

Connecting Memories, or the Making of an Inverted Archival Tree

Chow Yiu-Fai

52–61

Collect. Connect. I was intrigued by the correspondence between these two words, when I, primarily as a creative writer, started my residency at the *Asia Art Archive* (AAA) in Hong Kong, where I was invited to focus on AAA's *Ha Bik Chuen Archive* (H.B.C Archive). Ha (1925–2009) was a well-known artist, a fervent collector of exhibition catalogues, documentations, and the photographs he took at these exhibitions, among other things. Visiting the HBC Archive and his old home, I started to think of Mrs. Ha, of the impossibility of a collection without connection. We collectively remember; we connect for memories. If we can't know of what, we can at least know with whom. This essay documents my – or our – project titled *Connective Memories*, or the making of an inverted archival tree, a project that brought me into contact with six young people and over to the field of music. I end with a song on faith and letter-writing.

#asia art archive

#ha bik-chuen

#hong kong

#knowledge production

#music





Figure 1: Ha Bik-Chuen. Source: courtesy of the Ha Family and Asia Art Archive.

Collect. Connect.

I was intrigued by the correspondence between these two words, when I, primarily as a creative writer, started my residency at the Asia Art Archive (AAA) in Hong Kong. The year was 2018.

I was invited to focus on AAA's Ha Bik-Chuen Archive and conceive a project from this archive. Ha (1925–2009) was a well-known artist, especially noted for his sculptures and print works. In parallel to his creative practices, Ha was a fervent collector. Of particular interest to AAA is Ha's collection of exhibition catalogues, documentation, and the photographs he took at these

exhibitions. I was told that Ha, a self-taught artist, wanted to collect all these materials for his own reference, for his own use. Ha, however, collected more, far more than what could strictly be considered artist's materials; he collected reading materials of all sorts, photographs of all sorts, correspondence of all sorts – everything of all sorts, or all sorts of everything. The AAA itself has this to say about the value of this archive:

*"It provides a singular window into Hong Kong's art history through international exchanges, exhibition history, and the circulation of artistic practices and reading materials."*¹

He and his family used to occupy two neighbouring apartments on the same floor of a residential building in *To Kwa Wan*, one of the first areas of the city to have undergone development. One apartment was meant as domestic space, and the other as his studio-cum-archival space. Both apartments were packed.

A home packed with collected things – that served as the starting point of my residency project. I wondered how it might have felt like to live with a collector. Visiting the HBC Archive and his old home, I couldn't help imagining how Mrs. Ha would have felt – about her husband's work, his working time and space, his collection. And, from a slightly different perspective, would

Ha have been able to live, work, and collect as he did if Mrs. Ha had refused to let him or them live as they did? What kind of connection had they forged to sustain this practice of collecting? From such (unanswerable) questions, I started to realize that a collection wouldn't have been possible without this connection. Only collect; only connect.² We collectively remember; we connect for memories. If we can't know of what, we can at least know with whom. I wanted to work out my own project from this point of connection and see what it brought. I called it *Connective Memories*. This essay documents a project that brought me into contact with six young people and over to the field of music.



Figure 2: Ha Bik Chuen Archive. *Source: Chow Yiu-Fai.*



Figure 3: Ha's family home in To Kwa Wan. *Source: Chow Yiu-Fai.*



Figure 4: Archival tree of HBC Archive.
 Source: courtesy of Asia Art Archive.

First, the young people. Shortly after I started my residency, I learned, quite incidentally, that a former student of mine had joined AAA’s youth group, PageNEXT, some years earlier. I talked to Desmond Chan, my former student, and very quickly I was assured that PageNEXT would be my first point of connection. I issued an open call and, in the end, six members agreed to join my project and formed the first layer of connection, constituted by me and these six young people. We talked, we drank, we dined, and we visited the Ha Bik Chuen Archive. In the end, they were asked to form another layer of connection, to identify someone and bring this someone to the archive. Together they would identify something and turn this something into a creative work. In Desmond’s case, the someone was his girlfriend.

At the moment of writing this, these six young people have almost finished their works, delivering me materials for yet another layer of connection. As someone who has written lyrics for more than three decades, I have this almost instinctive inclination to carry my projects over to the field of music. I thought of Sophy Wong, an indie singer-songwriter whose music I love.³ I extended an invitation to her, and she agreed to collaborate with me. The idea is for us to create songs inspired by PageNEXT members’ works, with Sophy writing the melodies and I the lyrics. This layer of connection, for me, is not only a personal one between a songwriter and a lyric writer. It is also a disciplinary one, across the often-disparate

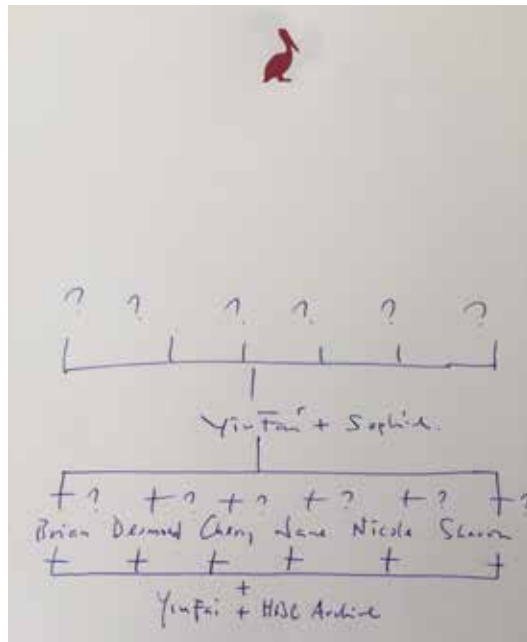


Figure 5: My inverted version of the archival tree.
 Source: Chow Yiu-Fai.

fields of art and popular music. Once the songs are ready, Sophy will invite film makers to create visualisations of the music. Pending a host of uncertainties (including the COVID-19 pandemic, that – quite ironically – decrees distancing while I am writing this tract on connection), I am toying with the idea of returning to *To Kwa Wan*, where the archive, and thus all of our works, find their origins, and present them there.



Figure 6: Digital audio workstation, Abelton Live session of *Faith*.
Source: *Sophy Wong*.

We have been slow. To let an inverted archival tree grow is a slow process. This term emerged during one of the archive visits, when an archivist presented us with an image explaining how the materials are organized: an archival tree. I came to realize that the project I was conceiving might be its inversion. If to collect is to bring together, to collate, to connect is to bring into contact, to relate. One is an inward, top-down process, the other outward and bottom-up. If an archival tree is to catalogue, to compartmentalise, to contain a certain collected item according to a certain logic – in this case, to produce certain forms of knowledge on Hong Kong’s art history – an inverted archival tree grows contingently, thriving on virtuality, multiplicity, and humanity, yielding something quite different, unpredictable.⁴ If I were to venture a dichotomy meant to provoke thinking, then I would suggest that while one side of the binary is driven by the intent to ascertain and know, the other is to connect and inquire. The insertion of visual materials and the mobilisation of a not-so-academic style of writing for this essay, I would suggest, should be seen as part and parcel of this experimental inquiry. In that sense, I would even align this way of producing alternative knowledge to Brian Massumi’s (2015) “inventive methodology”, whereby the wish is to bring about “more of the world” and not “more of the same.” The juxtaposition of these two very different images – of the archival tree processed by the archivists and the inverted one hand-drawn by me – is essentially a response to this dominant methodological per-

suasion, against the same. The very neat and tidy digital chart evokes a visual sense of order and ordering in the archivist’s mind; even without needing to read the exact categorisations that it contains, we can see its exactitude. The drawing, on the other hand, suggests a spontaneous affair, associative and connective, not dictated by me but co-constructed with others. While “personal records”, for instance, serves only as one major category among 10 in the archival tree, its contents attracted quite a few of PageNEXT members, inspiring them to work out something more connected to their own biographies: on secrets, intimacy, and, as we will see, faith ...

A tree, layer upon layer. Sometimes, layer reads like later. We have been slow, and one consequence is that Mrs. Ha no longer lives in their old home. During the Chinese New Year of 2019, we were still able to bring our seasonal greetings to Mrs. Ha, accompanied by their son. We were not able to speak much, but she exuded the ease of being in a space where she had spent most of her life. Despite the staircases, despite her frailty, Mrs. Ha stayed. We said goodbye when someone brought her lunch, a daily routine. Please eat, please eat. Mrs. Ha insisted on seeing us off, waving to us from outside her front door. I hope she will be able to listen to our songs, soon.

This will be one of the six songs, inspired by the work created by Desmond and his girlfriend, called *Faith, the Heart of the Letter*.

“Faith, the Heart of the Letter”

《信心》

How many sheets of paper
Do I need to bring you
Layers of my sky
Or perhaps you already
Knew

重疊過幾張信紙
容納了幾幅天空
還是你已經老早知道

Such a quiet pen
I am holding
My breath
Letter by letter, slightly heavier
Than my breaths

搖動過沈默的筆
藏入了呼吸中
一封封 比呼吸要重

Who is writing a good good dream in the middle of the
night
Who is writing a soft soft breeze in the midday sun
And I, right now, want to write
So much I have failed to write

在我掌握中繼續努力的紀錄 努力的紀錄
在你親手拆開中紀錄低努力的繼續 努力的繼續
也許不信什麼
而最好不信命
年月匆匆要守住 仍舊想寫信的心

When you start reading my letter, your hands touch
what my hands have touched
It's our attempt to record, to continue
To continue recording, to record the continuation
What don't we believe in
Better be destiny
What is the matter when I still have the heart to write
you letters

誰在笑著寫貪慕
誰在痛著都寫祝福
而我在此刻寫下 庸俗與美好

Who is turning his smiles into words of longing
Who is twisting her sadness into blessings
And I, right now, want to write
All the banality, all the beauty

在我掌握中繼續努力的紀錄 努力的紀錄
在你親手拆開中紀錄低努力的繼續 努力的繼續
也許不信什麼
而最好不信命
年月匆匆要守住 仍舊想寫信的心 還在信 你的心

When you start reading my letter, your hands touch
what my hands have touched
It's our attempt to record, to continue
To continue recording, to record the continuation
What don't we believe in
Better be destiny
What is the matter when I still have the heart to write
you letters

為了幾分鐘 渴望 渴望的紀錄
為了幾分鐘 生命 至少可繼續
也許不信什麼
而最好不信命
年月淌開似張紙 仍舊想寫信

For a matter of minutes, I wish, to record my wish
For a matter of minutes, life suspends and continues
What don't we believe in
Better be destiny
Time unfolds into a sheet of paper
I still have the heart to write



Scan the QR code to watch the video
and listen to the song discussed in
this contribution.

Desmond visited the Ha Bik Chuen Archive in June 2019. He was immediately attracted to the private correspondence between Ha and a young person who wanted to befriend and learn from the master artist. They sent one another letters over an extended period of time. It was an act of necessity, in an era where long-distance communication was only possible through the writing of letters. But Desmond, and later Ava too, also sensed and envied the sincerity, the honesty, the intimacy woven in the weft of the written words, in the letters. He wanted to know how that was possible then, and if it would be possible now. So, they tried it.

It was too difficult, too contrived, and in the end inauthentic, as Desmond noted in his creative statement. They gave up. Instead, they reverted to their usual mode of communication: WhatsApp. After all, if writing letters characterised Ha's time, digital means characterise Desmond's. In the end, they retrieved the WhatsApp messages they sent to one another during the first month of their relationship and turned the messages into a booklet. Putting the virtual conversations in print is, in that sense, Desmond's attempt to respond, across the decades, to the correspondence he read in the archive. The booklet is Desmond's letter.

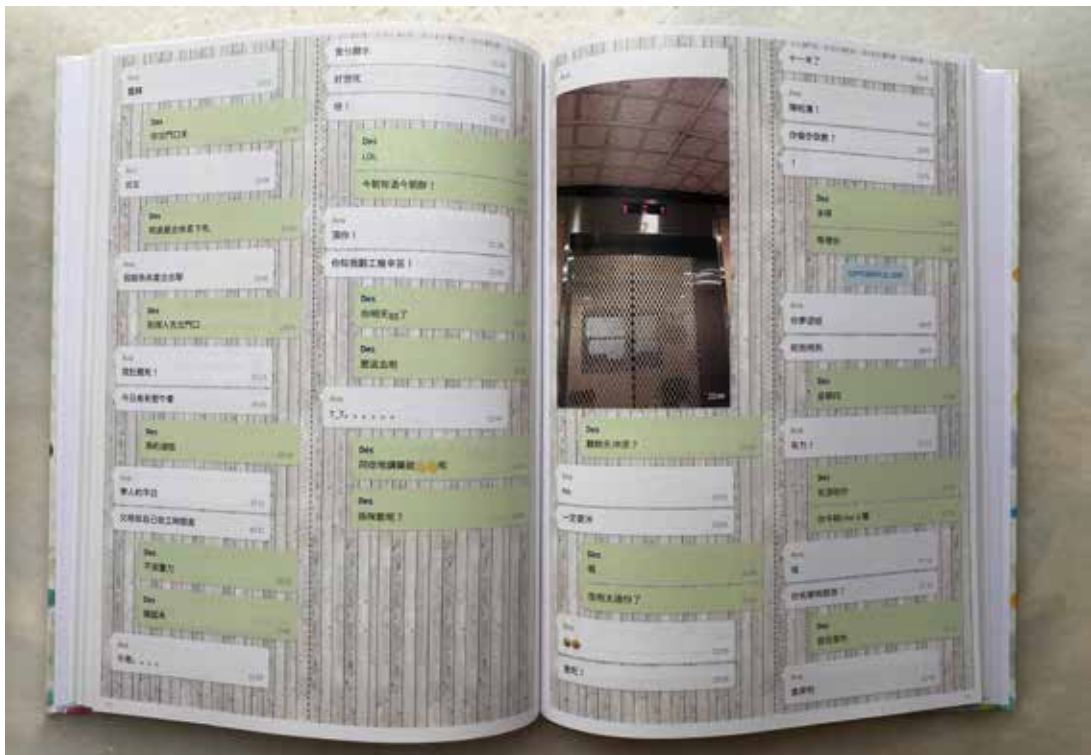


Figure 8: Desmond Chan's artwork, inspired by Ha's letter writing practice. *Source:* Chow Yiu-Fai.

This letter, the booklet, or to be precise, the digital rendition of such, was sent to Sophy, and she came back with a demo entitled “Better Days”.⁵ Having listened to it, I wrote the lyrics. Desmond and I decided to call our work 信心, for its beautiful ambiguity. At one point, we were talking about the project in progress, and we started using the Chinese word for “letter”, 信. As Desmond was explaining the difficulties of developing this habit of writing with his girlfriend to me, the Chinese term for “faith” flashed up: 信心, the two words literally meaning “letter” and “heart”. What is the connection between faith, letters and hearts?

Desmond and I do not know the answer to this, or to the many other questions that came up during our exercise of archival inquiry. Desmond, however, has found out more about his mode of communication with Ava. I remain baffled by the Chinese word for faith, and somehow am empowered by that coincidence.

Time unfolds into a sheet of paper

I still have the heart to write

Talking about alternative knowledge, that may be mine, at least at the end of May 2020.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. For more information regarding the Asia Art Archive and Ha Bik Chuen Archive, please see: <https://aaa.org.hk/en>, and <https://aaa.org.hk/en/collection/search/archive/ha-bik-chuen-archive>.
2. “Only connect” is a key phrase of E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End* (1910), one of my favourites during my undergraduate time reading literature, one of my own connective memories.
3. For more information regarding Sophy Wong, please see: <https://www.sophysophy.com/>. Her music is available on Spotify under SOPHY.
4. Given the remit and confines of this essay, I am not engaging with theoretical and creative works that evoke similar politics of archiving and knowledge production, such as Deleuze and Guattari’s figure of the rhizome (1980/2004) and Aby Warburg’s last and unfinished project *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-29), see, for instance, Johnson (2012).
5. The project was completed in 2021 with a concert and a display of artworks, songs, and music videos at Tai Kwun, Hong Kong. For details: <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/connective-memories>.

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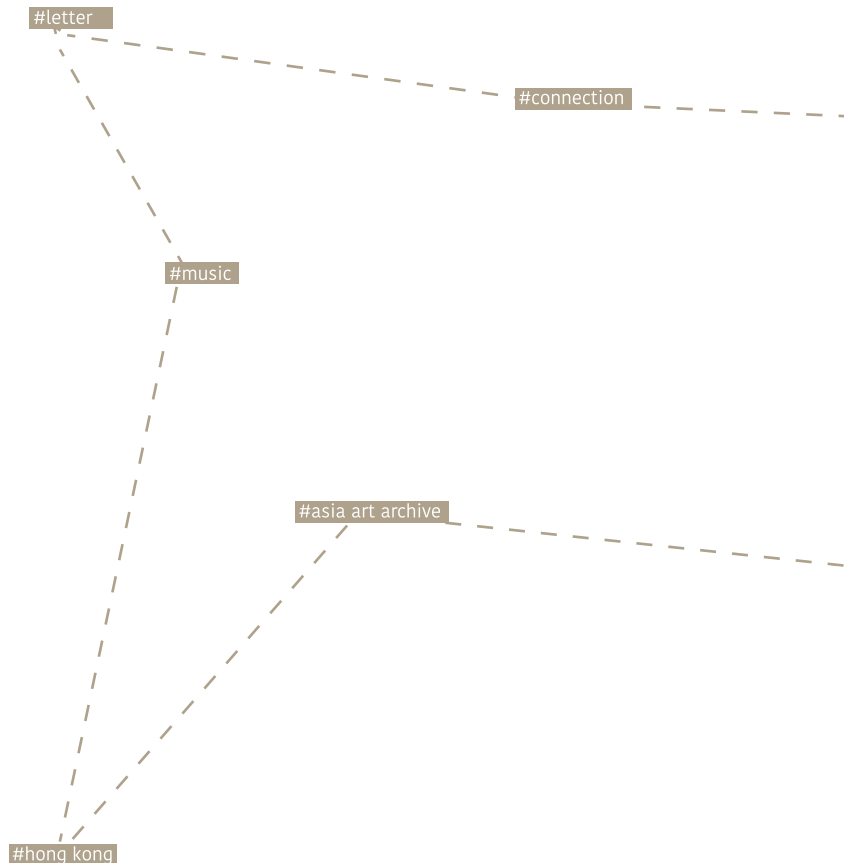
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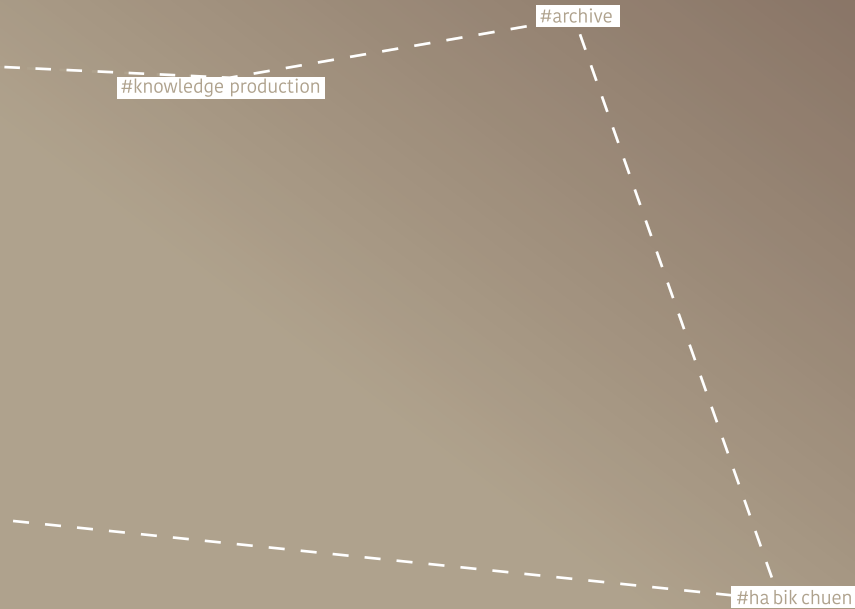
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Bio

Chow Yiu-Fai is professor at the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University. His publications cover gender politics and creative practices, including *Caring in the Time of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Palgrave 2019) and *Sonic Multiplicities: Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image* (Intellect 2013, co-authored). Chow is also an award-winning writer in lyrics and prose. Lately, he has been increasingly involved in multi-media and visual art projects.





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