

From Self-Archiving to Open Content: Digital Archiving as Ethnography, Historiography and Art Practice

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Abstract

This is a research-creation project of both historiographic and creative nature. The main “deliverables” include a “Creative Commons” (CC) licensed web database consisting still and video images produced and contributed by subscribers. CC defines the spectrum of possibilities between full copyright and the public domain. The resulting open platform facilitates the sharing of research findings and free contributions, thus democratizing knowledge via collaboration and co-creativity.

Grounded in **archival research** and principles of visual ethnography, collected data are subject to analytical tagging. It enables historians and cultural theories to develop their critical scholarship; it also enables history-learning and cultural articulation via imaginative free use of archived material for artistic creation. This archive grows as participants return their 'creations' to the same platform where they drew their resources. This archive is itself a creative articulation as well as critical interrogation of the city space of Hong Kong and its history.

Details

- (1) The proposal involves 4 main activities:
 - i/ image research (especially locating useful photographic and moving image material on Hong Kong);
 - ii/ collecting and acquisition;
 - iii/ classification, coding, and organization; and
 - iv/ creating two different environments for users to experience the power of the archive for information and creation via participation via open web-platforms that work within the framework of the Creative Commons.Objectives (ii) and (iii) will carry a heavier weight.
- (2) Keyword-summary suggesting the following aspects of the research and deliverables:
 - a/ **Self-archiving**: I shall focus on the content of collecting activities, from largely archival material via institutional acquisition to making use of ordinary users' and my own personal collection, which covers talking head interviews, video shots on the city space of Hong Kong, old photos collection, and shot clips of location shots from vintage movies.
 - b/ **Open content**: archived material will be made accessible on a web platform to invite subscribers to generate new works and narratives. In this sense, this project forms an on-line community in which members contribute in areas of ethnography, historiography and artistic creation.
- (3) Main objectives:
 - i/ AROUSE public concern for HK's cultural heritage and history of urban growth by building an -line archive with open-content and web-community participation;
 - ii/ CREATE HK's first archival-database history with a focus on cityscape and the texture of everyday life;
 - iii/ CREATE history-learning that is intriguing, active and thought-provoking;
 - iv/ SET UP an exemplary model for multi-disciplinary collaboration;

v/ WRITE 2 essays: one essay should be about digital archiving and art-making; the other essay a piece of historical writing based on critical analysis of the archived content; and
vi/ COMPLETE a 3-part on-line archive.

(4) General outlook and key themes:

General outlook

First, this investigation stretches the possibility of applied research in the humanities via the increasingly important “research-creation” methodology (aka “practice-led research” or “praxical knowledge”). The basic idea is to use theoretically informed multimedia creation as a method of critical research.

Second, it focuses on exploring the notion of archive and (digital) archiving, drawing upon many contemporary art and image archive works as reference to design an on-line archive that facilitates personal archiving and collaborative creativity. An “archive” is a database consisting of accessible documents, assembled from the past, rationally classified, and offering multiple narrative potentials for users to discover or invent. A “database” is a structured collection of data for fast retrieval by users who search, navigate, and view.

Third, it dialogues with recent scholarship on digital technology, especially how digital tools embody new ways to know and represent history.

This research brings together historiography, archiving as critical-creative practices, visual ethnography, spatial studies, and database as narrative structuration. It produces works that re-define access to HK history, revise cultural-history methods, and demonstrate computational thinking role’s history-writing.

Highlighted themes in literature research and critical writing components:

- a) research on the functions, provisions, and limitations of the Creative Commons, and various forms of 'open source culture'.
- b) theoretical examination of the notion of 'open content', 'open use', 'mis-use', copyrightability and patency, in relation to theoretical discourses such as 'network-gift economy', alternative media history, definitions of 'public' and 'community'
- c) Archival theories (Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, Okwui Enwezor, Janet Murray), archive and contemporary art (Hans Richter, Duchamp, Mary Kelly, Susan Hiller, Sophie Calle, Walid Raad), and the question of writing history with images (Aby M. Warburg, Sarah Pink).

(5) The 3-part archive:

- A. photos on the city space of Hong Kong (1880 – present): I have located photo material from more than a handful of image archives in the UK, US, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, plus conducted contemporary urban field shooting in recent years. I have started writing two spatial journeys based on photos in the mid-1930s, which will be turned to scholarly publications on visual ethnography. The collected images would invite on-line photo-text-narrative submissions that will be viewed on the same site. Such submissions can be documentary-style caption writing, poetry, story-writing, and critical analysis.
- B. talking heads of ordinary Hong Kong people: over 60 talking head shots have been collected in the past 4 years based on different cultural studies frames and research objectives. The talking heads were partly the work of the PI's own field work, and partly contributions from volunteer student researchers. Two academic conference papers, one 61-minute video, and an installation work have been produced up to this point. To properly incorporate the talking heads to the proposed on-line archive, we need to secure agreement of all volunteer researchers, properly code the clips and

make them available, and encourage on-line contribution of more talking heads and free use for critical interpretation.

- C. videographic shorts on the city space of Hong Kong: over 100 short video works have been collected. These include finely edited short video pieces (by young artists) to video footage on the city space of Hong Kong (PI's own fieldwork and collection from the past 15 years). The open platform will invite subscribers to use existing works to re-edit new works, as well as to upload new footage and video shorts.

The THREE categories above cover three very different types of sight and sound material, and yet all contribute to either the writing of Hong Kong history or artistic, creative work on the city of Hong Kong.

In sum, this history project collects, preserves and recreates the lost sight-and-sound and everyday texture in HK through photos and other video materials. This resulting database archive will assign the users, viewers, or visitors an active role in discovering the past via presence, navigation and construction. It is also a repository of images for creative invention of artistic nature.

(END of Proposal)