

Archiving Malaysian popular print artefacts through digital technology.

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Abstract:

Since Malaysia independence, not many of part of the domain of popular print such as magazines, newspapers, comic books, etc., are recorded or stored extensively in the national archives or libraries. They are not accorded significance as historical records in Malaysia. Only in the beginning of 2010, the archiving of the popular print culture such as magazines and cartoons began to be collected but the collections only started mainly from 1990s. In some other countries, the popular print artefacts have gained recognition as important cultural artefacts and have been allocated their own space in libraries, national archives, and even in some museums. This is because, through this historical print artefact, queries about the cultural histories and social evolutions may be discussed and answered. Preserving and archiving the popular print artefacts is a challenge in Malaysia. As pop-print artefacts are mainly considered as ephemeral artefacts, most of the early print have gone 'disappeared' and are not able to be retrieved even in the publisher's resource centre. Scholarly communities, concern citizens, publisher and personal collectors are now began to engaged in the efforts to resolve the problems associated in preserving these artefacts in another kind of common resource: digital archiving. Such information is a critical priority, especially for libraries and other institutions that have borne responsibility for maintaining the Malaysian design, cultural and heritage record. This paper will give an overview of the current status of archiving in Malaysia and then continue with discussion of a case study in relation to the topic.

Keywords: *digital archiving, popular print artefact, Malaysian digital archive, digital technologies*

*"In a democracy, it is predicated on the fact that the records belong to the people."
Jerry Handfield, State Archivist, Washington D.C Archive in "The Importance of Digital Archives", Dec 3, 2012.*

Introduction

Visual culture is an integral part of social life and visual artefacts can serve as an important link to understand the cultural ethos of a society. While visual artefacts, such as paintings, sculptures, murals and ceramics have often served as historical evidences, with the proliferation of mechanical means of production the print medium has emerged as one of the most important sites of production of visual culture (A. Rahman, 2012). Popular print artefacts, such as magazines, posters, advertisements, logos and cartoons, inundate everyday life in the modern world. But due to their non-intellectual content and ubiquity, the role of popular print culture in shaping and reflecting cultural life has been neglected.

Popular print artefacts can be considered as cultural artefacts in their own right. They play a significant role in shaping the ethos, aesthetics and customs of a society, as well as being shaped by them, because they are so enmeshed in people's everyday life. As banal ubiquitous objects circulating in the public domain, these artefacts not only provide insights into everyday culture, but also enable one to grasp the impact of political, economic and social transformation in a society on its culture.

This article will highlight the importance of the popular print artefacts and why they should be archived and kept as academic references. In light of the first point, this paper will present the current archiving status in Malaysia and then engage into discussion in proposing crowdsourcing and network citizen as a method that can be adopted in the archiving process of popular print artefacts in Malaysia.

The Popular Print

In Malaysia, popular print artefacts are highly produced in numbers and publications but very little of these artefacts are kept and accessible for public or scholar references. In fact, the idea that the popular prints are important and can serve as academic references for research purpose and source for pedagogy have not been much put into practice.

Popular print artefacts like magazines, newspapers, and posters are strongly driven by the general masses. Whereas literature requires a certain level of cerebral engagement, popular print artefacts have access to a much broader audience than books; to the general masses rather than just citizens with literacy, time and leisure.

In addition, popular print artefacts are not authored as objects of art like novels or literature. They are meant for disseminating information, messages and discourses circulating in the public domain of a particular society or nation. Popular print artefacts can act as a source of information that indirectly provide the readers contents that relates to the economic, culture, political and social developments of relevance to the nation. They act as a channel of information from various sources such as from the government, corporations, companies, individuals, institutions or investigators to the masses. Other print products like posters, brochures, and flyers are common printed materials used for election campaigns or social movements, to promote certain issues or just a simple everyday event such as launching an opening of a new office.

As a medium focused on issues of topical interest to a community, popular print culture is deeply imbricated in the local events and issues affecting that community. As Hall (2014) asserted, popular culture has “connection with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experience of ordinary folk” (p. 107). Tabloids and magazines not only focus on local issues, they gloss on events or developments from a local perspective. This process of re-interpretation helps ground a sense of identity and place for the readership.

As artefacts, circulating in the realm of everyday life and culture, popular print media also act as creators of taste and mobilisers of identity. In contrast to creative works of artistic or intellectual content, popular print artefacts revolve around trends and tastes in mundane everyday life. Chambers (2002) elaborated on this dichotomy and said that popular culture “does not involve an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention, but invokes mobile orders of sense, taste and desire” (p. 12). He legitimates what is ‘popular’ in culture and authorises hegemonic notions of taste and culture that influence identities. As John Street (1997) noted: “These identities emerge in relation to the ways in which the nation is defined in their rituals and pageants, in their sporting contests, in their daily newspaper” (p. 10). It has also been argued that popular media are malleable objects that can be used by those in power to consolidate a social norm. Printed works of intellectual or philosophical import, like novels and treatises, seek to provoke critical thinking. But popular publications like tabloids and magazines do not necessarily engage in such serious discourse. They circulate as an accessible source of information and discussion for readers. They are disparate collages of fragments of information, commentaries and advertorial materials that do not engage in serious reflection about the way a society works but unthinkingly perpetrate the status quo at most times.

To conclude, on account of these diverse aspects of popular print culture, as a medium meant for mass consumption, imbricated in everyday life, completely dictated by local contexts and created as a source of information: they are a potent cultural site for articulating national identity.

The Current Archiving Status

National Archives of Malaysia (NAM) was established in January 1957 initially as Public Record Office then in 1963 as NAM. In 2004 the centre was placed under the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage. NAM offers collections of books, serials, that contain mix of international and local journals and annual

reports, theses and academic exercises, variety of pamphlets pertaining to services and activities of foreign archives, and NAM owns publications. With the years of establishment as the national archiving center, NAM collections still leading towards the collecting mainly text basis documentation and photographs, and other print artefacts that have high contribution to the society, popular culture, and social development of the nation such as magazine, comic books and cartoon strips to name few are still not getting much attention. The state of archiving in Malaysia is disparaged due to the lack of understanding on archiving in general, and the selection of the artefacts that are limited because most selections are based on the national interest.

Most of the prints collection in NAM relates to national concerns such as historical photographs, newspaper articles, memorandum, national agreements, national memorable events and celebrations, etc. Most of the artefacts are tangible and some are no longer available for access due to the damages caused by visitors touching them without serious control. In addition, the collections of artefacts from each states of NAM around Malaysia are not shared or linked nor through their book collection either through digital databank for public use.

Interview with NAM Archive officer in 5-7 May 2010 has established that officers in NAM did not have a degree specifically in archiving, because there is no specific course or degree program on archiving in Malaysia. Instead, most of the officers graduated from other fields, mainly from business and management degrees.

Beside the collections offered in the centre, NAM also offers an online service that allow readers to view their materials digitally in e-arkib. Unfortunately, many of the artefacts are not accessible online and, for the ones available, the access are given according to different levels between the government servants, researchers, public and students. The online e-arkib provides databanks related to the national interest and topics as shown here (Figure 1). The sections are broken up into sections such as *Prime Minister's Speech*

Collection, Facts in Retro, Windows to History, etc. Each section is badly organised and languages are mixed between Malay and English.

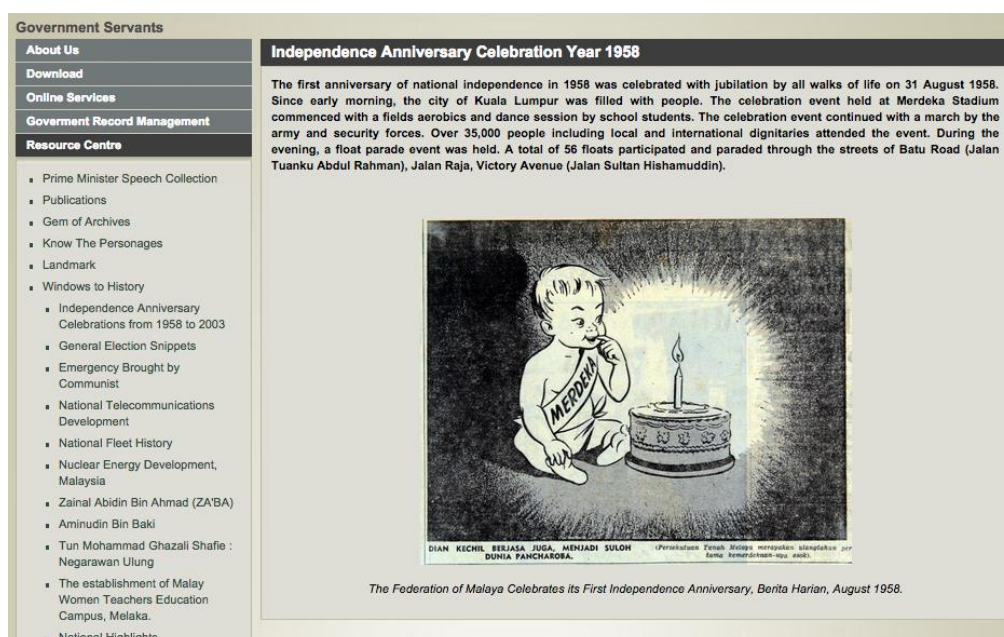


Figure 1: National Archives of Malaysia (NAM). Online access 8 April 2015



Figure 2: National Archives of Malaysia (NAM) Online access on 8 April 2015.

Besides the official archives provided by the Malaysian government, there are some privately owned digital resources that can be source of references in Malaysia. There are also digital libraries that are provided by all the Malaysian

universities. However, similarly to the NAM, the content and the collections focus around the national interest. For the private digital archive, the most popular website is *Malaysian Design Archive* (MDA) established in 2008 by its founder Ezrena Mazwan.

MDA is a digital Malaysian archive hub that tries to gather popular print artefacts from different websites including NAM (Figure 3). However each artefact (similar to e-arkib) lacks of details. The information has no structure or standards, which is a major problem as simple details such as year of publication, source or author are not available. Without such information, artefacts are difficult to use as references.

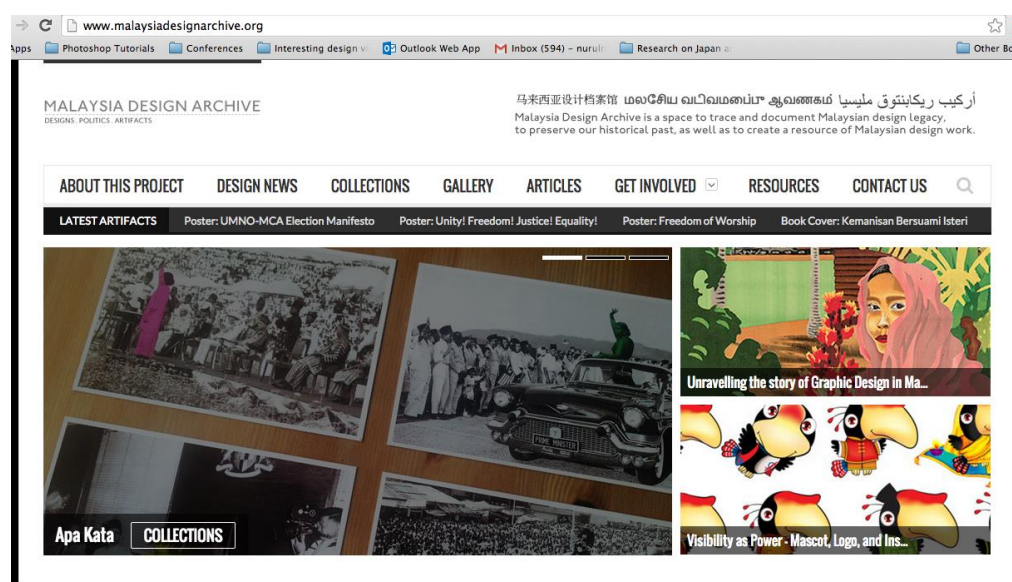


Figure 3: Online access 8 April 2015 (<http://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org/>)

Besides popular print artefacts, other cultural artefacts have also been in several academic discussions. For example, in her discussions on batik, Legino (2012) stated that there is a need in “cataloguing, collecting and researching batik for a museum’s archive” and highlighted that this requires “a collaborative process and involves documentation of the techniques.” (p. 60) .

For country with pluralistic society such as Malaysia, with a mix of different cultures, ethnicities and religions, the artefacts of everyday culture and

elements that link to the development of each ethnics' cultural identity are crucial to be documented and kept alongside the archiving materials. What is currently missing are the stories and anecdotes directly or indirectly related to the artefacts.

The process of archiving is not meant to be limited to collecting the artefacts or the cultural materials, as most centres, museums and institutions are currently practicing. But it is also about documenting the collections, maintaining the condition of the artefacts, and further more to have a system of organization centralized and accessible for public use, with permission of the archive centre.

Conclusion

The archiving state in Malaysia is in a crucial condition. Most of the collections archived focus only on the artifacts that link to the country's national interest. However, people's everyday culture, such as popular print artefacts, is hardly appreciated and kept. This paper highlighted the importance of archiving the popular print artefacts, and the archiving situation in Malaysia.

With the current wave of technology, it seems easy to produce digital collections and archives. Indeed, it is not difficult to adopt new tools, methods and software to assist in the process of transforming the archive collection to the digital. However, it is also needed to be emphasis here that the original print collections are at stake to be preserved and maintained before the idea of establishing digital archiving applications. Both should continuously together. Without the original popular print artefacts, there will be limitation in the collection of the digital archive as it is happening now with the Malaysian e-arkib.

The archiving situation that are currently happening in Malaysia, are most likely happens in many Southeast Asian countries. Popular print artefacts are

part of our everyday life and its contributions in any nation social development should be kept and to be accessible for future references.

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