



Poet and literary critic Kirpal Singh at the warehouse in Kaki Bukit where he keeps nearly 23,000 books, packed in more than 100 brown boxes. The avid reader plans to donate 3,000 books from his collection to various charities, universities and libraries.  
ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

**Professor Kirpal Singh believes that without general reading, Singaporeans cannot be good conversationalists outside of their immediate personal interests. He also said that reading less will result in a poorer vocabulary and command of words. This in turn will lead to a decreased capability in negotiations.**

According to Prof Singh, many are sadly not appreciating the multi-layered meanings and significance found upon repeated readings of books.

He attributes the dip in popularity of reading books to how fewer people find a need to read for pleasure.

He said: "We live in a very functional world where language has become very functional. It is no longer for pleasure. Now we read books mainly for utility. We read books like textbooks and workbooks... to pass examinations."

Singapore has seen impoverishment in the use of English over the years, he said.

According to Prof Singh, while many are able to use words in a literal sense, only a few know how to use them in creative and figurative ways.

He said: "The whole fascination of language is experimenting, using words in different ways, therefore expanding and enlarging their meanings, hoping that one day, this expansion will become part of the ordinary."

Hoping to enhance creativity, clarity of thinking and openness to playing around with words, Prof Singh wants his books to be given to people who have a genuine love for reading.

He said: "I hope that readers will make full use of their creative imagination to think of how they can use the knowledge derived from the books to create new relationships and opportunities."

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# Poet to donate 3,000 books to spark love for reading

He hopes to encourage people to read for pleasure, use words creatively through the gift to charities and libraries

Cha Hae Won

When Professor Kirpal Singh was in Primary 5, his form teacher wrote some advice in his autobiography book that remains etched in his mind to this day.

"Never ignore books. Read as widely as you can, for books can give you knowledge which can never be stolen because it is stored in your head."

Over more than 45 years, Prof Singh – the director for educa-

tional leadership in Training Vision Institute, a government-approved private educational institution – collected an estimated 25,000 books from different places, such as California in the United States; Perth, Melbourne and Sydney in Australia; and Papua New Guinea.

A poet and literary critic, Prof Singh has written several collections of poetry and non-fiction books, and has also edited literary works.

He was also the director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University from

2008 to 2017.

Last Thursday, Prof Singh spoke about his plans to donate 3,000 books from his collection to various charities, universities and libraries, to promote the love of reading.

These books include a first-edition copy of *A Passage To India* by E.M. Forster, an early edition of *Sons And Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence and *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*.

Prof Singh said he plans to e-mail various charities and libraries, such as the National Library and Children's Charities Association of Singapore, about his plans by the end of next year.

The Straits Times was visiting Mr Singh at a warehouse in Kaki Bukit where he keeps nearly 23,000

books, packed in more than 100 brown boxes.

As an avid reader who also collects books for pleasure, Prof Singh lamented: "I think my species is dying... In all my talks and lectures, I always encourage the love of reading."

He feels that younger-generation Singaporeans are being forced to read in school. But most of them later lose the reading habit.

He believes that without general reading, Singaporeans cannot be good conversationalists outside of their immediate personal interests.

He also said that reading less will result in a poorer vocabulary and command of words. This in turn will lead to a decreased capability in negotiations.

## Commentary

### S'pore Prison Service's 75-year history a saga of wartime horrors and peacetime rehabilitation



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Senior Law Correspondent

The 75-year history of the Singapore Prison Service is more of a saga than a mere logbook of jails, jailbirds and jail craft, given its record of pre-1946 wartime horrors and the peacetime punishment and rehabilitation that followed.

The 75th anniversary is an apt time, perhaps, to recall some of its finest hours as the department renews its efforts in the face of evolving challenges, different in form but similar in substance to its past.

First, some history: When Singapore evolved into a British crown colony in 1946 after previously being governed by a British Military Administration, the then colonial powers established prisons as a government department, with the maximum-security Changi Prison as its flagship jail.

Before 1946, Changi Prison, which was built in the 1930s, was the familiar landmark dominating

the Changi area and was where thousands of Allied prisoners of war were detained when Singapore fell to the Japanese army in 1942.

After the Japanese surrender of 1945, the roles were reversed and several hundred Japanese soldiers became prisoners there instead, awaiting trial for war crimes and tribunal-mandated execution, in several cases.

This original Changi Prison was the last British-built prison in Singapore to be demolished in 2004, replaced in the area by several multi-storey structures, high-tech and future-ready in outlook, centralising several scattered penal and drug institutions in an area called the Changi Prison Complex, with the first cluster launched in August 2004.

The original prison and the new complex have traits in common: While Changi Prison in 1936 was touted as one of the best-built prisons in the British Empire, Changi Prison Complex today is one of the best in the region, if not beyond.

Both were designed on tight budgets for growing prison populations, to enhance security and to improve prisoner rehabilitation.

But while in form they had similar intent, the late 1970s were when some seismic changes appeared in terms of the kinds of



Artefacts on display at the Changi Chapel and Museum. The original Changi Prison was where thousands of Allied prisoners of war were detained when Singapore fell to the Japanese army in 1942. After the Japanese surrender of 1945, the roles were reversed and several hundred Japanese soldiers became prisoners there instead. ST FILE PHOTO

challenges faced by prisons.

In April 1977, the Government launched an islandwide dragnet called Operation Ferret to round up drug addicts.

Drug abuse then was really a heroin-abuse problem, and Ferret was backed by two years of a well-coordinated, comprehensive and well-thought-out strategy, said then Home Affairs and Education Minister Chua Sian Chin in December 1977 at a seminar.

This operation, under strengthened drug laws that provided for treatment in drug rehabilitation centres (DRCs), led to several thousand addicts being nabbed in the years that followed.

Ferret was marked by urgency as heroin abusers were influencing others, luring them into their ranks at an alarming rate, and the operation's aim "was therefore to arrest abusers fast enough and

detain them for rehabilitation so that the growth in numbers could be stopped, if not reversed", said Mr Chua.

On March 31, 1977, it was estimated that there were 11,200 addicts, a number that fell to 7,300 some six months later, he said.

It fell upon then director of prisons Quek Shi Lei and his able staff to find space for accommodation for drug addicts by converting disused buildings to establish the DRCs, such as those in Sembawang and Selarang Park, with minimal staff.

The DRC years, where a set of institutions parallel to prisons was created and run under a different regimen, should count as one of the prisons department's finest eras.

The late Mr Quek, who was the longest-serving director of prisons – from 1973 to 1987 – is to be credited for having achieved the

most with the least, given the limited resources available to establish and operate the drug centres practically overnight.

His successor, Mr Tee Tua Ba, who was seconded from the police, had the distinction of upgrading and professionalising the prisons, placing a premium on staff training, and institutionalising the vision and approach of rehabilitation with missionary zeal.

The mercurial Mr Tee, who had a distinguished career in public service, returned to the police force as commissioner after a five-year stint as prisons director.

The groundwork he laid was sustained, continued and improved upon by his successor, Mr Poh Geok Ek, during whose term the first custom-built maximum-security jail in Tanah Merah Prison was opened.

Others followed, and the

department never looked back but took bold further steps to strengthen the goal of rehabilitation, such as through the successful Yellow Ribbon Project launched in 2004 during the term of director Chua Chin Kiat.

In October 2016, Mr Desmond Chin became the first prisons chief to have risen through the ranks of the service to attain the post since Mr Quek retired in 1987.

Mr Chin led the Singapore Prison Service to break new ground, including by having strong branding and implementing new regimens, leading to improvements in the recidivism rates of young offenders and drug inmates over time.

He was succeeded last year by the first woman to hold the post, Ms Shie Yong Lee.

In the 75 years since the prisons department was established, the common and continuing quality that made for its sustained and relative success was its able staff, if not leadership.

But even as it looks ahead, the challenge is for more and wider community collaboration and to reserve prisons as a last resort to contain the hardcore, the violent and offenders who have committed serious crimes.

One promising indicator could be the imprisonment rates here. According to the World Prison Brief of the British-based Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, the imprisonment rate per 100,000 population in Singapore for the year 2000 was 352. Twenty years later, it was at its lowest, at 185 per 100,000 population.

Population issues aside, perhaps a more robust community response and outfit may see the figure dwindle to double digits in this decade, like what is seen in the Japanese system today.

Prison numbers will have shrunk significantly then, which should cap another of the department's finer moments.

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