

# The Dynamic of Trans-local Cultural Activism in East Asia: Notes on No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone

**Lee Chun Fung**

Institute of Social Research and Cultural Studies  
National Chiao Tung University

---

With the interlinkage of social problems under the context of global capitalism, there is an increasing tendency that activists from different regions build up exchange networks on their own, in a self-organized and autonomous way. This trend suggests a growing urgency in developing a trans-local perspective in reading such dynamic and a new geographical imagination across different borders and localities. This article aims to outline the linkages and interaction of the left-wing cultural activist groups in East Asia. I would take “No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone”, a self-organized festival of cultural activism that took place in September 2016, as an example, to illustrate the historical trajectory and the synergy given by this platform. I would evaluate its outcome from both local and trans-local perspectives, such that both the local agencies that contribute to the network, the activist groups around East Asia, and its extension, would be both in consideration. I would also discuss the meaning of running this autonomous cultural festival, in the context of counter against cultural governance in the neoliberal creative economy, hence what would be the ethical and heterogeneous values that activists try to address?

*Keywords: activism, cultural, South Asia, Tokyo, Woodwork*

---

## Background

In the documentary film of No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone (No limit), a self-organized festival of cultural activism took place in September 2016, one of the key figures cum organizers, Matsumoto Hajime (松本哉) describes the process of putting together this festival as “[we] exist like a mystery (是充滿謎團一般存在吧)”<sup>1</sup>.

The activist network in Tokyo, and perhaps similar to its peers in other regions, has been a kind of mystery. They are neither organized as an institution nor have a clear boundary in defining their members. Such a network has no specific structure of the hierarchy, but they take action in a collective way. They don’t have a clear identity or ideology, only a loose title dubbed as Amateur Riot (素人の亂). “Amateur ” is posed as an ironic reaction to the “professional”, it also stands as praise to the ordinary people who are willing to take action directly.

The network of Amateur Riot is formed by musicians, visual artists, designers, and researchers. At the same time, some of them wear other hats as the worker, salesman, or shop owner in Koenji, a local community in Tokyo. They run several second-hand shops, boutiques, live houses, cafes, guesthouses, and a bar which runs on a shift basis together by the community, called “Nantoka Bar”

(literally means "whatever" in Japanese). They have remained "relatively" low profile, yet, what surprised the Japanese society is that on 10 April 2011, a month after the 311 earthquakes and the Fukushima nuclear incident, a huge assembly is organized spontaneously in front of the Koenji Train Station, where more than 15,000 people attended and it is said to be the first big-scale "anti-nuke" demonstration in Japan. How could they organize it within such a short time? It remains a mystery until today.

### **To Create Spaces and Community of Your Own:**

The idea of rooting in a community, creating your own space, and building up resistance among the living network is called "local community activism" in Hajime's word. He believes for those who are poor, but relatively free from the social institution, should live happily and be respected too, in their own spaces of surviving.

It is important to note that this space cannot simply exist temporarily, it is different from urban tactics in which space is created for short-term intervention or political occupation, but a space that exists "outside from the system", and aims to be more permanent. Researcher Takuro Higuchi (桶口拓朗) points that as a space that *"can be autonomously sustained by itself, hence it's a space that really belongs to oneself"*<sup>2</sup>.

With the mobility of Amateur Riot, the community has expanded to the nearby region throughout the years. In 2012, activists from East Asia gathered at the lobby of the HSBC, where the Occupy Central Movement (佔領中環) was happening. They organized a forum titled "East Asia Multitude --The World after Revolution" (東亞諸眾峰會 -- 革命後的世界), to exchange their experience in facing social problems. Hajime is one of the invited speakers, he shared his practices as a "local community activism" in Koenji. The "Funny Revenge to the Boring World" from Busan, Korea, came to share their experience in organizing counter-culture movements among the youth, and how they build linkage in supporting social movements of different appeals. Taiwan activists who represented G-straight cafe (直走咖啡), shared their members' constant involvement in social movements after the 2008 Wild Strawberry Movement, how to run a cafe that serves as a base to sustain the activist community, as well as experimenting alternative social values. I shared about the Hong Kong entity, spoken from my practice in a community art space Woofer Ten (活化廳), which is based in a grass-roots community called Yau Ma Tei. We explore an equal dialogical relationship with the local neighborhood, which is exposed to urban gentrification. In the forum, it seems we have quite a different imagination towards the concept of "revolution", but there is at least one thing we share in common, which is to create a world after the revolution, spaces, and community within our own locality<sup>3</sup>.

Six years have passed since then, some challenging issues surfaced but there are some successful experiences we can share. The network and exchange among these activists are gradually expanding, many artists and activist groups from different regions have started to link up, as we could see in the 2016 No Limit Festival. In spite of the scale and variety of participants, there is an interesting dynamic emerging. Now, what could be done to the growing social problems? How could this community respond to it? What are we resisting, and what is its origin? Secondly, some of the members have come while some disappeared like a mystery; some started to run new space while some are closed. It is in fact not as easy to maintain a space in an independent way, but then how

could the practice and experience could pass on? Or, if the network could continue in other ways? The sustainability of such praxis as “community activism” is thus an important question to address.



Block printing collective. Image courtesy of A3BC

### **No Limit Tokyo 2016:**

No Limit Tokyo 2016 serves as a platform for cultural activism across different locals in East Asia, a chance to exchange and build up the mystical network on their own. During the festival, there are artists and activists coming from all over East Asia and Southeast Asia, events ranging from the exhibition, concert, screening, talk, workshop, March, party... etc. in total 61 events are called upon within one week. The scale of this Festival sounds big, but it is organized without getting any funding support, and most importantly, in a self-organized format within the activist community in Tokyo. To study how the exchange among activists could be triggered, we may take a closer look at one of the key venues for No Limit Tokyo 2016, called Irregular Rhythm Asylum(IRA).

IRA is an infoshop, situated in a commercial building in Shinjuku, Tokyo, founded in 2004. During the festival, several activities such as a zine exhibition, and a woodblock-printing workshop are held. Within a small space around 300 sq ft, the mutual exchange between artists and activists from the different regions are frequently generated.

Narita Keisuke is the founder of this infoshop. He was inspired to run the infoshop after meeting some anarchist friends in a march against the Iraq War in 2003. With infoshop, he sells publications of anarchism, CDs of indie music, and independent zines from Japan and all over the world. IRA also provides space for other different self-organized activities, such as workshops, movie screenings, and seminars. The central idea of the IRA is the spirit of “Do It Yourself” (DIY), that

people do not need to rely on the consumer society and its authority, but through our hands to acquire the technique and knowledge we need, from our everyday living.

The woodblock printing workshop happens every Thursday night regularly. It is initiated by the collective A3BC, namely Anti-War, Anti-Nuclear, and Arts of Block-print Collective. They also ran a workshop on woodblock printing during the No Limit Festival, where participants from other regions hence get a chance to know about their working model.

Woodblock printing has its long tradition in a social movement. Apparently, it is not a mainstream “tactic” in social mobilization anymore, especially with the development of digital technology, it is so easy to produce propaganda images in mass volume, one could also easily mobilize and publish your idea through social media today. Woodblock printing thus gives us a quite low-file impression, if not for nostalgia, it seems to be less efficient. On the other hand, most people work individually under a liberal society, we are responsible for our own choice, and take our own risk, hence the result often belongs to oneself individually, but not a collective effort.

The way A3BC production of woodblock printing is reversed. From brainstorming the composition, sketching the draft, carving the figures, and lastly the printing process of ink transfer and printing it together by stepping on it, the whole process is done collectively. Members are encouraged to communicate with each other, as to build up a common motivation<sup>4</sup>.

The collaborative way of producing woodblock printing, not simply experimenting with “new” ways of working together, or combining each other's effort to produce images that look great. The ethics of collaboration are addressed. As researcher Kano Ai quoted from an A3BC member, Nanbu Hiroko *“Trust is not built simply because we have similar ideas. On the contrary, we recognize our similarities, but also our differences. What fills the gaps between the difference is the collaborative effort.”*<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not about the result or the final product, such as does it look nice or effective in promoting a certain message? but the process of producing it, where everyone's contribution is equally respected. Such statement, in fact, indicates some important values, quite contrary to the mainstream neo-liberalism ideology, in which difference is a matter of individual (free) choice, conflicts are assumed to be solved by certain social authority or rule that may exist, rather than understand it through deliberation within a community.

What is interesting is that A3BC is not the first group to use woodblock printing in the sense of “community activism”. The founding member of A3BC, Ueoka Seiji got his inspiration from a collective in Yogyakarta, Indonesia called Taring Padi<sup>6</sup>. They are formed in conjunction with the collapse of Suharto's dictatorship in 1998. Their works are produced collectively where the members actively engage with different local communities that faced land expropriation and other development issues. They produce woodblock print in the format of posters and banners to spread the messages, as well as puppets as props for marching. Similarly, in Sabah, Malaysia, another woodblock print collective Pangrok Sulap<sup>7</sup> is inspired by Taring Padi, and continues the spirit in a rural town in Ranau.

During the No Limit Festival, some Taiwan and Hong Kong activists participated in the woodblock printing workshop, they found this way of organization interesting and adapted the format into their own local community. For instance, a woodblock printing group is formed by Taiwan activists, they meet up weekly at the Halfway Cafe (半路咖啡) in Taipei. Recently they made a flag by wooden

printing, to protest against an eviction in the Dagan community(大觀社區). Hong Kong artists and activists also formed a group after that, they produced T-shirts and banners to support migrant workers and queers in their activities.

From this aspect, the meaning of space does not only come from its spatial dimension, but also from the ethical/heterogeneous values in which these spaces are addressed. Today a lot of cultural activities and festivals are held, many have to rely on support from enterprise or government funding. Yet, these activities are usually one-off or short-term, that people don't really have space to accumulate belief and trust among others. Perhaps that is the meaning of these "autonomous" activist networks, which shows a dynamic and commitment in trying to escape from the mainstream system and gaining time to create their own space outside of it. Although in the No Limit Festival, lots of activities are held, I think the spirit of autonomy, as a statement to realize "alternative is possible", have generated a synergy among them, and it would be passed on, within these mystical networks.

### Notes and References

1. That is a documentary film directed by Hironori Kodama (児玉浩宜), titled *No Limit Tokyo Autonomous Zone*, that follows the whole process of co-organizing the No Limit festival by the activists in Tokyo.
2. Takuro Higuchi. 2014. Ruin space, or a base for rebellion -Amateur Riot [廢棄空間, 或者是判亂據點—素人之亂]. in Yuk Hui & DOXA eds. *Creative Space: Art & Spatial Resistance in East Asia* [創意空間: 東亞藝術與空間抗爭], Hong Kong: Roundtable Synergy Books.
3. Lee Chun Fung eds. 2014. *Woofers Ten Art/activist in Residence 2011-12*, Hong Kong: Woofers Ten.
4. I participated in their workshop once in 2014, while a detailed description of their working mode could be a reference to the essay of Kano Ai. 2017. "Trans Local Networking of DIY Art Collectives from Asia to Europe—The Case of A3BC" in *FIELD: A Journal of Socially Engaged Art Criticism* (8) Fall 2017.
5. *ibid.* p.8
6. See Tarin Padi webpage, <https://www.taringpadi.com/?lang=en>, accessed on 1.6.2018
7. See Q&A with Pangrok Sulap. <https://borneoartcollective.org/featuredprojects/2016/6/17/pangrok-sulap>, accessed on 1.6.2018