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COMMENT

Digitised Sources, Materiality and 'Interim Archives': Archive Encounters in Asia and the United Kingdom

Jeremy Goh [iD]

Department of History, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom
Email: Jeremy.Goh.1@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

In this Comment, I reflect on my personal experience in doing research at institutional archives as an early career historian. I discuss how my research has been shaped by encounters with physical and digital sources across Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong SAR and the United Kingdom. In doing so, I draw on the concept of 'interim archives' to emphasise the partial nature of primary sources in institutional archives, and the necessity for research to be multi-archival due not only to the realities of access, but also the need to incorporate diverse perspectives.

In this Comment, I reflect on my experience in doing archival research as an early career historian in the early twenty-first century. I also discuss how the realities of archive access and travelling shaped my research. In particular, I draw upon and further develop the concept of 'interim archives', one that I coined with a colleague in an earlier article.[1] This concept denotes the partial nature of archival sources, especially those which might not be readily accessible to researchers. Here, I seek to expand and connect this concept to ongoing discussions on the digitisation of primary sources, which has generated substantial interest among historians and archivists.[2]

This Comment is not explicitly meant to be a comprehensive survey of archival practice, but one which is rooted in my personal encounters. At the University of Warwick, I work on the financial history of the Straits Settlements between

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[1]Kah Seng Loh and Jeremy Goh, 'Semi-Archives and Interim Archives: A History of the National Wages Council in Singapore', *Southeast Asian Studies*, 11 (2022), 427–49.

[2]For example, see Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital: Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural and Social History*, 10 (2013), 9–23; Harry Smith and Emily Vine, 'Material and Digital Archives: The Case of Wills', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, First View (2024), 1–30.

1900 and 1950. The Straits Settlements were a British crown colony comprising the cosmopolitan port cities of Singapore, Malacca and Penang. My project takes ethnic Chinese banks headquartered in colonial Singapore and Malaya, with branches in China, as its objects of enquiry, and investigates how they contributed actively to the growing economic integration of the region in the first half of the twentieth century. Alongside the elite networks of bankers, entrepreneurs and colonial officials, I am also interested in uncovering the lived experiences of common people who were instrumental as customers and consumers of modern banking and finance. By weaving the diverse stories from above and below, I seek to build an inclusive and novel narrative that explains the evolution of capitalism on the colonial periphery.

As it is for most historians, the archive is pivotal in my work. The centrality of archives is well encapsulated by Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, who pointed out that they were the 'second home' of historians, particularly those working on material culture.[3] However, in an increasingly digital era, in-person visits to archives appear to be less essential as more primary sources are accessible on the Internet. What does our 'second home' look like when digitisation and the material turn send historians in opposing directions? Do physical archives still matter?

In my case, physical archives remain essential as the majority of my primary sources are only accessible onsite. As part of my research, I have visited a dozen institutional archives located across the United Kingdom and several cities in Asia, including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Hong Kong.[4] These official archives contain reports, memos and letters which are essential for understanding policymaking processes and the complex deliberations among civil servants and bankers. To some extent, they are 'interim archives' due to the varying availability and accessibility of records. I focus on the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), which is my primary site for research. In the remainder of the Comment, I will elaborate on my experiences in accessing digitised and physical primary sources at these archives, and discuss how my encounter with these depositories shaped the direction of my research.

Digitised sources on the screen

Digitised sources have become increasingly essential for researchers since the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has driven substantial efforts in digitising primary material and making it more accessible to users in an increasingly digitally mediated world.[5] For example, Seton Hall University and Georgetown University in New Jersey have enhanced their outreach efforts not only by broadening digital access, but also by making their online collections more 'discoverable' by sharpening the

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[3]Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, 'Introduction', in *Writing Material Culture History*, ed. Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (2014), 3.

[4]The archives that I have visited are the National Archives of Singapore, Library of the ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute, Arkib Negara Malaysia (National Archives of Malaysia) in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru and Kota Bharu, as well as the Public Records Office of Hong Kong. In the United Kingdom, I visited The National Archives, London Metropolitan Archives, HSBC Global Archives, Bank of England Archives, and the Modern Records Centre in the University of Warwick.

[5]Christine Rosen, *The Extinction of Experience: Reclaiming our Humanity in a Digital World* (New York, 2024).

Figure 1. Photo of NAS. Photo taken by the author in March 2024.

metadata of their sources.[6] Efforts like these are certainly welcome for researchers who can access these collections at any time and place with a reliable internet connection.

A substantial amount of my research takes place in Singapore, as the city-state was the capital city of the Straits Settlements and host to the headquarters of major Asian financial institutions such as the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation. Since 2012, the NAS has been expanding its digital offerings to the public (see Figure 1).[7] It receives funding from the Singapore Government not only to enhance public access to records but also to create a more conducive space to do research.[8] The Government allocated more than 20 million Singapore dollars to revamping the NAS, which opened its doors in 2019.[9] Alongside newer machines and microfilm readers, the new premises are also more accessible to disabled visitors with levelled floors and lifts.[10]

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[6]Sheridan Sayles and Lauren Burroughs, 'When the World Shuts Down: Collections Access and Interpretation in a Time of COVID', *Journal of Archival Organization*, 17 (2020), 227–33.

[7]Eric Chin, 'How Goes the Digital at the Archives', In *The Digital in Cultural Spaces*, ed. Chui Hua Tan and Cheryl-Ann Low Mei Gek (Singapore, 2017), 2–8.

[8]'PAP Govt Committed to Ensuring Greater Access to Records for Research', *Petir*, 1 Mar. 2023, https://petir.sg/2023/03/01/pap-govt-committed-to-ensuring-greater-access-to-records-for-research/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[9]Jun Sen Ng, 'Poor Oversight, Inconsistent Disbursement of Grants, among Litany of Issues Flagged by Auditor-General's Report', *Today*, 7 Sep. 2020, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/poor-oversight-inconsistent-disbursement-business-grants-among-litany-issues-flagged (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[10]Janice Tai, 'National Archives of Singapore Building Reopens after 18-Month Revamp', *Straits Times*, 7 Apr. 2019, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/national-archives-of-singapore-building-re-opens-after-18-month-revamp (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

During the initial phases of COVID-19 in 2020, I was writing my Master's thesis on the first ethnic Chinese bank that was established in Singapore.[11] The 'circuit breaker' (as we called it in Singapore) meant that the NAS was closed. I had to shift my research focus from archival sources to digitised primary sources that were freely available online. I consulted a range of Singapore and Malayan newspapers on 'NewspaperSG',[12] a database operated by the National Library of Singapore, as well as the broadsheets that are available on the webpage of the National University of Singapore's Chinese Library.[13] Reading these broadsheets in English and Chinese reinforced my awareness and appreciation of how early banking and finance were closely embedded within the daily lives of elites and non-elites in the Straits Settlements.

Even some digital files, however, require a physical visit to the NAS as not all holdings are publicly available online, which is the case with other archives that I have visited in Asia and the United Kingdom. In most cases, researchers are allowed to view files in PDF format, using one of the desktops shown in Figure 2. In general, NAS does not provide records in their 'original format' for public consultation due to storage and preservation priorities.[14] Similarly, in-person visits are also highly recommended for the Library of the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, which holds vast collections pertaining to Southeast Asia, and manages the private paper collection of prominent individuals in Singapore and Malaysia.[15]

Like its institutional counterparts elsewhere, the NAS acts as both a custodian and a gatekeeper, making practical considerations for access quite pertinent. For NAS, it is vital to request files early as it may take 'upwards of 12 weeks' for processing and clearance by the government agency overseeing the record requested.[16] This usually takes longer as officials who are doing the review have to do so as they perform their main responsibilities.[17] In most cases, requests to access files in governmental collections take longer than others, such as Straits Settlements, overseas and private records, which only require a couple of working days.

There is a silver lining to this process. In some cases, after careful review of my request, files were made available by NAS on its database for public access. In most instances, however, I received permission to view the government records that I requested, with only a small number of my requests being unsuccessful. For approved files, I viewed them either through 'open terminals' (where photo-taking was allowed) or 'closed terminals' (where photo-taking and reproduction were not allowed), depending on the instructions I received from the archives. The criteria

[11]Jeremy Goh, 'Banking, Business and Race: The Kwong Yik Bank in Colonial Singapore and the Malay States' (M.A. thesis, Nanyang Technological University, 2021).

[12]'NewspaperSG', https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[13]'Historical Newspaper Collection, National University of Singapore Libraries', https://nus.edu.sg/nuslibraries/collections/special-collections/historical-newspapers-collection (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[14]'Frequently Asked Questions, Request to View Archival Records', National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/erequest/faq (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[15]'ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Library', https://www.iseas.edu.sg/library/iseas-library/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[16]'Frequently asked questions, Request to view archival records', National Archives of Singapore, https://www.nas.gov.sg/erequest/faq (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

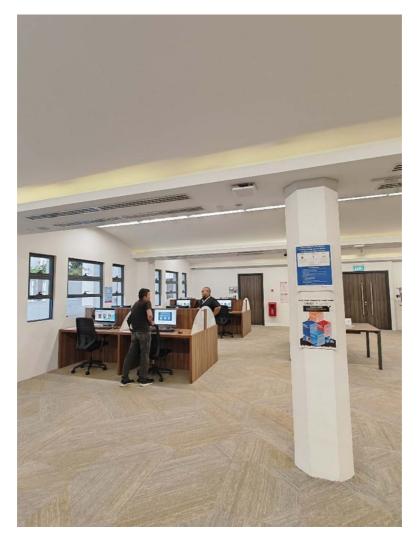[17]Loh and Goh, 'Semi-Archives and Interim Archives', 431.

Figure 2. The Reading Room of NAS. Photo taken by the author in November 2024.

determining whether material would be accessible on a 'closed' or 'open' terminal remains unclear. The resulting uncertainty is certainly daunting for researchers, even more so for early career historians like me. As I was allowed to read company and bank records on the 'closed terminals', I had to spend more time in the reading room taking down notes and corporate data, including annual balance sheets, shareholding lists and reports, on my personal computer. Archival realities, then, directly changed my research, requiring more and longer trips from the UK to Singapore than anticipated.

Digital records, therefore, do not always translate into easier accessibility. As Gerben Zaagsma has noted, even when records are available online there may still be

obstacles to access, especially for those in the Global South.[18] In some cases, potentially useful digitised texts remain 'hidden' due to the low quality of optical character recognition, which reduces their discoverability on search portals.[19] Another issue lies with materiality, as researchers lose access to the physical copies of documents and records. In their study on early modern wills, Harry Smith and Emily Vane found that digital version replicated the content, but not the materiality of original wills. Essential information regarding literacy and authorship were lost.[20] I have a similar experience, as crucial details such as signatures, coloured seals, stamps, and cursive handwriting in English and Chinese, are less visible on the screen as compared to paper.

Materiality and location matters

It is this preference for consulting primary sources in their physical form, coupled with the archival realities in Singapore, that led me to explore archives beyond Singapore. Financial records from London and the former British colonies of Hong Kong and the Malay States have made it possible for me to trace economic, financial and social connections within the British empire. In-person visits are necessary to access not only physical records, but also source indexes and guides as online search portals may not list the entirety of the holdings of an archive. For example, approximately 8 per cent of the material held by The National Archives at Kew was made available on its online catalogue in 2023.[21]

My experience at Kew and other institutional archives in London, Hong Kong SAR and Malaysia has been broadly positive. At Hong Kong's Public Record Office (PRO), researchers can submit file requests between one working day and one month in advance.[22] During my visit in July 2024, there were instances when I managed to view files within one hour after making the request. Similarly, I requested and viewed files on the same day in Arkib Negara Malaysia (ANM, National Archives of Malaysia). Likewise for Kew, researchers can order files and gain access to them on the same day, even though a minimum of four working days are needed to book a visit.[23] More time may be needed to book a visit to the HSBC Archives and Bank of England Archives as they have limited seating spaces.

Like most historians, I find encountering primary material in physical form exciting. I am curious about the content, materiality and provenance of the sources that I come across. I fully relate to Emily Robinson's description of archival research as an affective experience.[24] The joy of uncovering unexpected pieces of physical evidence

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[18]Gerben Zaagsma, 'Digital History and the Politics of Digitization', *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, 38 (2023), 830–51.

[19]Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital'.

[20]Smith and Vine, 'Material and Digital Archives'.

[21]Information obtained by the author during an introductory archival skills workshop in December 2023.

[22]'Request and Reserve our Holdings', Government Records Office, Hong Kong, https://www.grs.gov.hk/en/access_our_holdings.html (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[23]'Booking a Visit to View our Documents', The National Archives, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/about/visit-us/about-the-book-a-reading-room-visit-service/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[24]Emily Robinson, 'Touching the Void: Affective History and the Impossible', *Rethinking History*, 14 (2010), 503–20.

Figure 3. Specimen cheque of the Mercantile Bank of India in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Six specimen cheques and a cheque book from Kuala Lumpur branch, 1900–1950, HQ HSBCEB 0002-0002-0008-0002, HSBC Archives. Reproduced courtesy of HSBC Archives.

and the thrill of chasing a paper trail will be familiar to many. These emotional and sensory reactions, according to Carolyn Steedman, play a central role in interpreting the past, a process that is not merely rational, but deeply personal.[25] The experience of touching historical sources and artefacts enabled me to develop a tangible connection to history. In many instances, this sensory interaction sparked my curiosity and imagination concerning the lived reality of individuals, both elite and non-elite, in colonial Southeast Asia.

More important for me than the intellectual stimulus – and a factor often missed in these discussions – are the practical challenges of accessibility. Archival access is not just an affective experience but also a disability access issue. For instance, my preference for physical sources stems in part from my high myopia, which makes prolonged screen use challenging.[26] I find it much easier to read sources from paper than a screen. Moreover, I tend to get more out of physical sources as compared to their digital versions. For example, I learnt that a hard-copy cheque of the Mercantile Bank of India (Kuala Lumpur Branch) at the HSBC Archives was a specimen issued by the London engraver and printer Waterlow & Sons Limited (see Figure 3). The delicate imprint of specimen would have been less visible in digital form. This information is crucial as it suggests that this was not the version used in daily transactions. The making of cheques, a modern financial instrument in the Malay States during the early twentieth century, must have gone through rounds of editing and consultation between banks and printers.

Matters were less straightforward in Malaysia. ANM has a useful online search engine known as the Online Finding Aid, with a small number of documents available for public access.[27] There are also computer terminals onsite, which, according to the archivists, provide access to a wider range of collections, including those that are not available on its online search engine. These terminals are antiquated, yet effective and

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[25]Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester, 2001).

[26]Singapore is known as the world's 'myopia capital' with four in five young adults being nearsighted. See 'What are we Learning from the World's Myopia Capital?', Nature Portfolio, https://www.nature.com/articles/d42473-023-00377-1 (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

[27]'Online Finding Aid', Arkib Negara Malaysia, https://ofa.arkib.gov.my/portal/index.php/en/ (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

Figure 4. Photocopying form from ANM, Kuala Lumpur.

speedy in scouring for relevant files in Malay and English. Photocopying usually takes a couple of working days to process, and a return visit is necessary to collect the photocopies and make payment. Across all branches, ANM allows a maximum of one-third of each file to be copied. Staff members will enforce this rule as they verify the pages to be photocopied. The exact pages and documents to be photocopied must be written clearly on a form (see Figure 4). No cameras are allowed in the reading room, which makes photocopying essential (see Figure 5).

A particular challenge in accessing these archives in-person has to do with the cost incurred not only with travel, accommodation and subsistence, but in using the archives themselves. At the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), there is a charge imposed for taking photographs of its collections. On a single day, it costs £7 for the right to take up to thirty images and £20 for more. There is an option of paying £80

Figure 5. A sign at the entrance of the Reading Room, ANM in Kuala Lumpur. Photo taken by the author in March 2024.

for five days without limit. Students enjoy a discount of 25 per cent.[28] To save money, I attempted to take as many pictures as possible in a day. These costs, small though they might seem to some readers, are not insignificant for early career historians.

The realities of the archive – including the hurried photographing at LMA – inevitably negatively impact on the archival experience as an affective process. In light of time and cost constraints, this is unavoidable not only in the LMA, but also in other institutional archives. These constraints require me to navigate the interstices between material and digitised sources within the physical archive. I do this by swiftly handling physical files while noting special observations, such as the type of paper

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[28]'Photography Permit', The London Archives, https://www.thelondonarchives.org/your-research/using-your-own-camera-at-the-london-archives (accessed 26 Mar. 2025).

used, seals, symbols and signatures. I also pay attention to how papers were organised and embedded within archival files, particularly larger ones, as the way certain papers are bundled together can reveal key themes and networks surrounding a particular issue.[29] This approach enables me to engage with the materiality of the sources I encountered, whilst leaving interpretation and closer reading outside the archive.

Richard Cobb, a historian of France, has emphasised how archival travel is more than a necessity, it is a deeply personal process and experience of immersing oneself in history and culture. For him, experience is vital for historians who are travelling and researching abroad, in which the 'sense of time, place, feeling of city (and) impression of belonging to a community' helps not only in fostering personal empathy and connection, but also in producing intellectual insights on the historical topic under study.[30] Similarly, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer discuss how the experience of travelling 'authenticates the narrative, embodies it, makes it real, to the point where it threatens to re-engulf those who come to tell and to listen'.[31]

Travelling to the archives provided valuable opportunities to explore the town or city where they were located. I visited several addresses and streets mentioned in letters I encountered in the archives and took time to wander around the surroundings (see Figure 6). This helps me greatly in understanding the nature of commercial activity and society in certain areas. In Malaysia, I gained insights on the multiculturalism that underpinned economy and society, even though it is a Malay-majority country. This multiculturalism is clear in the use of multiple languages, including English, Mandarin, Malay and Jawi, on signboards, for example. Despite travelling alone, I never felt lonely throughout my journey. Besides speaking to archivists, I also chatted with individuals, particularly taxi drivers who were curious on my visit to the small town of Kota Bharu, for example (see Figure 7). In these conversations, I could better appreciate the locations that I have visited, local cultures, and the things that mattered to the town's population. Additionally, archives and place hold a special meaning to me on a personal level, as I got engaged at Singapore's Registry of Marriages, located next to NAS, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researching 'interim archives' as an early career historian

Taken together, the predictable and less predictable considerations in accessing digital and physical archives discussed above led me to consider other primary sources that can be used alongside material located in institutional archives. In light of accessibility issues, I deploy the term 'interim archives' to emphasise not only the partiality of institutional holdings which have not been made entirely public, but also the need to read them together with alternative sources for a more complete and balanced understanding. This is not something new, as historians are turning to 'archives of the people', including private collections, fieldwork and visiting individual households.[32]

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[29]I would like to thank Dr Thomas Simpson for raising this pertinent point in our conversations at the University of Warwick.

[30]Richard Cobb, *A Second Identity: Essays on France and French History* (Oxford, 1969), 63.

[31]Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, '"We would not have come without you": Generations of Nostalgia', *American Imago*, 59 (2002), 253–76.

[32]Thomas David DuBois and Jan Kiely (eds.), *Fieldwork in Modern Chinese History: A Research Guide* (2019).

Figure 6. Information on Chulia Street, Penang, Malaysia. Photo taken by the author in February 2025.

In my research, I have turned to sources known collectively as 'grey literature',[33] including biographies, periodicals and information on social media, which has

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[33]C. P. Auger, *Information Sources in Grey Literature*, 4th edn (East Grinstead, 1998).

Figure 7. Signboard of a bicycle shop in Kota Bharu, Malaysia. Photo taken by the author in February 2025.

increasingly been used by Southeast Asian historians to create narratives that are more inclusive.[34] These materials complement institutional sources by providing perspectives beyond official and elite narratives. For me, social media is also a useful platform to connect with independent historians and contacts with useful sources and information. Moving forward, it is very likely that social media will become an 'interim archive', if not an archive in its own right, given the substantial amount of time of our lives that we spend online.

In my view, digitised sources can also be considered a form of 'interim archives' given the information that is lost in the process of digitisation not only by the archives, but also by the hard drives or cloud storage of the individual researcher. In some cases, it is still ideal to consult the physical copy of a record rather than its digital surrogate. A multi-archival approach is becoming increasingly necessary in historical research due to the realities of archival access and the need to take into account

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[34]Kah Seng Loh et al., *Theatres of Memory: Industrial Heritage of 20th Century Singapore* (Singapore, 2021).

multiple perspectives. In addition, this approach should take the historian's personal experiences, feelings and impressions of travelling into account, given how historical research is closely intertwined with affect and sensory experiences.

Like many historians before me, I have learned that archival research is rarely a simple matter. It is becoming increasingly challenging, especially in the case of foreign archives, as uncertainties around archival access are growing amidst a deteriorating geopolitical climate. My diverse experiences in accessing archives shaped my research direction, particularly the focus on transnational connections and lived experiences from below. For me, archival research becomes more enjoyable not only in my encounter with physical sources, but also in finding novel information that I would least expect to find. Research has rarely been isolating for me as I remained in constant communication with my friends, colleagues, professors, archivists, librarians and independent scholars. It is crucial, more than ever, for historians to work actively with stakeholders in the research community not only to gain knowledge on new sources of information, but also to form potential collaborations that are necessary to produce histories for the many.

Author biography. Jeremy Goh is a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Warwick. His interests lie in business and financial history, Chinese overseas, capitalism, transnationalism and, more generally, Southeast Asia's past and present. His doctoral project is titled 'Globalising from the Periphery: Chinese Banking Transnationalism in Colonial Singapore, Malaya and China (1900–1950)'. His work has been published in peer-reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, Asia Pacific Business Review* and *Global Policy*.