

A virtual Noah's Ark: Hongkongers race to archive democracy movement amid city-wide purge

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“Being the more tech-savvy guys, we feel we have more obligation to help preserve the history of Hong Kong,” Chris Wong, a software developer said. “But everyone can and needs to play a part in sharing the past with your friends, your next generation.”

Hong Kong activists are working in the shadows to preserve digital backups of their democracy movement as the physical symbols of their resistance, including an opposition newspaper and a museum, are purged from the city's streets.

In the end, it was food safety inspectors that finished Hong Kong's museum to those killed in the Tiananmen Square protests — the only memorial of its kind within China to victims of the 1989 crackdown.

Its exhibitions documented Beijing's decision to use tanks to quell democracy protests in the Chinese capital and Hong Kong's three-decade history of holding annual candlelight vigils for those killed. But officials from the city's Food and Environmental Hygiene Department visited in early June and declared the venue — which had operated on and off for years — did not have the correct license.

With the city's Tiananmen vigils already effectively banned by authorities since last year, the move came as little surprise to many.

Which is why dissident Chinese author Chang Ping, a former student leader back in 1989, spent the past year leading a group of anonymous activists to create an online version of the museum.

“We hope to save the spirit of 30 years' candlelight commemoration in Hong Kong, which was an unparalleled act of resistance in human history,” Chang told AFP by phone from his home in Germany.

‘We needed to race the clock’

The online museum project is just one of many where cyberspace has become a place to preserve remnants of a city that is being remoulded in authoritarian China's own image after huge democracy protests two years ago.

The Hong Kong Alliance, which ran the museum and organised the annual Tiananmen vigils, knew they might not survive, especially after China imposed a security law last year that criminalised

much dissent.

Most of the group's leaders have since been arrested and the coalition is on the verge of disbanding — but not before it fundraised HK\$1.6 million (US\$215,000) to build a virtual Noah's Ark for their movement.

Other projects had far less lead time to prepare.

Chris Wong, a software developer who asked to use a pseudonym, scrambled to mobilise coders earlier this year to preserve what they could of the city's outspoken pro-democracy Apple Daily tabloid.

Its millionaire owner Jimmy Lai was already in jail and facing national security charges over campaigning for sanctions against China.

But in early June police used the national security law to freeze the paper's assets and within little more than a week it collapsed.

"We needed to race the clock," Wong recalled after Apple Daily announced the printing of its final edition and the removal of its online presence for later that month.

Wong went to LIHKG — a Reddit-like forum that was instrumental in coordinating Hong Kong's 2019 democracy protests — and found tech-savvy volunteers willing to scrape the tabloid's website. They harvested over two million pages and archived them on the searchable website collection.news by writing around 10,000 lines of code, Wong said.

"Being the more tech-savvy guys, we feel we have more obligation to help preserve the history of Hong Kong," Wong told AFP.

"But everyone can and needs to play a part in sharing the past with your friends, your next generation."

'Proud to play a part'

Similar digital backups have been created for reporting by RTHK, the city's public broadcaster. Over the last six months, it has been overhauled to be more like China's state media.

Critical journalists have lost their jobs and current affairs programmes have been axed while much of its social media content, including many reports critical of authorities, have disappeared.

An activist, using the pseudonym *"Freeman"*, said their group had harvested 14 terabytes of video reports from both RTHK and Apple Daily for a planned online backup.

Such digital activism is not without risks.

In recent weeks Hong Kong's pro-Beijing media have suggested moves to preserve online records of the Tiananmen Museum and annual vigils are illegal under the national security law.

Police action usually follows such editorials.

Days after the Apple Daily back-up site launched it was hit by a distributed denial of service, a type of cyber-attack where a website is deliberately flooded with hits by a network of computers to try and bring it offline.

But Chang Ping says he and other digital activists remain unbowed.

"If building a museum is a crime, then the whole history of human civilisation is illegal," he said. *"I am proud to be part of it."*

Su Xinqi (AFP)

P.S.

<https://hongkongfp.com/2021/08/28/digital-dissent-hongkongers-race-to-archive-democracy-movement/>