

# Digital Art Archives in Asia for the Public Domain:

## A Conversation with Bo Zheng and Lu Pan

Sjoukje van der Meulen

Below is a written account of a conversation between Bo Zheng and Lu Pan about digital archives in Asian contemporary art and visual culture, which took place via Zoom on March 30, 2020, and was moderated by Sjoukje van der Meulen, co-editor in chief of *Stedelijk Studies*. While the challenges and promises of increasing connectivity, inclusivity, and easy and unrestricted access in regard to digital archives and collections are ordinarily presented in the context of large and often state-sponsored digitization projects, the focus in this conversation is on nonprofit, experimental archival practices of artists and artists' collectives who operate outside the domain of large official institutions, such as art museums and state archives.

Zheng was invited by *Stedelijk Studies* to participate in this Zoom conversation because he created two notable digitally based visual archives of socially engaged art in China, which are an important source of textual and audiovisual documentation for anyone interested in the subject. The first is a website about the work of socially engaged Chinese artists and collectives, such as Xiong Wenyun, Xu Bing, New Worker Art Troupe, and Grass Stage, while the second is a related, archive-driven online course. Together they provide insight into the relatively underexposed trend of socially engaged art in China. The website (<http://seachina.net/>) is conceived as an online exhibition space, where the “visitor” can scroll from left to right along a virtual gallery wall and through audiovisual material about the artworks, framed by concise descriptions of the projects. The online course, published by Future learn (<https://vimeo.com/showcase/4484998>), introduces Chinese socially engaged art based on Zheng's years of research and teaching experience in this field. In addition to the art projects, the course includes original interviews on location

with the artists. The quite informative and well-designed course offers users the chance to discover the Chinese variant of socially engaged art. Zheng is associate professor at the School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong, where he leads the Wanwu Practice Group, a group of artist-scholars which focuses on ecological research and art practices in East Asia, including their own. He is also an artist who has participated in major exhibitions in both Asia and Europe, including the Yokohama Triennale (2020), Manifesta (2018), and the 11th Shanghai Biennale. Zheng taught at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, mainland China, from 2010 to 2013, and in 2020 he will be artist in residence at the Gropius Bau.

Lu Pan is an assistant professor in the Department of Chinese Culture at the Polytechnic University of Hong Kong since 2015. Trained in comparative literature, she has focused her research on the theory and practice of art archives in Asia, contributing four articles on this theme in recent years.<sup>[1]</sup> These scholarly essays cover theoretical and cultural aspects of archives, including digital ones. Their focus is on artistic and activist archives in Asia that play a specific role in establishing new democratic spaces for different (artistic) groups to create their own sociocultural identity, make themselves visible, and express themselves, as she explains in “The Making of Gōng/Kyo: Visual Archive and the Common in Contemporary East Asia.”<sup>[2]</sup> To develop a firm theoretical and methodological basis for those essays, she also conducted in-depth research into the whole notion of archives in Asia, which differ in several significant ways from those in Europe and the United States. She argues that the discourse needs to be nuanced, because currently “the archive and the public discourse are dominated by theories from Europe and the US.”<sup>[3]</sup> Her ongoing research inspired Lu Pan to compile an edited volume, entitled *The (Im) Possibility of Art Archive: Theories and Experiences in/from Asia*, which will be released in 2020 in a Chinese-English bilingual edition and contains contributions by a diverse range of archive builders; that is, artists, curators, and activists developing “alternative archives,” digital and otherwise, in various places in Asia, such as China (including Hong Kong), Japan, and Taiwan. Lu Pan joins this conversation because she has become an expert on experimental art archives in Asia, plus the theoretical discourses around it, as well as newly emerging digital and online archives.

Sjoukje van der Meulen: The theme of this issue is “Imagining the Future of Digital Archives and Collections.” There is hardly a museum or cultural institution that is not actively digitizing archives and collections. Is this the same in Asia?

Lu Pan: In my recent research, one of my projects required me to do archival research in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. I found Taiwan has digitized its historical archive material in libraries and collections very well. I guess it has something to do with Taiwan’s agenda and priority to increase its cultural infrastructure and to increase its soft power in promoting digital technology for research and culture. The same emphasis can be seen in Taiwan’s recent public health control in the COVID-19 pandemic. Hong Kong has access to the same technology, but it also has a

complicated history related to their historical archives. For example, many archival materials that were filed in the colonial period (before its handover to China in 1997) were transferred to London. In Hong Kong's Public Record Office, microfilm remains the major non-paper medium for archival material viewing, not the digital. Mainland China has many archives, but not many of the paper files were digitized. I also encountered difficulty with getting access to archival materials related to certain periods, especially Mao's period. In some cases, such as Shanghai Municipal Archive, the digital access is much friendlier than other places. So I guess the development of digitization of Chinese historical archives still has much space to grow and is uneven at the moment.

Bo Zheng: I really can't add much to this, because I am not an active user of archives and digital archives. But I can talk about the one I built, seachina.net. It is a digital archive of socially engaged art in mainland China from 1990 to 2015. I built it as a kind of art slash research project. It is very visual. We collected images and videos of socially engaged art projects and also conducted interviews with the artists, excerpts of which are included in the archive. Sometimes we added contextual information, because to my mind socially engaged art is very context-driven. For anyone browsing these archives, it is essential to get a sense of the context in which these projects took place. The archive was built over a two-year period, from 2014 to 2016, and is bilingual; it is accessible both inside and outside mainland China.

SvdM: You have chosen the format of an online archive. What was the reason behind that?

BZ: We chose an online archive because we had so many videos that cannot be presented in a book format. We also critically responded to an earlier online archive created by Creative Time in New York on socially engaged art, in which each artistic project was summarized and illustrated with just two or three images. To my mind, that is not the best format for documenting socially engaged art. When we decided to build our own socially engaged art archive, we decided to make it very visual, and we also wanted to include as much detail as possible about each project. The public, the users, really need to understand that socially engaged art needs time to unfold and be understood. The impact of socially engaged art lies in duration and the long fermentation process, and not in a distilled summary of the project. So the nature of socially engaged art really compelled us to build something visually heavy, which, also given the many videos we had, is best achievable online, in a digital archive. I think it will be too costly anyway to do this in a traditional book format.

SvdM: You say it is too costly, but what I hear you say is that one of the benefits or promises of this online archive is also its greater accessibility?

BZ: Yes, of course. Anyone with an internet connection can access it. Although putting something online does not necessarily mean it is "accessible," because people should also know that the website with the online digital archive exists. Frankly, I don't think the seachina.net website had such a good visitor rate because we didn't bother enough to promote it and link it to other sites.

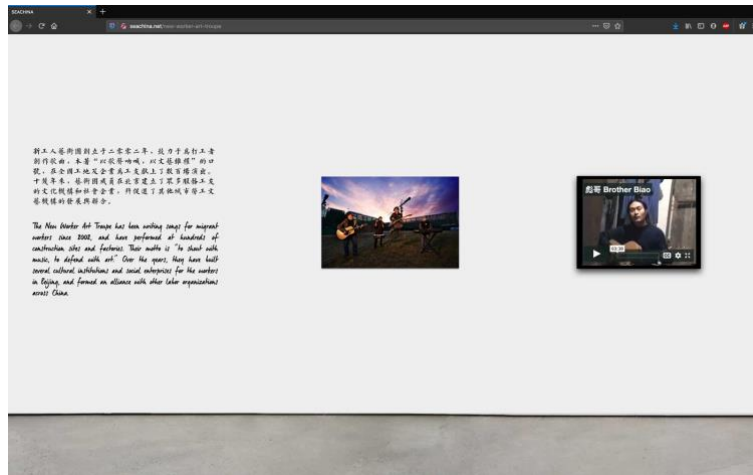


Fig. 2: seachina.net page for "New Worker Art Troupe"

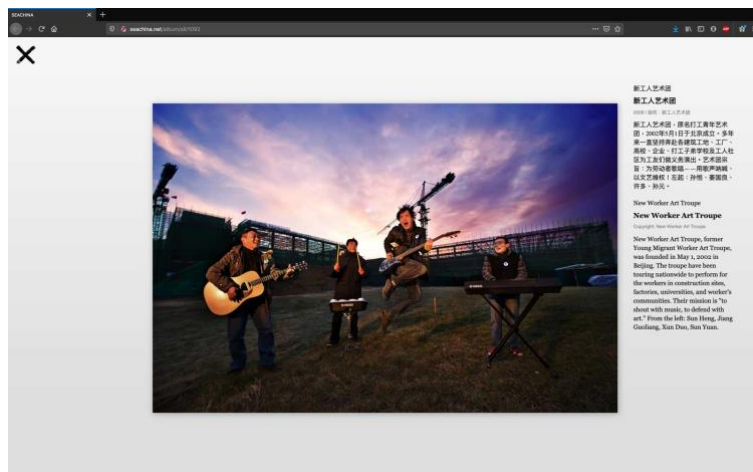


Fig. 3: Image of "New Worker Art Troupe"



Fig. 4: Video of "New Worker Art Troupe"

The online course that I then designed for seachina.net, based on the online archive, better conveyed information about Chinese socially engaged art, because once we built the database, we made sure people found it and knew how

to navigate through the database. So, while the original purpose of the digital archive was to document these socially engaged projects in China, we expanded it with a learning tool. This was because I started teaching socially engaged art in China in 2010. I realized that students have a hard time finding information about this type of practice from Chinese artists. It is still a relatively new subject in art, both in China and abroad. That's why we decided to build an online course as a structured introduction to the topic, on top of the digital archive. The online course is therefore also very visual, because we were able to mobilize the database of video clips, artist interviews, and the contextual information, such as 360 videos from certain sites in China where the projects took place. The online course was actually very easy to create, exactly because we first built the database. But I still think it is not enough; I am sure there are even better ways to use the new possibilities of the digital archive.

LP: In addition to digital archives about artists, such as Bo's, we can also talk about more established online archives in Asia, such as the digital collection of Asia Art Archives, better known as AAA (<https://aaa.org.hk/en>).

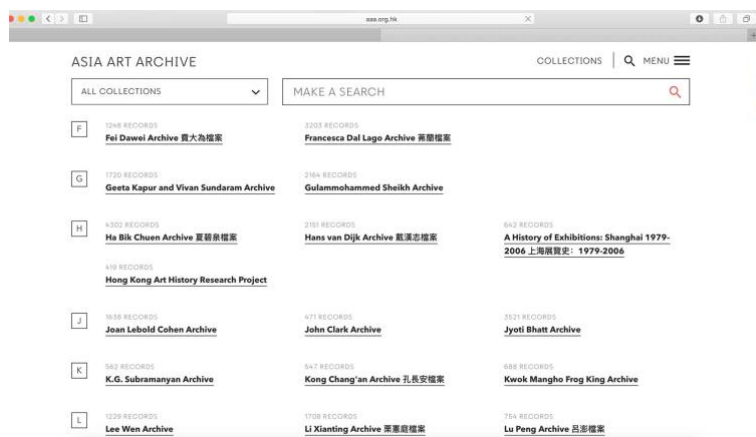


Fig. 5. Screenshot of <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/browse>

[\[https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/browse](https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/browse)

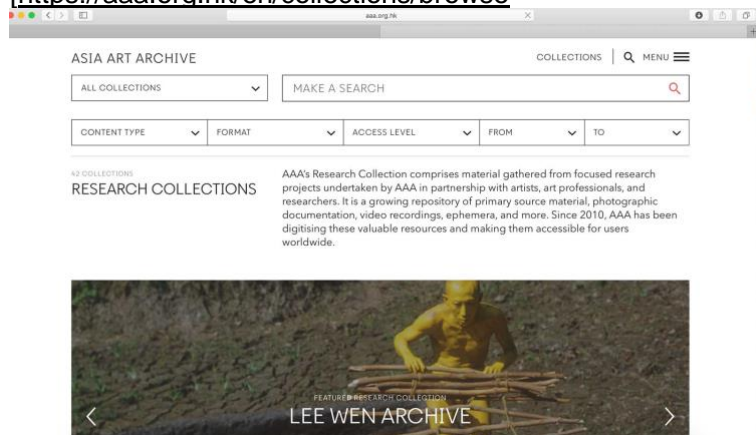


Fig. 6. Screenshot of

<https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections> [caption]

[\[https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections](https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections) (scroll down)]

I'm not sure about students, but most researchers of contemporary Asian art know that collection. AAA was created in 2000, so it is a relatively early art archive that is devoted exclusively to Asian art. They collaborate with many other small and larger art archives, but they also organize public events and have artist residences. AAA is highly visible and important to the region. When you visit the physical archive in Hong Kong, it doesn't look like a conventional archive, as the space you enter feels more like a specialized library. It has a small back space for original documents and other primary material, but you mainly see the library. AAA has digitized and put a huge amount of material online through their digital archive, which is accessed worldwide. Even if I just google names of artists, curators, works of art, exhibitions, etc., the items in the online catalogue of AAA appear in the search results. They make it very easy to find their digitized material on the internet.

BZ: I am aware of certain technologies and strategies called search engine optimization, to improve your Google search results, for example. It is, of course, very important for commercial websites, but also for cultural institutions. When institutions build an online website or digital archive, they improve their page ranking so that they appear more quickly in search results when people search by keyword. We don't have anyone from AAA to join the conversation, but I assume they use it. What I do know is that we didn't use these tools for seachina.net, although I think we should have used them, because most people get things through Google Search. So, unless you really work with their technology and work with the advanced algorithm behind Google's search system, your site is not as accessible. When we built seachina.net, I was aware that we were building an important database for research and education. But, I just thought later, after we built it, we can still transfer the archive to a more public institution. I spoke to AAA, but they didn't really want to include it, because it's a custom-designed archive. If they want to merge it with their archive, it takes a lot of work. Let's say we built a small archive and another institution built something on a related topic, and yet another institution does the same. If we want to work together later and unify our archives, it is in fact costly. So, there is still that problem.

SvdM: In terms of the accessibility, full connectivity, and inclusivity at stake in this issue of *Stedelijk Studies*, did AAA achieve these goals through the digital archive they built?

BZ: In my experience in Asia, digital archiving is still in its infancy in the cultural field. So it is difficult to evaluate these archives with the type of criteria you mention. I think it's better to think of these institutions, even AAA, as some sort of startups; certainly not huge, state-sponsored ones. AAA is so important in Asia, precisely because we don't have large public institutions that archive a lot. AAA has been incredibly important for twenty years, but it's still a nonprofit organization. I see AAA as a sort of persistent attempt to fill a huge void, rather than seeing it as an institution trying to realize a digitalization agenda.

LP: One final note, I think AAA's "passion" for digitizing materials is also due to the extremely high rents in Hong

Kong. A nonprofit organization really can't afford to have a large physical space for storing multiple collections. When I visited an old film archive affiliated to a university in mainland China, I was surprised to see how huge their space for storing these old film tapes was. I think that creating online archives is sometimes directly determined by the availability of space. In many cases, the materiality of the archived files and objects is equally, if not more important than its content, like in the case of old films. I thus hold the opinion that digital archive cannot replace all material-based archives, as material and medium *per se* have significant messages of history. Medium is the message!

SvdM: Lu Pan, maybe we can talk about your projects. How did you get involved in physical and digital archives, especially with regard to archives developed by artists?

LP: I am not a trained archive user, like historians. So I have sometimes been criticized by historians for not using archives as a basic tool for my research. That criticism made me think why archives are so important to historians, but also what exactly the concept of "archive" is. So I started not only reading what material can be found inside archives but also thinking more theoretically about possible ways to understand the notion of archive, especially from a point of view of language. I started to realize that the concept of archive in the Chinese language actually has a very different history and meaning from that in Western languages. I think the concept of the archive closely linked to (national) institutions is an idea that comes largely from Western discourse. We have another category of archives that has been around for a long time in Chinese history. In the Chinese language, at least one concept of archive refers to a permanent interpretation and reinterpretation of historical material, which in my opinion is different from the idea of archive in a Western sense, as a mere collection of historical records and documents. Thus, when we translate the term "archive" in English, French, and German to Chinese, we can't take for granted that the two terms have the same "temporality." While most of the theoretical frameworks about archive in Chinese writings I have come across are Western. This root-searching process of how archive is translated into Chinese pushed me to reconsider the possibility of other archival theories beyond this dominance of Western archival discourses. If we assume that the term means the same everywhere, we will just miss a lot of connotations in other languages and cultures. This is my very starting point for thinking about archives.

SvdM: In your essays "The Making of Gòng/Kyō: Visual Archive and the Common in East Asia" and "Socially Engaged Archive: Art, Media and Public Memory in East Asia" you discuss the potential of digital archives, which are embraced and mobilized by artists and artists' collectives, such as Huang Sun-Quan's Multitude.asia or Bo's seachina.net project. Do I understand correctly from your various publications that you are most interested in archives created by nonprofit organizations and artists' initiatives?

LP: Art and visual archives related to social movements, activism, community activities, and alternative cultural

practices in East Asia have emerged rapidly since the turn of the millennium. This “archival turn,” as I explain in my essay “Socially Engaged Archive,” can be characterized by a search for new and innovative ways to develop social and communal ideas and imagery that go beyond the official narratives in the mass media. In contrast to the national archives, these experimental visual archives created by scholars, artists, activists, and others focus not only on documentation and conservation but also on provoking critical reflection and creating public platforms. So yes, I find these non-governmental, non-major-institutional-affiliated art archives very interesting. It is also easier to talk to archive builders who are artists and activists. In both cases you mentioned, I had the opportunity to talk to the makers themselves. For example, I discussed the ideas and motivations behind seachina.net with Bo. Another example is an organization in Tokyo called P+ Archive, which collects a lot of information about socially engaged art in Asia, although the focus is, of course, on Japan.



Fig. 7. P+Archive at <https://www.art-society.com/parchive/>

[<https://www.art-society.com/parchive/>]

What I find interesting is that they not only provide relevant material and information to the users of their online and physical archives, but also print brochures, booklets, and instructions on how to create an archive yourself. At the moment, the instructions are for creating material archives (texts, homemade videos, photographic documentation, etc.); maybe it will develop new instructions for digital archiving in the future. Such active involvement with archive users, or simply the public, characterizes this trend of newly emerging archives in Asia.

SvdM: You have recently finished an anthology entitled *The (Im) Possibility of Art Archive: Theories and Experiences in/from Asia*. Did the trend you just mentioned trigger this volume? What are the main arguments or perspectives developed in the book, and are there any conclusions about digital art archives in Asia?

LP: The book is an edited anthology for which I have invited archive builders such as artists, curators, and activists to write about their own experiences with making art archives in various places in Asia. I have also invited scholars to write about their understanding of archival-driven artworks, for



example, artworks that use archives as a method for their creative practice. The book is a collection of insights into the different ways of dealing with archives, especially in artworks and other visual projects. So the book goes a step further than my articles on this topic, as it offers more perspectives and methodologies. The book includes some contributions on digital archives, although I don't think they are in the majority. The book will be out soon, so anyone can read it, but I think it might be more interesting to talk here about the conceptual challenges related to your issue of *Stedelijk Studies*. For example, I am quite ambivalent about the current emphasis on digital archives. The physical space is actually very important to archives, especially to the smaller and non-institutional genre, as they can function as an important medium for certain communities to collect material about themselves and express themselves. These more interactive, user-oriented archives differ from the type of archives historians and researchers consult in search of relevant source material. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I'm against digital archives. I just think physical and digital archives play different roles. It all depends on how we imagine archives. Do we envision archives like those big national archives, which are in the process of being digitized, or can we also imagine an archive as a place for social communication and for some sort of community building, regardless of what kind of archive it is, digital or material. We see digital archives, especially online versions, as a promising new category of archive, because we think they are more accessible than physical archives, and therefore have democratic potential. But the question is whether this is the case, as Bo also indicated. Recently, in Hong Kong and elsewhere, the coronavirus crisis forced us all to switch to online education. And guess what? Many students from poorer families do not have the digital resources and infrastructure to participate online. They don't have a good connection to Wi-Fi, or there is only one computer in the family. Actually, we could and should talk about such class issues and other problems associated with the use of online resources, including digital archives. Digital infrastructure is unevenly built around the world, and even within a digitally developed society there can also be internal inequality of the digital resources across age, gender, class, and bodily conditions. So I am not imagining a happy world of digital archive of universality. So, instead of imagining and romanticizing an online archive for universal use, we need to face these real questions. We must pay attention to these different cultural and socioeconomic contexts. In addition, as I talked about Taiwan, I already mentioned that digital archives are involved in a kind of soft power competition. Why do some places have more input than others? There may be other ways to imagine digital archives and online environments; you don't have to accept this universal "promise."

BZ: I would like to add two more comments. First, teaching and learning is more important than just building archives. I think these new digital archives are really new teaching and learning tools, not only for students but also for people in general. Second, how can we really emphasize that these online digital archives are meant to be shared, rather than simply built as endless source accumulation, either by state archives or by cultural institutions to show off their

collections? I think these two things are salient for this part of the world. I am afraid we think we will likely see that many digitization projects will soon be driven mainly by large institutions, such as art museums, museums, or state-sponsored archives and collections. In China, these institutions necessarily mean state institutions. Lu Pan's research focuses on more experimental, radical, bottom-up archiving by artists, artist collectives, and the like. This is especially important in China, where civil society is not an established fact. We have strong state institutions, but we don't have strong public institutions, even in Hong Kong. Most of Hong Kong's cultural institutions are government-owned, but this is a relatively new experiment. In mainland China, but as I said, even in Hong Kong, this sense of openness, this sense of public sphere separate from the state, does not exist. When we built seachina.net, we naturally built the site for the public sphere, not for the state sphere, nor for the market sphere. This need for a public sphere is important, also when it comes to digital archiving.

SvdM: Thank you both for your very interesting observations and criticisms. Do you want to share something else, or is there something we haven't touched upon?

BZ: I am sure I have said this already, but I would like to emphasize again that this conversation is really focused on some kind of bottom-up initiatives and not on a discussion about digitalization in Asia or the world in general. We are not dealing with national archives and their digitalization projects, or archives of other big institutions. We don't really use those archives in our personal lives, at least I don't. I don't even know if artists and even researchers in this part of the world benefit from those archives. We have a very different situation than in the US or Europe. The criteria or terms you mentioned at the beginning about "full connectivity, accessibility, and inclusivity" to evaluate large-scale, government-sponsored digitization projects don't really apply the same way to the bottom-up archives we talked about, i.e., small-scale, experimental projects around art and artists' initiatives.

LP: In my current research project on the radical use of magazines in Hong Kong in the 1970s, I was thinking of setting up an online archive where people could get a digital copy of the magazine and other really interesting magazines in the same period. I discussed the possibility of creating a domain name under the library, where we could build this archive. But the university librarian's answer was clearly "no," because of all the copyright issues. She totally discouraged me. Copyright issues online can be counterproductive, as many of these magazines were already available for free download from a personal blog of one of the magazine's former editors. If you search really hard, you can find them, but the fact that they are online and can be found by some people, as we discussed, does not mean that they are accessible to everyone. Copyright is thus another double-edged sword: on the one hand, it protects the author; on the other hand, it can also hinder public use and education. But recent good news is that the copyright owner has authorized another researcher to build a digital archive of all the magazines. It will be out by the end of this year for free public use.

SvdM: I think you are right, copyrights in the digital domain are an entirely new field and often at odds with the accessibility of research. The copyright issue challenges the intellectual property system in which libraries and archives have been accustomed to operating, and also hampers the creation of a nonprofit digital archive, such as the experimental art and visual archives that have been the subject of our conversation. The question is: what can we do with these insights for our vision of the future of digital archives.

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[1] Lu Pan, "The Making of Gòng/Kyō – Visual Archive and the Common in Contemporary East Asia," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 19, no. 3 (2018): 431–448; "Socially Engaged Archive: Art, Media and Public Memory in East Asia," *Media Theory* (online) 2, no. 1 (2018): 222–244, accessed July 29, 2020, <http://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/44>; "Translating Visual Archives: On the Making of the New through Three Cases of Hong Kong," *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 16, no. 3 (2017): 1–18; "Archival Flows: Fragment, Material, and Memory in/through the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum," *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* 16, no. 4 (2017): 14–24.

[2] Lu Pan, "The Making of Gòng/Kyō, 432.

[3] *Ibid.*, 432.