

“The Semi-Autonomous Zine: Charting Margins and Peripheries in Independent Publishing”



Political poetry by Jannie Kwan.
Courtesy of Jannie KWAN.

A research inquiry of 展銷場 Display Distribute, carried out by artist-researcher 何穎雅 Elaine W. Ho and writer-researcher 凌明 Ming Lin





A rack of zines in the Asia Art Archive Library. Courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

Burn After Reading

“The arrival of durable paper centuries ago was seen as a threat to the royal courts. Any paper bearing messages [were] to be burnt immediately after being read. Books were not preferred forms of documentation, but feared for their permanence.”¹

—YEUNG Yang, “On Writing and Writing Away: A Review of the Curatorial Writing of **bōk- : Book Review in This Bookless Age**”

Surfaced from the exhibition catalogue for **bōk- : Book Review in This Bookless Age**, organised at Hong Kong’s 1a Space in 2008, this anecdote’s emphasis on the historical tenacity of books contrasts with that of **bōk-**’s curators, who lament that today, “Books will never be in the spotlight again.”² And yet, nestled in a special section of Asia Art Archive reserved for small-sized monographs and exhibition-related printed matter, this simple, stapled, A5 booklet endures. The publications in this section of the AAA Library stand out from the weighty, stand-alone tomes in other aisles; here, the shelves host folded sheets of paper and thin pamphlets supported by plastic document racks, lying somewhere between the permanence of books and the ephemerality of a brochure. Such temporalities are what first led us to peruse the AAA collection in search of other understandings of the typology of zines, which have already taken on many new life forms since their resurgence worldwide over the last five to ten years.

¹ Quoted from Lucien FEBVRE and Henri-Jean MARTIN, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450–1800*, trans. David GERARD (London and New York: Verso, 1997). See: YEUNG Yang in “On Writing and Writing Away—A Review of the Curatorial Writing of **bōk- : Book Review in This Bookless Age**”

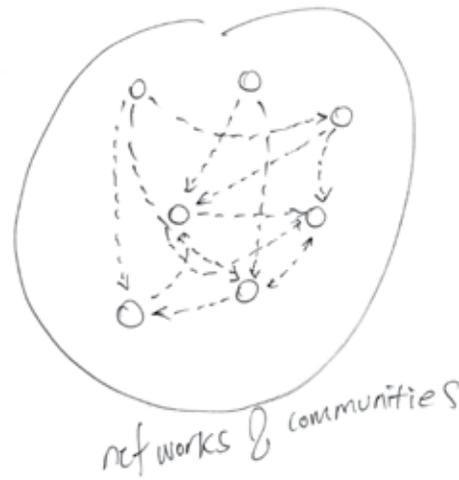
² 莊國棟 James CHONG, “Preface,” **bōk- : Book Review in This Bookless Age** (Hong Kong: 1a Space, 2009). [EXS.HGK.BBR1]

Logics of Fandom: A Brief History

Considering the lifespan of publications is fitting for an examination of zine culture, a lo-fi genre lacking well-documented histories precisely because of its cheaply produced and printed nature, as well as its limited circulation. While the grassroots ethos of zine culture contributes to a flexibility in its naming and practice, the term's etymology points to a genealogy that suggests how zines have come to be generally understood today. Shortened from "fanzine" (itself a truncation from "fan magazine"), zines can be traced to science fiction from the 1930s, independently produced and printed by devotees of the genre. This blurring of the boundaries between consumer and producer, author and audience, forms a crucial pivot for the formation of zine culture.

Beyond the most general understanding of publications as "making publics," what zines reveal are a strategy for creating and gathering invisible communities from the ground up. Punks in Europe and the United States since at least the 1970s, aided by the advances and increased accessibility of photocopy machines, developed the particular stark and crude aesthetics by which zines are still associated today. Like the "fandom"-building attributes of sci-fi fanzine production, punk zines often featured news and reviews on the latest bands; and with the sociopolitically charged nature of punk subcultures, zine production became a mobilising and unifying medium for sharing outspoken political commentary and anarchist allegiances.

With punk culture spreading around the world as a global movement, zine-making followed concurrently from West to East. Many of the earliest examples in East and South East Asia can be traced to places where punk music took root, from the Philippines to Indonesia and Japan—not surprisingly, all places with colonial histories and/or other widespread, multi-layered Western influences. In metropolitan Manila, for example, the Sex Pistols and Crass were imported by way of airtime on local rock station DZRJ 810 AM, along with wealthy Pinoy teenagers bringing records home from the UK—both forms of migration enabled by economic and legal access to Western culture.³ Interestingly, it was also punk zines from the US that were largely responsible for spreading these trends to the Philippines, rather than an existing subculture and fanbase that produced the literature; what is generally acknowledged to be the first Filipino punk zine, *Herald X*, did not appear until nearly a decade later in 1987.



³ While it was the first country in Asia to operate a radio station, broadcasting in the Philippines was itself an American import, with programmes historically broadcast all in English. See: "History of Philippine Radio," *Radio Online Now*, 25 July 2011, accessed 1 May 2018, www.radioonlinenow.com/2011/07/25/history-of-philippine-radio/. For more information about the history of punk music in the Philippines, see: Shirring RHOD, "About PHILIPPINES 80's HARDCORE," Facebook, 29 July 2010, accessed 1 May 2018, www.facebook.com/notes/pinas-dekada-80/about-philippines-80s-hardcore/123127624399480.

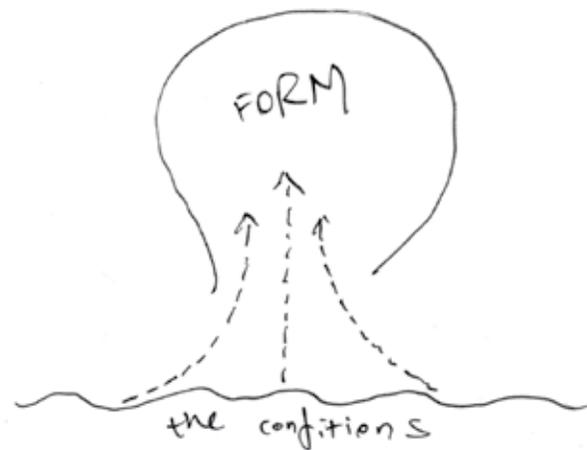
East and South East Asian Trajectories

Observing that the term ‘zine’ has been in recent years co-opted to apply to nearly anything—cute, small, nicely printed, not entirely mainstream—our research led to the proposal of a new definition, one borne of conditions specific to this part of the world’s sociopolitical ecology. By exposing fluid streams of influence and proposing other possible routes for the formation of zine culture in Asia, we may begin to depart from a Western-dominated narrative and to rethink and refine what zines and independent publishing culture can be.

The phenomena of *dōjinshi* (同人誌) from Japan, for example, traces the independent publication of comics, novels, and magazines to the early Meiji period (late 19th century), long before science fiction fanzines emerged in the West. *Dōjinshi*, literally meaning “same person periodical,” exemplifies a community of those with common interests. Through these publications, students came together outside of school and regular institutions to share ideas about literature and society. While newly developed technologies helped advance punk countercultures in the West, the same was true for *dōjin* in 1970s Japan, as photocopier-printed *dōjinshi* grew to inhabit the indie manga scene with which it is most known for today.⁴ Its various spheres of related practices—including the copied book (コピー本 *copybon*), “little press,” and mini communication zines (*mini komi zasshi*)—have been hugely influential for the nurturing of coterie and parody cultures in Japan, as well as abroad in China, Korea, and Taiwan.

It was manga and its related subcultures that were among the earliest self-publishing initiatives in contemporary China, before the English slang “zine” made its appearance among culture-hungry youth in the 2010s. Such developments can be traced throughout the 20th century via the shared comic culture of *dōjinshi*, as well as related formats like Chinese-linked serial picture books (連環畫 *lianhuanhua*). During the more turbulent period of China’s Cultural Revolution, the bulk of publishing activities were subordinated to the needs of the State, but one particularly politically charged form of printed matter emerged, revealing precarious entanglements between individual actors and the State: *dazibao* (大字報), or big-character posters, were handwritten statements of protest, propaganda, debate, and denunciation, posted in highly trafficked public places all over the country. This form of publication forms a material palimpsest of sociopolitical discourse, laying out an intricate map of political ties, public expression, and communication enabled by individual authors.

A third trajectory for considering the origins of zine culture in East and South East Asia was witnessed in 1980s Indonesia. Prior to mid-1990s punk outbursts during the Post-Suharto era,

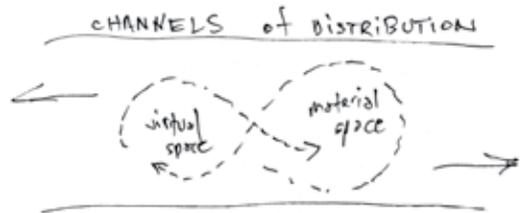


⁴ Patrick W. GALBRAITH, “Fujoshi: Fantasy Play and Transgressive Intimacy among ‘Rotten Girls’ in Contemporary Japan,” *Signs*, vol. 37, no. 1 (September 2011): 219–40.

⁵ Tom BOELLSTORFF, "Zines and Zones of Desire: Mass-Mediated Love, National Romance, and Sexual Citizenship in Gay Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 63, no. 2 (May 2004): 367-402.
⁶ Hakim BEY, T.A.Z.: *The Temporary Autonomous Zone: Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2003).
⁷ Anna LOWENHAUPT TSING, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).



LGBT zine *Gaya Hidup Ceria*, Indonesia, 1982



"Wifi zine Throwie" by Dianaband, 2018

small-scale circulation of gay and lesbian publications arose in cities all over the archipelago. Small magazines and booklets such as *Gaya Hidup Ceria* and *Jaka*, without being denoted as zines as such, supported a generation of hushed solidarities in the face of significant marginalisation from a generally conservative society. In contrast to the common theorisation of zines as safe spaces that protect closed counterculture circuits, however, anthropologist Tom BOELLSTORFF has argued for the much more fluid subjectivities of Indonesian LGBT publications, pointing to how they embraced gay sexuality as an equal part of Indonesian national identity.⁵

The Semi-Autonomous Zine (S.A.Z.)

The three alternative trajectories touched upon above lay out possible foundations for a burgeoning body of research we call the Semi-Autonomous Zine (S.A.Z.). Situated and discussed outside previously existing boundaries of aesthetic and sociopolitical origin, the S.A.Z. attempts to refine a new understanding of zines from a practice-based perspective, where publications carve out new spaces for creating publics. To designate such publications as "semi-autonomous" is both a nod to our own geopolitical points of reference—the Special Administrative Region (S.A.R.) and the Special Economic Zone (S.E.Z.)—and also borrows from anarchist author Hakim BEY's "Temporary Autonomous Zones (T.A.Z.)," described as spaces eluding formal structures of control, allowing for non-hierarchical social relationships to form and creativity to prosper.⁶ T.A.Z. offer a moment of resistance to cultural, economic, and political hegemony. In playful reappropriation of such bureaucratic and ideological terms, the S.A.Z. does not necessarily aim to oppose "Western genealogies," but allows for a more complicated and more context-focused analysis of the conditions and outputs of zine culture in our regional context. Rather than being wholly independent from mainstream institutions or media, the S.A.Z. negotiates a parasitical (or *peri-*) relationship to dominant culture. In what is, then, inevitably a fraught relationship, print media are examined as a strategy and a social practice, whereby the communities involved take precedent over categorisations by form and design. Reading the S.A.Z. allows us to locate practices of autonomy within entrenched structures of media—and, in the process, attempts to make sense of the dissonances.

Writing on underbelly economies fueling global supply chain systems, anthropologist Anna LOWENHAUPT TSING describes "pericapitalist" practices as those that, rather than resisting cap-ital, serve as coping mechanisms for people living and working within a system that marginalises them.⁷ The S.A.Z. proceeds with a similar operative logic, whereby the discourses created are never in total isolation from the dominant ones, but subsist on their peripheries as acts of "making

support for repairing the space, they decided to also rebuild the collection by accepting zine donations to substitute for entry fees, and the practice has long continued even after the successful repair of the roof. As a result, Kedai Buku Mak Ali's reconsideration of the literal currencies of print culture effectively place zines into an alternative mode of circulation.

《水沫》 [PER.FOAM]

Seventeen issues of *Foam* were irregularly published between 2000 and 2011, which was founded and edited by 吳幼明 WU Youming, a police officer with a predilection for art and literature in the fourth-tier city of 黃石 Huangshi, Hubei Province. Despite being fired from his position for his illegal publishing activities, Wu has described his experience and practice as a form of freedom which enabled him to understand and collect the works of a particular generation.¹² Working outside the established art centres of Beijing and Shanghai, *Foam* created an alternative network for the dissemination of art and literature, self-organising production to redraw the parameters between text, cultural discourse, and space.

《The Zines of Production》 [REF.KRC6]

Zines of Production (ZoP) is published by Philippines collective Hardworking Goodlooking, featuring the work of ten artists temporarily “liberated from the means of production.” As a project, the zines are available as either a hardcover “white collar” edition, featuring reproductions of each of the zines’ pages, or in their “blue collar” original forms as individual zines.¹³ ZoP incorporates the means of production within its very form, working with local presses and cottage industries as an endeavour to decolonise print itself.

Political Poetry Origami

For at least twenty years, Jannie KWAN has been writing fixed-length couplet form poetry, which she self-publishes as handwritten calligraphy on folded sheets of A4 paper, photocopied and distributed to friends and others in Hong Kong. Known for sharp political critique focusing upon Hong Kong—Mainland China relations, these mini-zines are also sometimes enlarged and reprinted as posters and street banners.

《馮火 Fong Fo》 [PER.FEF]

Fong Fo is a monthly zine published since 2013 by a collective of artists based in Guangzhou and Shunde. Their studio consists of six low-range inkjet printers and one laser printer, which they have been using to house-rig a printing production chain for a small-run zine consisting of texts, drawings, and photo essays by a network of contributors from all over China. The collective self-organises the entire system of production, from editorial to



A zine donation station outside a Kedai Buku Mak Ali event.
Courtesy of Kedai Buku Mak Ali.



Political poetry by Jannie Kwan.
Courtesy of Jannie KWAN.

¹² 吳幼明 WU Youming, WeChat Messenger message to 何穎雅 Elaine W. HO, 19 March 2018.
¹³ Office of Culture and Design Philippines, “Re: Reviving the United Frontline Partline,” email message to 展銷場 Display Distribute, 13 March 2018.

distribution and online media, selling the print version at select locations for only 1 RMB each (or 1 unit of whichever country's currency it is sold in). Such "bad business" as a publishing operation must be considered in conjunction with *Fong Fo's* parallel activities online, whereby the dialectics of the print and web, the virtual and the real, are seen as mutually supportive.

Systematic Graffiti

Marker-drawn diagrams, flowcharts, and notes are meticulously scribbled all over bus stops and underpasses in Bangkok, the work of former art student turned garbage collector and now homeless urban resident Samer PEERACHAI.¹⁴ Whether viewed as artwork or the illegible ramblings of a stilted member of society, Peerachai's graffiti presents a particularly complex web of relations between author, text, and public space.

Beyond the Institutional

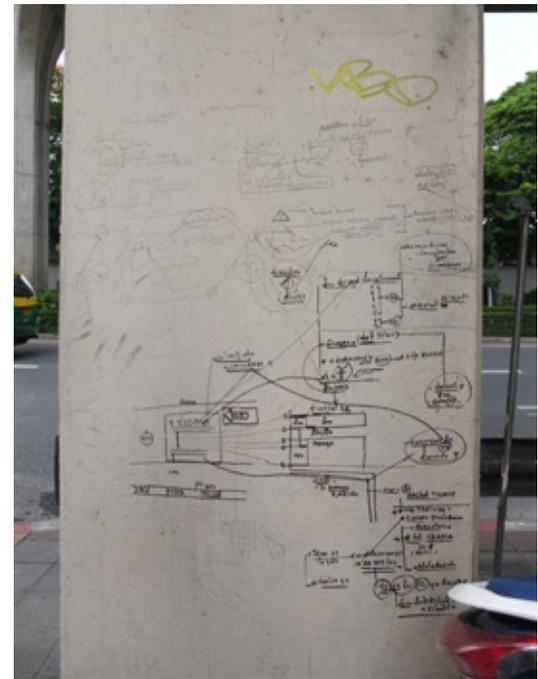
Another phenomenon demanding a closer investigation is the category of publications with institutional affiliations. Sometimes resembling zines but bearing less in common with the independent production and distribution ethos, publications made with the backing of an institution—e.g., exhibition catalogues produced with the support of a gallery, or artist books created through public funding bodies—generally stand outside the purview of zine culture. While appropriations of zine aesthetics with such institutional underpinnings can indeed be problematic, it is also necessary to acknowledge such productions as indicative of the growing phenomena of socially engaged practices and DIY cultures within the field of art, and from there to examine how such relations tell more about the particular socioeconomic conditions enabling artistic production. Re-reading the hybrid position of such printed matter allows us to consider the unique permutations of independent publishing in Asia, whereby the allocation of resources and configurations of independent and corporate enterprises often operate on very different terms. In certain instances, perhaps such enterprises can be reconsidered as themselves acts of creating spaces of semi-autonomy from within, through the deliberate culling and re-allocation of resources in a manner that is not wholly complicit but rather makes other narratives possible.

《藝術俱樂部 *Social Club*》 [EXS.HGK.SOC]

While supported by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council and by this time already running for several years, the artist-founded non-profit art space Para Site chose a modest form of black-and-white photocopied booklet, saddle-stitched with a yellow softcover, for its 2002 exhibition *Social Club*. While it maintains the authored sequencing



Graffiti in Bangkok by Samer PEERACHAI. Courtesy of Elaine W. HO.



¹⁴ "Homeless Man on Quest to Scribble Illuminati Conspiracies on Ratchathewi Bridge?," *Cocoon's Bangkok*, 23 September 2016, www.cocoonits.co/bangkok/features/homeless-man-quest-scribble-illuminati-conspiracies-ratchathewi-bridge-photos/.

The Magasin of Independent Publishing

To view these objects, publications, and printed matter within the framework of the S.A.Z. calls for a shift towards an active mode of reading as an exegetic form of inquiry. Readers are called upon as agents to connect disparate lines—intimately composing a map that transcends socioeconomic borders, language, and aesthetics. Whether through reasserted lineages for independent publishing practices in Asia—as we seek to demonstrate via *dōjinshi* or Indonesian LGBT publications—or through other vernacular print forms, the S.A.Z. nomenclature repositions existing conceptions of the zine as a turn toward what Foucault calls “subjugated knowledges.” By bringing disparate legacies of print culture into contact, the S.A.Z. references the root of zines not simply as clipped or reduced from the heftier “magazine,” but draws upon the French root magasin, meaning warehouse, store, or depot.¹⁶ Stockpiling in this sense contextualises not only printed matter but the relations—between people, print, and place—allowing space for both new historical and speculative narratives to emerge.



¹⁶ 展銷場 Display Distribute, “Aesthetics of Circulation: Along the Black Rim,” 『CATALOGUE』 (Hong Kong: Display Distribute, 2017), referenced from Etie IGHILE, “One for Alpha’s Bet,” *Alpha’s Bet is Not Over Yet: The Reader*, eds. Jamal CYRUS and Steffani JENKINSON (New York: New Museum, 2011). Many of the initial ideas for this essay were first conceived as the editorial for our own S.A.Z., published as 『CATALOGUE』 in the summer of 2017.

REFERENCE PUBLICATIONS

For additional references, the following selection presents existing research and/or documentation on zine-making practices in East and South East Asia:

- 《All We Know About Japanese Zines: Doujinshi, Mini-comi, Little Press... A history of self-publishing, 1960s-2010s》 by BARBORA and Momo NONAKA [REF.MON4]
- 《A Study of Publishing Practices in Malaysia: KL, Penang and Ipoh》 [REF.OOMK]
- 《Lick Zine》 [PER.LIZ]
- 《ZAMAN》 [REF.SID5]
- 《目錄 CATALOGUE》 [REFS.DDI]

“The Semi-Autonomous Zine: Charting Margins and Peripheries in Independent Publishing” was first commissioned in 2018 by Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong. All Latin character codes (e.g., [REFS.DDI]) are catalogue codes for finding the publications mentioned in the text at the AAA library. Also published online in the original English with Chinese translation at: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/shortlist-the-semi-autonomous-zine-charting-margins-and-peripheries-in-independent-publishing>.