

It's not all about statistics though. On a daily basis, we make a real difference to the lives of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in our community – we're a gateway to ideas, information, and experiences, providing social networking opportunities and often simply a welcoming space to be.

What better illustration of the importance of our role could there be than the competition entry below? The beautiful artwork along with its accompanying text is on display at Campsie Library.

I am not alone.

The book was my childhood friend. I did not feel afraid if I am alone when I have a book.

When I came here it was very difficult choice to read just English books, and I need to work hard to study, sometime I feel loneliness and lost, but when I came to the library the first time, all my fears were gone, I found people who are ready to help me.

I found all the spiritual knowledge and the most important things in my life [BOOKS]. I am free and I am able to communicate, it gives me the knowledge to face the fears with inner strength, it makes me reassure that the future would be better than past.

I have the dream to be able to read all the time what I interest in.

- Jamila Ismail

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Book club for Chinese readers – preparation and experience

In Willoughby city area, over thirty-one per cent of the population speak a language other than English. Chinese is the largest community group in the area. About thirteen per cent of the total population speak Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin). There are about twelve thousand items in the Chinese language collection which is the most popular collection among the 12 community language collections in Willoughby City Library. The average annual loan of the collection is about 120 000 which is 16% of the total library annual loans.

Over the years, Willoughby City Library has been organising various activities for our Chinese customers, such as Chinese author talks, internet training in Chinese, and law talks in Chinese. With our extensive Chinese language collection, we believe we can broaden our services to the Chinese customers in a more literary approach. In August 2008, we started our first Chinese Book and Movie Lovers' Club meeting in Chatswood Library. The aim of the club is to provide an opportunity for people who enjoy reading books and watching movies to discuss them with other interested group members.

The preparation work began in May last year. At that time, the library decided to set up book clubs in both English and Chinese. The Acquisition Librarian and I worked together to prepare for the club, including:

- searching internet for guides on running a book club
- looking for reference materials, e.g. books with questions that are suitable for book club discussion
- thinking of the name of the club
- promotion and publicity
- setting the format, time, number of members, and
- talking to other library staff who have experience in running a book club in their libraries.

As there are not only books but also movies that are worth discussing, we decided to include both books and movies in the club. We invited our library staff to give ideas for the club's name and they were very enthusiastic and creative in giving different names for the club. Some suggestions included 'Chatties Club', 'Read it and See', 'Seen & Read', 'Fiction n' Flick', and 'Top Shelf'. We decided on 'Book and Movie Lovers' Club'. And then, of course, I needed to think of a Chinese name too.

Two posters in both English and Chinese were designed. They were put up in all our central and branch libraries, related sections in Council, and on the website. Press releases were also prepared and sent to local newspapers, Chinese newspapers, and radios. I was also interviewed by SBS–Cantonese channel on the Book and Movie Lovers' Club in Chinese. With the help from the mass media, we received a lot of inquiries concerning the club.

After the consultation and consideration of all factors, we decided that each group would meet once a month for an hour. The optimum number for a group is 10 but we considered that each time there may be some members who cannot come. Therefore, we set the maximum number in a group at 15. We do not want to fix the format of the meeting, but let the members decide it, e.g. each member takes turn to be the leader or select a permanent leader for a period of time. We aim to have the members run the club by themselves. The library staff members may not attend the meeting but will provide assistance if needed.

The application forms are designed in both English and Chinese. Because of the heavy use of our meeting room, we provided four possible time slots for the applicants to choose: two slots at lunch hours on a weekday, one weekday afternoon, and one Thursday night.

Issues in running the Chinese book club in Willoughby Library

Lack of reference materials available

I find that there are not many reference materials or guides out there for running a Chinese book club. I found several libraries that run Chinese book clubs on the internet, but they were not suitable for our library, e.g., book clubs for drivers, or too academic that only scholars can join. Some of them are not really a book club, but an author talk. Besides, they do not put up their reference materials on the internet. Therefore, I need to help the members prepare some discussion questions.

Purchase of books/DVDs in advance

Purchasing Chinese titles is not like the English books that you can find in many libraries or you can buy from many local book stores. Normally we will buy only one copy for each Chinese title. That means only one member can borrow it from our library. The other libraries nearby may not have that title. It is also difficult to find Chinese books in local bookstores. Thus, I need to decide the books for discussion and order them from overseas well in advance.

Selection of books and movies for discussion – cultural, reading habits, and reading preference differences

It is not easy to decide which books and movies to discuss in the club. Our aim is to have the members run the club by themselves; therefore they themselves should choose the books and movies they would like to discuss in the meeting. We requested that they bring three book and three movie suggestions to the first meeting. However, they found it hard to decide what books to read. Our group members are mainly from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Although they all share similar cultural backgrounds, there are still cultural differences among them, such as reading



Posters for the club in two languages

habits and reading preferences. However, during the preparation period, I consulted with our Chinese-speaking library staff, Chinese customers, and some Chinese book suppliers for their ideas on books and movies for discussion. I tried to start with contemporary classical works and works by overseas Chinese authors, e.g., the Chinese version of *Falling Leaves* by Adeline Yen Mah. They all loved these books.

Language barrier (written and spoken)

Language is also one of the problems. Some applicants can only speak Cantonese and some only Mandarin. Luckily, there are a few Cantonese speakers who can also speak Mandarin, although not very fluently. I put these bilingual speakers and the Mandarin speakers together to form our first Book and Movie Lovers' Club in Mandarin. It is our plan to run one group in Mandarin and one in Cantonese. However, there are a lot of variables to consider which make it hard to form a group with a sufficient number of people. For example, there are six Cantonese speakers who show interest in joining the club, but they are only available for different time sessions. One or two people are not enough to form a group.

Apart from the spoken language barrier, written Chinese is a problem. Most of the members from Taiwan and Hong Kong do not understand simplified Chinese characters. Therefore, I try to purchase or prepare books in traditional Chinese characters as many readers from mainland China can read traditional Chinese characters.

Cultural awareness

- **Sharing of feelings**

The main spirit of a book club is for the members to discuss and share their feelings about the book that they have read. However, many Chinese people do not have the habit of sharing their real feelings with other people. They are afraid that if they say something wrong or unimportant or in disagreement with other people, people might laugh at them or think that they are stupid. In fact, many members asked me if they can be observers rather than participants. I need to encourage them constantly that there are no right or wrong opinions. It is only about their feelings about a book or movie they have read or watched. They are gradually getting used to it and feel more confident in expressing their ideas or opinions in the meeting.

- **Teacher vs leader**

In the first meeting, I told them that they needed to have a leader each time to guide the discussion. Many of them responded that they did not know how to prepare enough things to talk to others about for an hour. They might think

that a leader is a teacher. In this case, I explained to them the role of a leader in a book club meeting.

- **Discussion vs contents repetition**

It might be influenced by the Chinese traditional education style, but I noted that many members tend to repeat the contents or report the facts of the books instead of discussing the issues arising from the books. In many cases, I tried to direct them from repetition of the book's contents to a discussion of the interesting issues arising from the books through asking them stimulating questions.

Conclusion

Although many obstacles occurred during the preparation for the club, I overcame the problems one by one. After several meetings, all members told me that they enjoy the meetings very much and have made friends. They have built confidence in sharing ideas and opinions with other people. Although I still need to help them to do a bit of balance work – make sure everyone in the meeting has a chance to speak and stimulate them to share their feeling, opinions, or ideas – I can see their improvement in leading the discussion. It is my passion to continue to promote the spirit of book clubs to our Chinese readers so that they can enjoy the meeting through discussing and sharing their feeling on books and movies they have read and watched with others. Through discussion and reflection, readers develop their opinions and a new appreciation of the 'book club spirit'.

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