From Making Zines to Community-Building: Self-Publishing as a Chinese Émigré

離散華人的自出版——由藝術小誌到社群建立

by
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Contents

Abstract

This research delves into a question: what can self-publishing as a practice offer to the Chinese émigré community? As a Chinese émigré who has self-exiled to a Western country, I have struggled with my diasporic identity and grappled with the polarized environment within the Chinese diaspora. Many other newcomers from China have to deal with similar struggles and hardships. Against this backdrop, I explore ways to examine and realize my diasporic identity as well as ways to give care to the Chinese émigré community.

Since Max Schumann and AA Bronson established the New York Art Book Fair in 2005, the global art publishing community has established a network of art book fairs, independent publishers and artist communities across the globe. A practice-based design research methodology is integrated in this research through a studio practice in which I create, design, print and distribute zines. The following thesis document takes you through a systems thinking lens and examines self-publishing as a complex system. By understanding and locating existing feedback loops in the system (Meadows, 2008 p. 187), I investigate possible paths to build a community for Chinese émigrés through a self-publishing practice.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge that this research is conducted on the stolen, and unceded territories of the Coast Salish peoples of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) , Nations. As a settler, an uninvited guest on this land, I recognize the ongoing harm and ethnic cleansing inflicted by colonizers upon the Indigenous people of this land. I am committed to opposing any form of oppression against Indigenous communities and individuals. I urge the colonizer government to return the land to the peoples.

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Glossary of Terms

Zine "A noncommercial often homemade or online publication usually devoted to specialized and often unconventional subject matter" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Photobook A book contains a narrative conveying through a series of photographs.

Self-publishing A publishing activity that does not involve a publisher beside the author.

Photo-essay A form of storytelling through a sequence of images.

Chinese émigré Émigré is used to refer people who self-exile to a foreign country for political reasons. The term "Chinese émigré" is used in this paper to describe Chinese citizens who decide to flee to a foreign country because of China's worsening political environment in recent years.

Art publishing Publishing practices that involve noncommercial artist's books and zines.

Small-scale art publication A type of publication that usually presents a small footprint in scale. They are often created and self-published by individual artists.

Risograph/RISO A printer duplicator designed to produce high volumes of prints. "Risograph has gained popularity in recent years among art and design communities who utilize it as a middle ground between digital and offset printing" ("WHAT IS RISOGRAPH PRINTING?," n.d.).

Chapter 1: Introduction

CONTEXT AND FRAMING

Wandering in my diasporic journey with zines and photobooks

Working with books, especially photobooks, was my primary practice when I was pursuing my Bachelor of Fine Arts degrees in photography and graphic design in San Francisco. Learning in both streams, fine art and design, I found myself enjoying the enticing narratives told by artists as well as the tactility from the design choices that sublime the narratives. Among all mediums used by different artists, I found self-publishing a fascinating thing that could ease the struggles in my diasporic journey as a Chinese international student, and the tension between my national and diasporic identities.

When I studied at California College of the Arts, I had a photobook class in which we were required to make an eight-page zine with our photographs. Nelson Chan, who was the instructor, stunned me with his small zine that contained photos of his dad and a close friend. I was amazed by the fact that a piece of letter-size paper, through a simple folding sequence, could become an enthralling photo-essay. So, I made my first zine and exchanged it with thirteen other students. Through making and sharing photo zines, I finally understood the manifesto written by Bruno Ceschel in his book *Self Publish, Be Happy* that "books are both social and utopian places" (2015, p. 4).

One of the topics I discussed the most in my undergraduate work was my identity and the culture in my hometown. Growing up in Canton (Guangzhou), Cantonese culture and its language gave me a unique and treasured cultural identity as a Cantonese Chinese. When I started my journey as an international student in the US, I was surprised that most of the diasporic Chinese and Asian Americans also spoke Cantonese. Looking back at my experience in the States, I realized I was profoundly influenced by the political atmosphere inside the Chinese American community in which diverse topics and political opinions were present. It greatly impacted me as a young college student who had not experienced any political discussion or systematic learning of citizenship back in China. In this diverse community, the more I spent time recognizing its cultural and political diversity, the more I was confused by my intersecting identities. Therefore, I set foot in a journey to recognize and realize my identity.

Bridging my academic background in design and fine art with my struggling identity, I put more effort into reflecting on my diasporic lived experience with photobooks. Learning from the graphic design program, I paid attention to the form of each publication I made. At the same time, studying the art of storytelling through sequencing images, I enjoyed presenting the exciting, beautiful, and sometimes sorrowful contents in zines and photobooks. Between the juxtaposition of images, I could find meaning from my lived experience as diasporic Chinese. I continued my photobook-making practice after I graduated from the programs, and began to distribute them in community art sales, and art book fairs. It marked the starting point of my self-publishing practice.
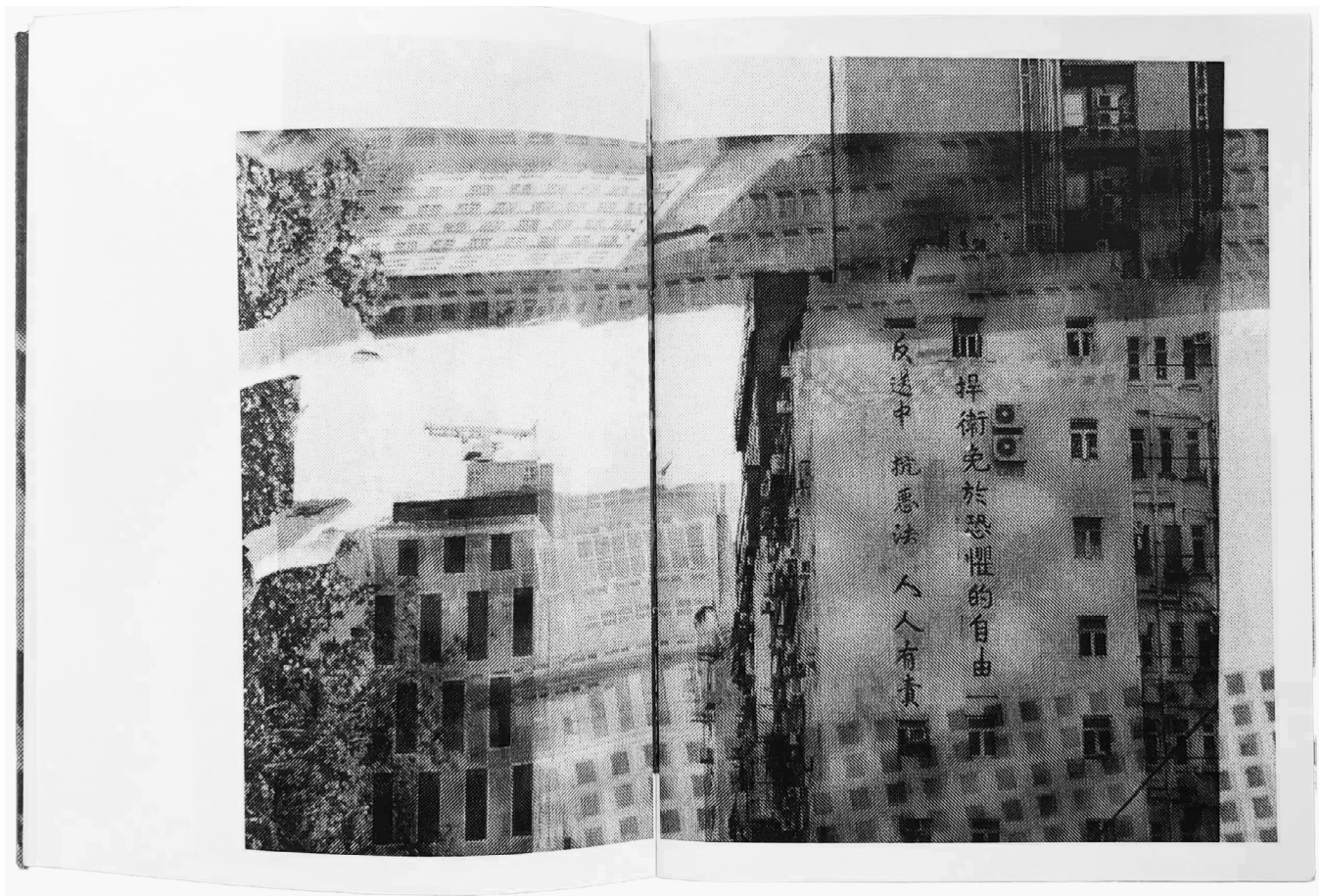

Fig 1.1 A spread in *intertwined*, a self-published zine by Howsem Huang. The spread contains a photo collage showing a five-story-long protest banner during the Anti-extradition Bill protest on June 9. 2019.

Chinese émigré: an identity for self-exiled young Chinese

Looking back to 2019, the Hong Kong government attempted to pass the extradition bill, sparking a significant social movement. The social movement also had a great impact on the overseas Chinese student community. On one hand, a large portion of the Chinese students supported the oppression of the Hong Kong protesters, since the mainstream media in Mainland China showed a biased view that "foreign forces" were to blame for the anti-government protest. On the other hand, some Chinese students showed sympathy for the lack of democracy in Hong Kong as well as the police brutality seen in the protests. This left Chinese students divided. Furthermore, the overseas students who were on the pro-democracy side especially suffered from the fear of being discriminated against by friends and other Chinese students, and were concerned over the safety of their family members at home (Yang & Fu, 2023).

However, the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic muted this social movement which went silent as the implementation of the Hong Kong National Security Law. What followed was a second major social movement that took place in many major Mainland Chinese cities under the strict "Zero-COVID" policy implemented by the government. A tragic fire in an apartment building in Urumqi, Xinjiang, which resulted in ten deaths and nine injuries, ignited public outrage. The tragedy was attributed to the stringent COVID-19 lockdown, which significantly hampered rescue attempts (Wright et al., 2022, "Deadly Xinjiang fire", 2022). In the last few days of November 2023, a series of protests happened in Nanjing, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and other Chinese cities (such protests are very rare in China). Joined by many university students, artists, and the general public, the protesters held up sheets of white paper in their hands as a protest gesture against the harsh control of social media posts and news about the pandemic (He, 2022). Additionally, many overseas Chinese students organized rallies and protests outside of China to support the student protesters in China. I attended a rally in Vancouver expressing condolences for the fire victims and solidarity with the Chinese protesters. Similar student-led rallies took place in Taiwan, Japan, the United States, and the UK (Peng, 2022; Yu, 2022). Among those protests and rallies, the protesters continued to hold sheets of white paper in solidarity with the domestic protesters in China. This led to the worldwide protests being recognized as the "white paper movement". Furthermore, Chinese students who have participated in the "white paper movement", including me, often self-identify as the "white paper generation."

As the overseas Chinese students participated in more and more civil activities, many identities were used by the community members

including "反賊" (dissident), "覺醒的人" (awakened people), and "白紙一代" (white paper generation). Although each of these identities shows differences and nuances, in this research, I identified them as Chinese émigrés, referring to Chinese people, especially international Chinese students who have emigrated or are seeking emigration status as an act of self-exiling to flee the totalitarian regime led by the Chinese government.

The thriving art publishing culture

In *Post-Digital Print*, which was first published more than a decade ago, Alessandro Ludovico disagrees with the long-lasting prediction and assumption that paper as a medium is dead (2012). In his latest book published in 2024, *Tactical Publishing*, he reiterates that the argument is still relevant today (Ludovico). As our screen technology evolves, we now have bigger, higher fidelity, and more portable screens. However, books today are still everywhere: in libraries, bookstores, and print shops. Not only does it prove Ludovico's argument, but it also reminds us that the book, as an ancient technology, still shines in the era of fast information.

Looking closer at the publishing scene today, not all of the books come out of big publishing houses such as Penguin Books, and some don't follow conventional methods of printing, bookmaking and publishing. These are often zines and artist's books that are often created by individuals or a group of artists, and sold in art book fairs or independent bookstores. Max Schumann and AA Bronson established the first New York Art Book Fair in 2005, giving the modern self-publishing scene a refresh as we entered into a tightly connected world through the internet. This happened as the world became increasingly interconnected through the internet. The digital interconnectedness has allowed the self-publishing community to build digital networks by inviting those outside the community to connect with it online. Since then, the number of art book fairs worldwide has continued to grow. As an artist who frequently self-publishes and sells my publications at art book fairs, I have directly benefited from the digital networks formed by the art publishing community in which I have received help and am informed of the latest art book fair applications.

Moreover, the growing art book fairs and independent bookstores simultaneously provide a logistic infrastructure for self-publishing artists to distribute their publications. The logistical infrastructure also made some inspiring projects possible. For example, *Mangmang*, a magazine project that focuses on various political topics about China with liberal and diverse perspectives was successfully self-published by crowdfunding (Paotong et al., 2023). Initiated by a group of Chinese émigrés in Berlin, this publishing project would not be possible if it was attempted in China under totalitarian control over the media.

Research questions

Threading the contexts of my professional practice and the socio-political background, this research aims to address a main research question: what can self-publishing as a practice offer to the Chinese émigré community?

Along with the main research question, several goals were set at the research's outset. As a Chinese émigré, I aimed to continue exploring my intersecting diasporic identity and personal experiences through creating photo-essays and zines. The pleasure of producing zines and artist's books inspired me to share this joy with other Chinese émigrés and to create a platform or safe space to amplify our voices. *Mangmang* demonstrated the possibility of forming a small publishing community through self-publishing, and this inspired me to establish a similar community or artist group for Chinese émigrés. Reminded by Ludovico, independent publishing has historically been a medium for disseminating dissident political ideas and inspiring political revolutions (2012, p. 33). With this in mind, I maintained a hopeful outlook that my work could influence China's state-controlled publishing environment and potentially make a positive impact on stimulating social changes in China.
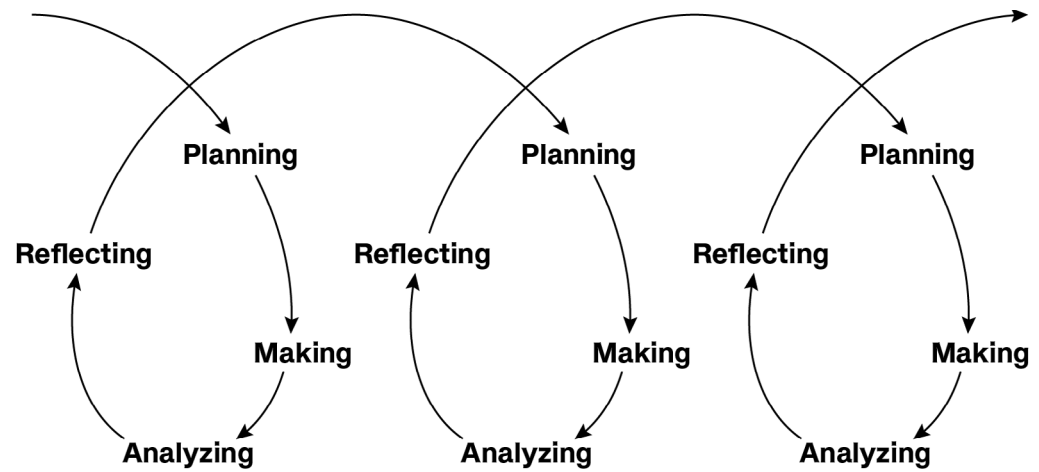
METHODOLOGY

Practice-based design research

This research was informed and guided by practice-based design research methodology (the overarching combination of methods and rules followed in this project). The Dean of the School of Design at RMIT University, Laurene Vaughan's thoughts on practice-based design research enlightened this research with one of her research models named "Designer/Practitioner/Researcher" (2017, pp. 9-17). This methodology allows designers to view a problem space as three different roles, as its name suggests. Transitioning from designer to designer-practitioner is a significant step in applying this methodology (Vaughan, 2017, p. 14). It requires designers to view their work as a practice and allows them to reflect on methods and design outcomes, improving their practice over time. One step further, the methodology proposes a researcher's approach to a designer-practitioner role, completing the three different viewing angles and mentalities on a specific research topic.

Through reviewing my studio practice during the master's program as well as the completion of this design research, I have followed the methodology and situated myself into the three perspectives. Initially, with a background in publication design, I have studied and absorbed knowledge in grid system (a design method that informs the information hierarchy and placement), typography and book design. I was able to draw from

Fig. 1.3 A graph showing the action research method.

Planning Reflecting Making Analyzing Planning Reflecting Making Analyzing Planning Reflecting Making Analyzing

this expertise and utilize the knowledge in my self-publishing practice in which I designed and self-published several zines and artist's books prior to my MDes research. This collection of zines proved to be a valuable resource to reflect on and establish a self-publishing practice. Upon entering the program, I have started to revisit my previous self-published books and commercial publication projects, marking the starting point for my designer-practitioner role in my self-publishing practice. At the start of this practice-based research, I had difficulties defining the problem space with my practice. However, I focused on recognizing and realizing my diasporic identity through making zines—which led to two publication projects, *I'm in Vancouver* and *refuse* (see chapter 3). These initial explorations have guided the formation of the research structure. As I established the methodology framework inspired by Vaughan's insight into practice-based design research, the researcher's role was present in my practice research.

Research methods: make, reflect and evolving plan

Informed by the practice-based design research methodology outlined above, I developed a set of research methods. Fundamentally, shifting among three different roles allowed me to approach a problem from various perspectives, further requiring me to keep practicing self-publishing and reflecting on the outcomes. Moreover, introduced by my supervisor Katherine Gillieson (2023) I was informed of a simplified action research model that requires the practitioner (as researcher) to establish a plan, analyze the outcome of the plan's actualization, and reflect on the results to inform future plans (fig. 1.3). This method provides an open-ended studio-based research pattern that allows a researcher to effectively produce design outcomes and build a new plan based on the findings of the previous research cycle.

Unlike a typical design project which requires the designer to solve an existing problem, design research often would not present a clear pathway to the problem. Echoing the methodology, Pelle Ehn and Peter Ullmark argue that it is impossible to achieve independence and objectivity for a design research project, and further state that making conscious interventions to improve the situation is a better approach (2017, p. 82). Connecting this approach with the action research model, I have moved away from the problem-solving mindset to tackling my main research question. Throughout my research process, I put establishing my practice as the priority and kept observing the outcome for future plans. This action-research-inspired research method was integrated into my studio practice. I continually evolved my design strategies for self-publishing, which will be further discussed later in this paper.

Interview

In addition to the primary research methods, I planned two interviews as my research evolved. Early on, I met Marlene Yuen, a bookmaker based in Vancouver, and Alex Lau, a Hong Kong artist with a Risograph (RISO) publishing practice. Despite being located in different places, these two artists and I have a shared culture lineage. Marlene Yuen was originally from Canton, where I was born and raised. Similarly, Alex Lau and I both speak Cantonese (the interview with him was also conducted in Cantonese). Noting the shared cultural backgrounds, I designed two complementary interviews. They each aimed to investigate their experience in establishing practices in bookmaking and self-publishing, as well as to gain insight on how the local communities were involved in their self-publishing practice and vice versa. From a designer-practitioner perspective, their insights in working with artist's books, finding ways to sell publications also informed my studio practice.

Writing as a research method

Throughout this project, writing as a research method has been a powerful tool for reflecting on my studio practice, summarizing literature reviews, and synthesizing the theoretical framework with my practice. When I began the MDes program, a blog platform was provided for us to reflect on our study and practice. I used this platform to record my thoughts after each studio project and plan for the next one. These reflections later became a valuable archive for chapter 3 of this thesis. Beyond the MDes studio blog, writing also played a role in my bookmaking practice. I produced an auto-ethnography style writing reflecting

on my diasporic lived experience as a book artist. This essay was later included in *Bittersweet*, one of the most important publication pieces in the research. Furthermore, I co-authored an academic paper with my supervisor (see Gillieson & Huang, 2023). In the paper, enlightened by the founder of the Sustainability Institute (now called Academy for Systems Change) Donella Meadows (2008), I synthesized systems thinking theory with my studio practice. It was an excellent chance to inspect the theoretical framework used in this thesis. In summary, writing as a research method has served various roles in my research, providing invaluable documentation and insights.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

SELF-PUBLISHING PRACTICE AS A SYSTEM

What is self-publishing today?

Despite the growing market of screen-based mediums, print culture is still vital and keeps evolving. Ludovico brings up the point that "paper is mutating" (2012) as simpler, lower-cost publishing processes emerge, such as print-on-demand (POD). Today, we have more diverse ways to print and publish compared to when POD first appeared on the scene. For instance, Blurb is a publishing site that provides easy-to-use book printing services for individuals, both professional publication designers or people who don't have any experience with design. Apart from the matured POD industry today, Risograph is also a popular printing process cherished by many artists, and makes its way in the self-publishing culture for its agility in spot color processing and efficiency. The fast-growing RISO community brings this method to artists' and readers' communities by constantly experimenting with the medium. More importantly, alternative printing methods and different collaborative ways to publish also provide novel ideas for artists who are interested in self-publishing their works. Notably, some self-publishing communities are committed to providing resources and guidance for artists starting their self-publishing journey. For instance, Self Publish, Be Happy is an organization that provides workshops and resources for photographers to publish their photobooks (Ceschel, 2015). In addition, screen-based or digital publishing is another factor contributing to the growing community of self-publishing. Ludovico further dissects the relationship between screen-based publishing and traditional publishing (2012, p. 117), and sees them as two complementary mediums rather than contradictory concepts. For example, one of my self-published photobooks, *Bittersweet*, was published both in a printed form and a digital publication that is open-access online. As a result, the diverse printing environment, resources and cultures have incubated a modern scene for self-publishing practices.

While alternative printing methods enrich the self-publishing culture, the expanding networks of art book fairs and independent bookstores are the backbone of today's self-publishing scene. Helen Jungyeon Ku's observation and investigation shed light on the unique logistics in the world of zines and art books (2023). She argues that art book fairs can temporarily manage and control the networks of distribution of the local and

neighbouring regions (Ku, 2023, p. 97). Printed Matter, a non-profit organization dedicated to artists' books, plays a significant role in this space with their online bookstore and art book fairs in New York and LA. Since hosting the first New York Art Book Fair in 2004, they've inspired many communities to establish similar fairs in their cities. Today, art book fairs can be found in various cities, including Vancouver and San Francisco where I've lived since starting my self-publishing journey. Art book fairs are also prevalent in China, my home country, with Art Book China Art Book Fair (abC Art Book Fair) being one of the largest organizations hosting fairs in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. While art book fairs can contribute to the local art book logistics in a limited timeframe (art book fairs are typically short-lived events), independent bookstores and publishers play a crucial role in distributing zines and artists' books. They constantly seek new ways to reduce the cost of storage and shipping (Ku, 2023, pp. 93-94). In essence, the diversification of alternative printing and publishing methods has formed a democratic environment for self-publishing. Meanwhile, art book fairs and independent bookstores have introduced new ways to distribute small-scale art publications. These two factors form today's self-publishing scene and print culture.

Recognizing self-publishing as a system

Grounded in systems thinking theory and its framework, this analysis provides a conceptual lens through which to understand self-publishing practice as a complex system. By analyzing the modern scene of self-publishing, we can recognize different roles and factors at play in self-publishing practice such as artists, printing methods, and distribution. If a system is made of interconnected elements that coherently achieve a certain goal (Meadows, 2008, p. 11), then self-publishing as a practice presents features of a system. In order to identify a system, Meadows provides us with straightforward guiding questions (2008):

> A) Can you identify parts?
> B) Do the parts affect each other?
> C) Do the parts together produce an effect that is different from the effect of each part on its own?
> D) Does the effect, the behavior over time, persist in a variety of circumstances? (p.13)

As we have identified the different elements of self-publishing previously, we can recognize that those elements affect each other. If we single out an artist's self-publishing practice (including the distribution of their works), for instance, the artist finishes the content of a publication, then

they will move to the publication design process. There are various printing methods available for independent publishing projects—it could be as simple as using a consumer level inkjet printer, or even hand-drawing the contents. By selecting a different printing process, the outcome (the form of the publication) will vary. Adding another layer, the artist can pair up with a skillful designer to produce a publication which embodies both of their professions, echoing the C) question in Meadows's list. Lastly, publication designers with different cultural backgrounds, or different design training would choose different typefaces. Although the outcome can be recognized as books, their appearances, graphic treatments and typography may be significantly different. More interestingly, not only can self-publishing be identified as a system, but it is also a complex system in which individual elements within a self-publishing system can be seen as subsystems. Addressing self-publishing as a complex system provides a viable framework to interact with and analyze each element in the system from a designer-practitioner-researcher perspective. Systems thinking further offers a new way to look at self-publishing practice as a dynamic entity which interacts with different people, subjects and communities. Thus this research was designed, conducted and examined with the systems thinking theory.

Finding ways to intervene in the self-publishing system: Marlene Yuen's self-publishing practice

Through the lens of systems thinking, leverage points in the system can be utilized to pivot the system's behaviour with small changes (Meadows, 2008, p. 145). Although more than one leverage point would exist in a complex system (Ibid, p. 153), it's not an easy task to identify leverage points that are meaningful and significant to the outcome of the system. In my research, finding and interacting with these leverage points was a major hurdle. As an artist, I have learned from my past experience that building a network of artists, or institutions such as galleries, is essential to an art practice. The evolving landscape of the art publishing community reveals a diverse range of interconnected networks involving artists, readers, print shops, distributors, etc. Thus I decided to focus on the existing networks within one's artist practice as a starting point to locate the leverage points.

In the interview with Marlene Yuen, a printmaker and sessional faculty member in Print Media at Emily Carr University (ECU), we discussed her publication project, Ho Sun Hing Printers (2020). This project commemorates a Chinese print shop in Vancouver's Chinatown that was closing down. Yuen set forth on a research project about the Ho Sun Hing print

shop which eventually became a publication. During the project, the print shop owner's son told Yuen that Fred Herzog (a German-born Vancouver-based photographer who is famous for his colour photography) had a photograph of the storefront of the print shop. Yuen acquired permission to use this image from its owner, the local contemporary art gallery Equinox. As the research progressed, Yuen needed a translator to translate the Chinese characters on the letterpress blocks. Through her association with Wepress, a print studio that conducts outreach to Chinese seniors in Chinatown, she met and hired a translator for this task. As a Vancouver-based artist herself, Yuen published the book from engaging and seeking for help in the local artists network.

Anchoring Yuen's publishing journey with systems thinking theory, the leverage point is located in the artists networks she engaged in and interacted with. As an outcome, the intervention in the system led to a richer publication in which she could use the family image, and include an English translation of the Chinese type found in the print shop.

Creating positive feedback loops in Hong Kong art publishing community: Alex Lau and his Risograph studio practice

Another important concept in systems thinking is the feedback loop, which is a mechanism that keeps the stock level consistent despite the change of input (Meadows, 2008, p.188). Within the self-publishing system, a feedback loop can be the effort put into investigating a topic and adapting it into a publication project. Maintaining a feedback loop in a self-publishing system is to establish a practice that is capable of dealing with changes in printing technology, changes in community and even major social change. In conversation with Alex Lau, it emerges that a positive feedback loop (Meadows, 2008, p.188) can be found in his RISO printing practice. Based in Hong Kong, he is an artist and designer whose practice focuses on designing and producing artist's books for local artists. Lau established his RISO practice after purchasing a RISO machine. To maintain the cost of printing, he decided to provide design and binding services for artist's book projects. During our conversation, he expressed his concern for Hong Kong's art publishing ecosystem, stating that many Hong Kong artists still relied on the conventional pathway to publish their works through a publishing house and distribute publications in commercial bookstores. He was hopeful when the Tokyo Art Book Fair made an impact on the Hong Kong artist community. The discussion around small-scale art publications has been subtly changing local artists' perception of art publishing and print culture. However, his concern about the art publishing ecosystem was still present since he thought

local artists needed more resources and spaces dedicated to small-scale art publications outside of commercial bookstores. For that, he said, "I hope there are some ways to bridge the gap between creators (artists) and their audiences." During the interview, he told me about his plan to open a RISO book archive, providing a space for artists and scholars to physically experience the tactility of RISO printed works, as well as for people who love art books to acquire them.

Lau's RISO publishing practice, aimed at increasing readers' acceptance of art publications, was an act of maintaining a positive feedback loop in Hong Kong's art publishing ecosystem. His RISO studio, where he's created a space for artists to produce publications, and his plan to establish an archive for readers, both provide a vital environment for self-publishing activities in Hong Kong. As Lau's practice boosts both the quality and quantity of art publications, a positive feedback loop is established when more self-publications are produced. Lau's efforts to alter the system's behavior can be visually represented in a graph (fig. 2.1), inspired by Meadow's diagramming method (2008). Furthermore, the growing acceptance of art publications can act as a leverage point in changing the publishing market. Consequently, this could potentially address Lau's concern about the lack of resources for self-publishing.

Fig. 2.1 A graph showing Alex Lau's practice in the local self-publishing system

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Chapter 3: Studio Practice

In this chapter I showcase the works in my self-publishing practice. The three major publication projects I did during the MDes program are discussed based on chronological order, because those projects followed a pattern of action research model: as I finished a project, I would reflect on it and carry the discovery and retrospect into the next project. In addition to this, a summative reflection is present at the end of the chapter, threading my studio practice and research discoveries with systems thinking together.

SELF-PUBLISHING IN CLASS

Experimenting in bookmaking

I entered the MDes program knowing that I would focus on bookmaking and publishing for my studio practice. After experimenting with the tools and resources that the school provided for us, I got back into my photo-book-making practice. My first publication project, *I'm in Vancouver*, involved a unique activity: exchanging images with strangers on the street. I curated ten images from my personal photo archive, printed them, and set out to exchange my photos with those on others' phones (so that it would be easier to receive image files). As a newcomer who had just moved from California to Vancouver, I designed the photo exchange hoping that I could know the people here better by having conversations about their lived experience through the images we would share. By the end of the two-week timeframe, I had eight images acquired from newly met people around the city.

I decided to make an accordion book, echoing the long and challenging journey of exploring the city while making new friends. By the end of the project, I finished the accordion book titled *I'm in Vancouver* (fig. 3.1 & 3.2, next page), exhibiting the conversations between a newcomer (myself) and nine locals through images. One important highlight of this project was that I was able to get familiar with the bookmaking tools in the COMD studio (an on-campus studio for Risograph printing and book-making), and the printing service called the DOC on the ECU campus. However, I was prohibited from making multiple copies because the cost was too high, around $50 for one copy. In addition, the binding required me to glue three sheets of paper together, making the binding process very time-consuming. While contending with the disadvantages of this format, I had a goal that I could produce multiple copies for my next publication project.

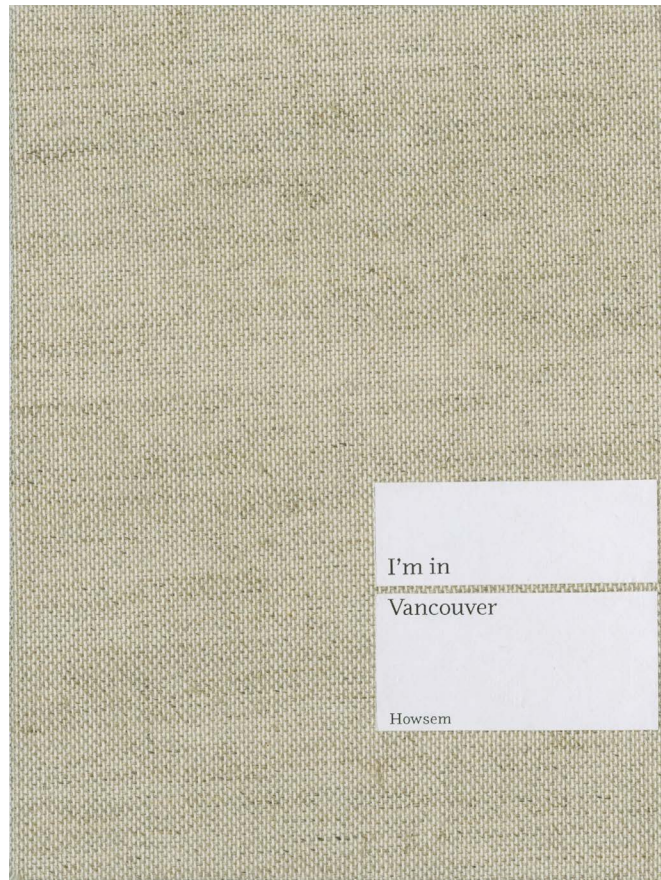**Fig. 3.1** *I'm in Vancouver*, artist's accordion book, 2022

Fig. 3.2 Expanded view of *I'm in Vancouver*, artist's accordion book.

Publishing a zine in class

Stepping into the next project prompted by the curriculum, students were instructed to initiate a studio project based on a reading assigned by the course. I picked *What's the Use*, a philosophy book written by Sara Ahmed (2019), in which she emphasizes *queer use* (things that are not used in ways that they were intended to be used). The book inspired me to reflect on my national identity in the diasporic context. Titled *refuse*, the final outcome is a letter-size pamphlet zine bound by a rubber band. Containing a photo-essay and a piece of short self-reflective text on my identity, I showcase the misalignment between my cultural identity as a Cantonese-speaking person and my given national identity written on my passport as a Chinese citizen. By making 20 copies, I was able to share the zine with everyone in the class including the professor.
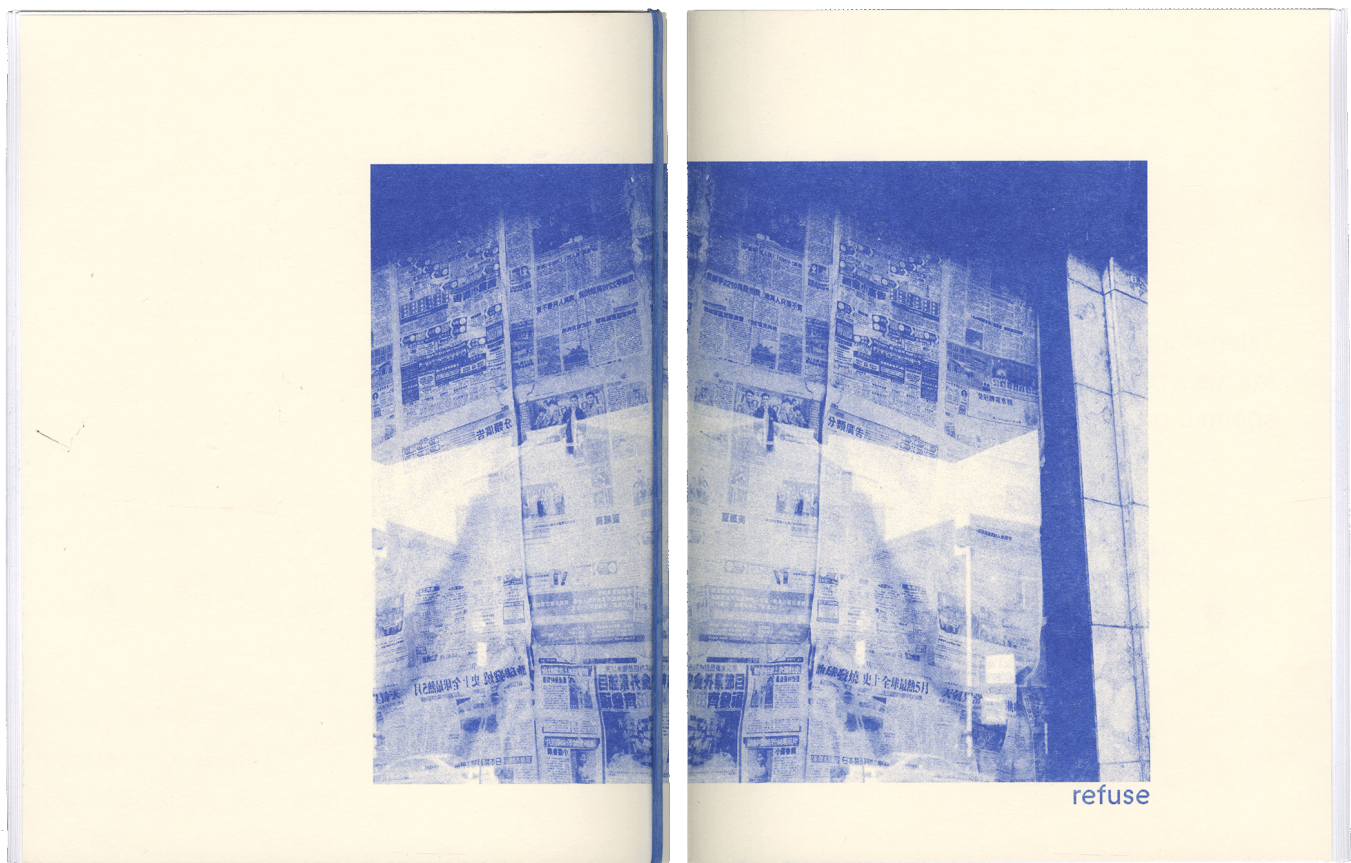

Fig. 3.3 *refuse*, Risograph photobook, 2022

Learning from the drawbacks of the last publication, a key objective of this publication project was cost reduction to ensure a consistent series of copies. After comparing the printing cost and quality between RISO and laser printing, I decided to opt for RISO printing. The zines were printed only in Medium Blue RISO ink to further cut costs. The size of the zine was 11 × 8.5 inches (Fig. 3.3)—the spreads were thus tabloid-size, which is the largest size that could be fed into the RISO machine on campus. To simplify the binding process and reduce costs, I used a rubber band to

hold the pages and cover together. This method was more cost-effective compared to the previous book project. With these design decisions, I produced 20 copies in under 6 hours. More importantly, each zine cost under $10 to make, compared to the previous book at $50.

As part of the process of publishing the zine, I gave everyone in the classroom a copy of *refuse* during the sharing section. After a brief discussion and feedback section for the publication design, another discussion was sparked among the classmates about the different identities within diasporic groups. Through the discussion, I learned that I was not the only one who struggled between different identities in a colonial context. It was an unexpected outcome from publishing *refuse*, enabling a safe space (Gillieson & Huang, 2024) for other readers (in the same space) to share their comments and even personal stories. Viewing through a systems thinking perspective, a series of changes were implemented into the publishing activity as a system compared to the last publication, *I'm in Vancouver*. This new system contained a feedback loop created by a series of design decisions to lower the cost and simplify the production. The feedback loop allowed me to produce enough copies for everyone in the classroom, facilitating further conversations.

PUBLISHING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

The start of a Risograph practice

Simultaneously with the printing process of *refuse*, I discovered the versatility of RISO printing. Similar to an offset printing process, once a RISO master is created, it can be used to produce a large volume of the same image. Unlike any commercial offset printing process, RISO does not require expensive machines and laborious processes to produce masters. Instead, every RISO machine is capable of making its own master internally. Moreover, Risograph's modular design allows users to easily switch colours by replacing the colour drum, making it more versatile than a commercial offset machine. Therefore, Risograph has become a valued way for printing multiple copies in a relatively short amount of time for documents, artworks, and even publications. In *refuse*, all photographs were converted into monochromatic images and later printed only in blue. Although using a one-colour process reduced the time and cost of printing, I was excited about the potential result that RISO could deliver when printing in two, three or even four colours. Thus, shortly after

finishing *refuse*, I initiated a fresh project focused on using RISO, which later led to a mini poster named *free china*.

Printed on letter-size newsprints, the *free china* poster shows a Chinese ceramic cup with a price tag of "0.0¢" on it (fig. 3.4). Deliberately as an equivocal wordplay, the text "free china" and "免費瓷器" (free porcelain) are superimposed on the image. At the time that I designed this poster, Chinese society suffered from the strict and inhuman zero-COVID policy. Affecting billions of Chinese citizens, any positive COVID-19 patient would be mandatorily transferred to a quarantine facility. Therefore, I printed ten copies of the poster as a protesting act against the zero-COVID policy.

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The posters were printed in fluorescent orange, aqua, and black as three spot colours. By researching the colour separation method, I came across three RISO colour profiles online databases: Color/Shift, Risolve Studio, and Exploriso. Contributed by scholars and enthusiasts, there were hundreds of colour profiles dedicated to RISO printing. For the poster, I was able to achieve a photographic result by simply applying a colour profile to the image. During the process, I learned how to use a colour profile to export the colour channels into separate files, which later became an essential skill for the next publication project, *Bittersweet*.

From Risograph printing experiments to a publication project

Through making *free china* posters, I was equipped with basic knowledge and skills in printing with Risograph. After I experimented with a three-colour process, I decided to print more photographs using different RISO inks. Although these were a series of separate printing experiments, I still designed a template that mimicked a book page with a 0.75-inch blank space on the left side of each image to preserve space for binding. Since RISO masters can efficiently print multiple copies, I printed 32 copies of each experiment template with the speculative idea of producing up to 32 books (fig. 3.5). With the template, I could start my printing experiments with a four-colour process. The first image was a photograph of a Chinese massage shop signage I found lying on a street. The signage

Fig. 3.5 Each RISO template contained two images. Total of 16 copies were produced for each template.

showed its bold texts in bright red and blue which immediately reminded me of the Medium Blue and Bright Red RISO ink. Thus, I picked this photo for the first printing exercise to find out what Risography could transform the image. Printing in a four-colour process, the result stunned me with the vivid colour and the tactile texture of the ink (fig. 3.6 & 3.7). After the first exciting printing result, I continued the experiments with other colour separation methods such as dual-tone as well as different screening settings for the masters.

Although RISO can produce an unexpectedly stunning result, not all photos achieved a good outcome at the first print. I encountered a situation where a print lacked suitable contrast and density. Altering the brightness curve in Photoshop improved the second print slightly. However, a third adjustment was necessary to perfect the image and bring out the shadow details. Through my research on the printing process, I learned that repeated hard proofing (printing things up) could be avoided by soft proofing (simulating the print result on screen). Therefore, I started to use soft proofing software named Coloraster to aid the printing process.

Throughout the printing experiment, I printed nine photos using a range of RISO inks available in the COMD studio. Similar to silkscreen printing,

I also experimented with AM (Amplitude Modulated) and FM (Frequency Modulated) screening processes (fig. 3.8 & 3.9). After printing the nine photos, I paused the exercise to consider the idea of creating a photobook with Risography. With this new focus, I turned my attention to the printed photos and those in my archive.
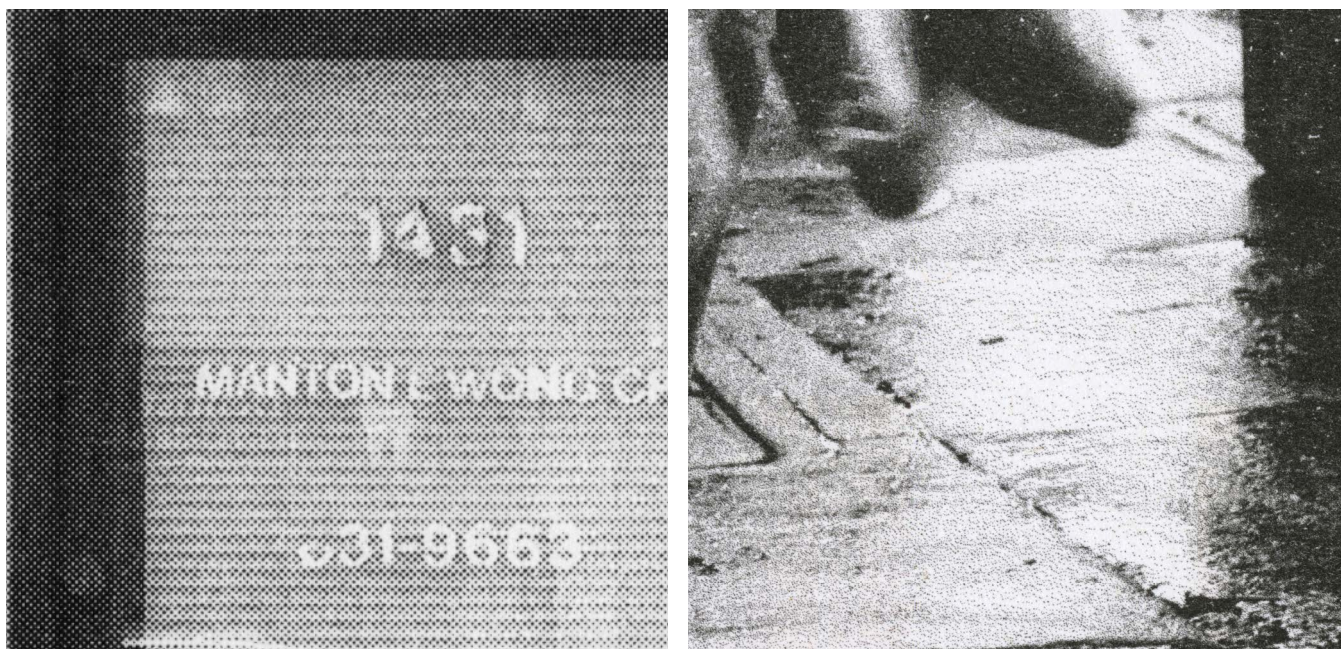

fig. 3.8 & 3.9 Comparing AM screening (left) and FM screening (right). Images from *Bittersweet* at 200% scale.

Telling a bittersweet story through images and words

Echoing the main research question, this publication project was a chance to share stories about my struggles in recognizing identities. Dedicated to the Chinese émigré community, I wanted to share what I had experienced in many social movements and political events. I remembered an incomplete photobook project from an undergraduate publication class, *My Bitter Cantonese Nostalgia*, which I never had the chance to print. After revisiting this book, I was inspired to title my new book *Bittersweet*.

In my approach to sequence the photographs, groups of two or more images were pulled out from the connection and juxtaposed together. By looking at the interconnections from juxtaposing images, I was able to create narratives from what showed on the image, similar to the montage technique used in filmmaking. For example, the first six images together established a scene in Chinatown—more specifically, the Chinese dining culture that lived outside of its home region. With this six-image opening

sequence, I intended to connect my diasporic identity to the daily life scenes in Chinatown. The photo-essay is divided into three sections, separated by two fold-out pages with horizontal photographs. Each section had a focus point: the first section emphasized cultural scenery; the second one showcased a lively cultural presence in diasporic Chinese communities with images of Chinese characters found in various cities; the last section embodied my anger and the helpless feeling towards the social injustice happening in Mainland China as a Chinese émigré.

Following the photo-essay, there was a self-reflective article named *Seeking My Own Language* (Huang, 2023). In the article, I shared three stories, all of which came from my experience as an overseas student in the U.S. As implied by the title, I desired to learn new languages, driven by the excitement of encountering and learning new things. Diving deep into the stories, the word "language" in the title became a metaphor for a community since I was eager to find my community in a place full of novel experiences. Following a similar vein, the three stories echoed the three sections in the photo-essay. Together, *Bittersweet* shared a story of a rugged trip during which I tried to get into different communities, and grappled with my political beliefs. Eventually, I arrived at the realization that I am a Chinese émigré.

Next page: fig 3.10 – 3.13
Opening image sequence of *Bittersweet* (from left to right, top to bottom).

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fig 3.14 & 3.15
Opening image sequence of
Bittersweet.

Fig. 3.16 *Bittersweet*, self-published photobook, 2023

Publishing *Bittersweet*

Although *Bittersweet* is a fruitful outcome of my self-publishing practice, the final publication (fig. 3.16) is published by Occasional Press, a publishing imprint serving the ECU community. As a Research Assistants (RA) at the Occasional Press, I benefited from the resources shared by the Press. In the fall of 2022, I worked on a book launch for an Occasional Press title at the ECU library. This experience later proved invaluable when preparing for the launch of *Bittersweet*. Supported by other members of the Press and the ECU library, I hosted a two-hour book launch introducing *Bittersweet*. Occasional Press, as a research-based publisher, explores accessible and responsive formats (Gillieson & Huang, 2024), including open-access digital publications. To engage both local communities and a wider audience, *Bittersweet* was released in both print and digital formats, with the latter being open-access online.

With support from the ECU community and the Chinese émigré community, *Bittersweet* is a sustainable project in my self-publishing practice. A $500 financial aid from the President's Research Fund helped cover the cost of the book, which was priced close to its production cost of $38 at $45. So far, 25 out of 30 produced copies have been sold through various channels. These include direct sales to friends, classmates, and faculty, the READ bookstore (a bookstore inside the ECU campus), and at events such as the ECU Student Art Sale and 2023 Fotobook Dummies Day Photobook Fair in Taiwan. The sales not only covered the printing, material, and shipping costs, but also provided extra funds for the next project.

Chapter 3: Studio Practice

Design and Printing Choices

In my self-publishing practice, both graphic design and photography play the most important roles. The themes in my photo-essays, and design choices in the zines I self-published during my MDes research, are closely tied to my Chinese émigré identity and cultural background. I frequently photograph Chinatown and Chinese diaspora communities. I'm particularly attracted to the signages of Chinese stores and restaurants, as they visually represent Chinese diaspora communities. On the streets, these signs guide me to this communities. When they appear in my images, they construct a cityscape that defines diasporic Chinese culture. Apart from the cultural significance, I also enjoy documenting the unique letterforms of various Chinese characters in different styles of calligraphy. Trained as a graphic designer, I draw great inspiration from the type design on Chinese store signages. For instance, the Hanzi "好甘" in *Bittersweet* was designed, inspired by the bold, blocky Chinese typefaces found frequently on signage.

Since I self-published *refuse*, Risograph has become the primary printing method for my zines. While it's a cost-effective and versatile way to produce zines, it doesn't perfectly reproduce high-fidelity images. In contrast to most of conventional publishing, books printed in Risograph present a low-fidelity and handmade aesthetic with misaligned print registration (layering of different colours to produce multi-colour print). I utilized this unique quality of Risograph in the design of *Bittersweet*. The Chinese and English titles on the cover were printed in rich black (using black and other colour inks to produce a denser black). Due to imperfect alignment with each color master, the title appears to have a color shadow overlay. By intentionally showing the misregistration on the title, I paralleled the theme of my misplaced diasporic identity in the book.

BEYOND BOOKS:
THE SYSTEM AND ITS OUTPUT

New Connections through Self-Publishing

Since my first self-published zine came out in 2021, I have made new friends with many readers and book artists from various art sales and online sharing. My self-publishing journey has been full of pleasant surprises in terms of networking. As I started my Risograph practice for *Bittersweet*, I received help from the Risograph community. Theretherenow, a Risograph studio mentioned above, whose practice focuses on Risography photograph output, was one of the most significant resources for the printing of *Bittersweet*. In the summer of 2023, Travis Shaffer, the owner of the studio, offered help as I encountered a file output issue. Later in the summer, I joined a month-long online workshop hosted by the studio where I met many book artists, press owners and Risograph enthusiasts. Besides the online community, I have also met new friends and connections at art book fairs. Alex Lau, one of the interviewees in this project, took part in the 2023 Hong Kong Art Book Fair where we met each other in the first place through conversations about RISO photographs.

After *Bittersweet* was published in November, 2023, I was surprised by the publication's outreach to different audiences, including other Chinese émigrés. At the Masters program Open Studios event a month later the book attracted three Chinese students from the MFA program at Emily Carr, who shared similar political views towards social issues in China. One of them also shared an insight that she also self-identified as a white paper generation since the "white paper" movement started in her university back in China.

Make zines, build communities

Besides the exciting moments of making new like-minded friends through sharing zines and books, through the exploration of my practice, self-publishing is also a community-building practice. From a hyperlocal perspective, many students in the MDes program also chose to make and share zines as a research method. Since I entered the program with a self-publishing practice as well as experience from working at a publishing house, other classmates would ask for book design or bookmaking advice. Conversely, I also participated in critique sections where I would get feedback for my zines. In one of the studio prompts, a classmate partnered with me to make zines to reflect on each other's research progress. After a brief

conversation to understand her research project, I made a zine to introduce her practice and research project mimicking a community newspaper. In the same manner, she created a zine to showcase diagrams that reflected my research. Through the conversations enabled by both our zine-making exercises, we were able to look at our research from a new perspective. As making zines become a popular research method among the MDes students, a community around zine and book design has been created where we would share opinions on various aspects of zine-making practices such as typography, zine formats and distribution methods.

Another community-building experience I had with my self-publishing practice stemmed from my prior degree in photography. Two of my friends whom I met in my undergraduate photo program invited me to their study group about semiotics. The study group later turned into a publishing project after one of the artists decided to make a zine for his research on semiotics. Titled *Is a Black Swan a False Swan?* (Pan, 2023), the zine was a solid outcome from the different expertise and skills we contributed: artist T was the editor for the zine while I was the publication designer. Naming our group "Unpress", we participated in the Fotobook Dummies Day Photobook Fair in Taipei in December 2023, our first art book fair experience. Moving forward, we will participate in more art book fairs in 2024.

Community-building: a positive feedback loop in a self-publishing system

Fig. 3.17 Self-publishing practice as a system
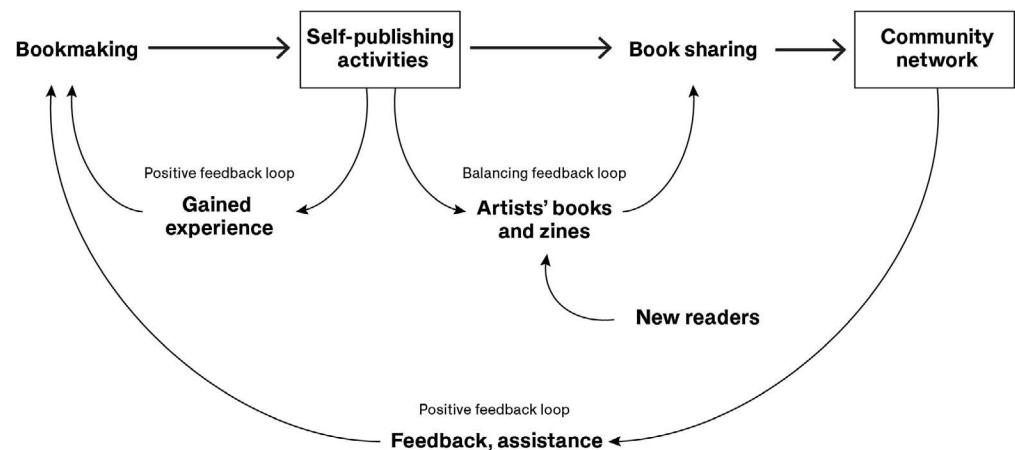
After reviewing the the outcomes from my literature reviews and self-publishing practice, a diagram can be drawn to depict a simplified self-publishing system (fig. 3.17). Viewing the diagram from left to right, a bookmaking practice can be seen as an inflow in the system. As the artist creates publication projects, the outcome will flow into the stock which

is indicated by the box labelled with "self-publishing activities". Through insights from my studio practices, I gained experience from decisions made for each self-published project, resulting in a more refined work-flow and design principles for my zines. As a balancing feedback loop (Meadows, 2008, p. 153), the newly gained experience can be summarized and put into future bookmaking projects. Book sharing, an integral part of the practice, is reflected as an outflow of the self-publishing activities stock in the system diagram. Since the increasing quantity and quality of self-publishing activities, more artist's books and zines will be available to the readers, creating a positive feedback loop. In the meantime, new readers will join in the positive feedback loop by buying, reading and sharing the artist's books and zines. Interestingly, the roles of reader and artist are interchangeable, as I initially started my self-publishing practice as a reader of others' zines. In my practice, through various places and social events, I have met people who later become my readers as they buy my publications. The newly joined reader also contributes to the positive feedback loop as they buy and read the artists' books. On the right side of the diagram, another stock box represents the community network. Through observing my practice, I found myself making new con-nections with the RISO community by participating in Travis Shaffer's online workshop; not to mention I established a deeper connection with Alex Lau, one of the participants in the workshop. As an outflow from the stock of self-publishing activities, book sharing can lead to the forma-tion of various large or small communities, such as the MDes community and Unpress. Historically, many communities, especially underground publishing networks, were established from a self-publishing practice, then expanded through a positively expanding system described in the diagram. One of the examples of this is "Samizdat" in the post-Stalinst U.S.S.R. (Ludovico, 2012, p. 38, Parisi, p.154). In modern times, SOKONG! Publish was initiated through five artists' photobook-making and -publishing practices, and later grew their networks through crossovers with other art fields (Lin, 2022, pp. 14-21). Ludovico also shares his insights in analyzing the publishing network structure: he describes a publishing practice (listing examples such as Neural, a magazine he edited) as a "node" (Ludovico, 2012, p.138). It is a similar concept to the concept of "community network" in the diagram—the nodes are different communities in the pub-lishing network, which help and assist publishing practices (Ibid, p. 139, p. 142). The overall feedback and assistance given by the communities in the network to aid the bookmaking practice establish a long-reaching positive feedback loop in the system, and further constitute the system's continued growth and development.

Conclusion

Self-publishing as a method

Since the first zine was printed in my inkjet printer three years ago, I have found a place where I could tell stories from my diasporic journey. From images I took during the anti-extradition bill protest in Hong Kong, to a two-thousand-word self-reflection, I have been looking for ways to interpret my entangled identities. Through this practice-based research, I delved into zine-making and self-publishing as a method to recognize my identity. The first RISO zine *refuse* gave me a chance to deconstruct the tension between my national and cultural identity in a diasporic context. *Bittersweet*, as its title implies, set up a safe space for me to go through the traumatized memories. As a method, self-publishing has rewarded me with a precious chance to ponder my diaspora identity, my responsibility as a Chinese émigré and a member of the white paper generation.

Self-publishing, as a community-building method, provides a safe space for connection, story sharing, and helps healing traumas. As a Chinese émigré, I have often felt lost trying to find my community. However, creating and sharing zines with like-minded friends helped me realize that I'm already part of a warm community. As one of the achievements of publishing *Bittersweet*, I met Chinese émigrés at the ECU community. Knowing my RISO practice, they reached out to me for help on their art projects. Although the final research outcome did not achieve one of my ambitious goals of forming a community where we can safely share our political ideas through making zines and artist books, I was still able to offer care to other community members and myself.

Current limitations and future of the research

As we try to go back to "normal" after the global health crisis, we cannot deny that our way of engaging with others has profoundly changed. The art book community in Vancouver was deeply affected by the change. While the Vancouver Art Book Fair moved to online formats in 2022, the fair was cancelled in 2023. This cancellation meant that I, along with others, lost a major platform for engaging with a broader audience through our self-publishing practices. Aside from the gradually recovering art publishing community, the Chinese émigré community also endured deep trauma. As Chinese émigrés, many of us, including myself, have suffered harm due to voices incited by the irrational patriotism promoted by the Chinese government. This added another layer of complexity to my research.

Nonetheless, my exploration of self-publishing and the ambition of building a safe space for Chinese émigré artists will not stop at the conclusion of this research. Amid the shifting political landscape, my practice in publishing will continue with the goal of giving care to the Chinese émigré community. Transitioning from my MDes research, I will continue sharing the research outcome, and supporting others' self-publishing practices by buying and reading their publications. Furthermore, I aspire to advance my self-publishing practice and establish a press or communal publishing space for Chinese émigrés to create art and heal traumas.

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