Moving into an age of digital Asian Studies

By Dr Amy Chan (independent researcher, President of ALRA)

In the last roundtable discussion at the 2016 ASAA conference in Canberra, many around the table expressed their apprehension at the current state of the primary sources they had accumulated on their fieldtrips. These were pictures, posters, interviews, music recordings and other ephemera languishing in personal garages, gathered in the hope of further research one day. In that discussion, the notion of digitising the material was raised, not only as a means of preservation, but also to build the research resources for future Asian Studies scholars. Two years on, where are we?

I am aware of the ANU's Southeast Asia Archive Project which Emeritus Professors Anthony Reid and David Marr have invested much into. As far as I can tell, there is an increased undertaking to digitise the material and have them available on Open Access as soon as possible. However, as the senior archivist once told me, to digitise everything they have in their catalogue would take hundreds of years.

It had also been brought to my attention previously of the various digitisation projects undertaken around the nation by university libraries of their archival material. The Balai Pustaka collection at Monash University, for example.

It seems to me there are various pockets of digitising activities happening around the nation: NLA's digitisation project, the two universities aforementioned, and perhaps even other cultural institutions like NFSA that may inadvertently have digitised material related to Asia. Then there is, of course, digitising work undertaken in various universities in the US (e.g. the Southeast Asia Digital Library, Cornell's digitisation of Southeast Asian newspapers), UK (e.g. British Library's Endangered Archives project), Singapore's NLB (e.g. Malaysian and Singapore newspapers), and the respective universities and institutions in the region.

Many of us would be familiar with the difficulty in finding research material on the region (China excluded), and relying on personally being in-situ to be in the advantageous position of discovering, finding and collecting material for our various research projects. We had hoped that with the ubiquitous use of the internet and its enabling communication and connectivity, it would make remote 'Asian Studies' possible. It has, to a degree, with the widespread take-up of the medium in Asia. However, as noted in the most recent Ithaka-SR research report "Supporting the Changing Practices of Asian Studies Scholars" (2018), to gain access to information and research material, it is still necessary to be physically there in the respective archives, libraries and cultural institutions.

This is in contrast with conducting historical and archival research on Europe or England, where there are many curated digital archives of books and all manner of primary resources for remote access and interrogation. These digital collections provide researchers access to high-quality reproductions of historical artefacts with ability to zoom and resize on-screen images for detailed interrogation. They are accessed anytime, anywhere, travel is not required, and multiple sources available for simultaneous consultation. (Meyer and Schroeder, 2015:162 *Knowledge Machines*) In a previous mini research project which Aline and I conducted on Indonesian research resources, many of the Indonesian studies scholars

told us they want more digitised resources because fieldwork is costly and dangerous (at times), and having the availability of material at hand anytime is invaluable.

Take, for example the South Asia Archive. This resource is very much appreciated by the South Asianist community. So much material that was inaccessible was made accessible. Where once researchers would have to spend days in dusty archives in the hope of finding that elusive manuscript which has turned up disappointingly unreadable due to decay, now they can interrogate that manuscript at their desks without fear of causing more damage, and in improved conditions. The South Asia Archive is the work of two researchers who were not prepared to be put out by the inconvenience and inaccessibility to primary research resources.

With the material in the various garages scattered around Australia, I am willing to venture we have quite a sizeable collection of research resources on Asia, waiting to be interrogated, for their untold story to be told, for their well-kept secrets to be unlocked. So, it is very encouraging that the various universities and institutions are undertaking digitisation, and I hope those projects would include these resources from the garages before the silverfish get to them.

But even for this archival project to continue and eventually be digitised, is it enough to just convert them to digital formats? How are future researchers to know of the existence of this treasure trove? We would rely on Google, or in Australia, Trove, to expose and discover these collections. But are they adequate? Would they have the technical capacity to handle the various script-based languages, for example?

Further, even with the most sophisticated metadata, it would still require help for these digitised objects to be discovered amidst the overwhelming 'white noise' across the world wide web. I came across a research paper on this precise topic, and the finding revealed that curated digital collections stand a better chance of being discovered and used as designed. This is particularly true for our subject area, because of the vast range of languages and scripts across the Asia region, the variable standard of transliteration, and multiple formats (audio, visual, manuscript, etc.) the material is in. Further, there are common topics across a breadth of countries, regions, languages, cultures and political systems. A curated collection can bring digitised artefacts together, focused on these topics, which would enhance their discoverability and usability.

If we have the physical material converted to digital, what is to stop us from moving into data mining, large-scale textual analysis, and other digital research methods? Methods that may answer previously unanswerable questions or help prove unproven hypotheses. Methods that will allow us to track the specific words and their evolution across time and region to help elucidate the origins of the language and/or people. A similar example was done a few years ago to chart the rise and fall of the English term *feminism* and the French term *feminisme* over the course of the twentieth century, using a dataset provided by the digitised copies of 5 million books through the Google Book Project. The study provided insight into the significance of feminism as cultural change in two different contexts and over a period of 100 years.

In the little time I had researching this issue, I have yet to learn of more than a handful of projects that use digital research methods on the region. It is not that Asian Studies needs to be pulled out of the dinosaur age, but that what we can learn of the region if we had tools that would allow us to examine

the large amount of data generated from the many digitised books, manuscripts, records, interviews, and audio-visual records. What stories could be told?

To conclude, I would like to see a national effort to build such an infrastructure that will not only preserve what our emeritus community has collected, but also to build a resource for the future. A resource that bears witness to the long established Australian research in the Asian region; a resource that we can share with and return to our partners in the region.