

**Building a Crowd-Sourced Community Archive
in Hong Kong: the Challenges and Rewards -
an Informational Interview with
David Bellis, Founder of Gwulo.com**

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Introduction

Community archives are often created and owned by the community or by an individual. Community archives often collect and preserve historic records of significant social and cultural values that might be neglected or unwanted by the university, public or government archives. In addition, community archives can often tell the story of a community's unique history and cultural heritage. They also contribute to the overall process of identity production, as well as to the building of a collective memory for a multicultural society like Hong Kong. Virtual community archives are also a great way of bringing people together. Using a natural voice that encourages anyone to get involved, allowing them to share their expertise, knowledge, and interests, as well as fond memories at anytime, anyplace, anywhere.

The *Gwulo.com* website was created by David Bellis, a British expatriate currently living in Hong Kong, who possesses an unparalleled passion and curiosity for the local history and culture of Hong Kong. His website combines photographic images with people's narratives, personal diaries, articles, discussions, and old maps. The photographs from his Website date from between the 1880s and the 1960s; and his website currently (as of May, 2013) includes over 13,000 pages, featuring over 6,000 photographs and 300 articles of the old as well as the contemporary Hong Kong. According to David, his *Gwulo.com* website attracts no fewer than 700 visitors per day.

In the following interview, David Bellis discusses the causes for his curiosity and interest in the local history and culture of Hong Kong, as well as the challenges and rewards of building a crowd-sourced community archive.

The following interview with David Bellis was conducted in Hong Kong on March 14, 2013.

Patrick Lo (PL): *Could you begin by first introducing yourself and also tell us how you came up with the idea of developing this “Gweilo”¹ online resource?*

David Bellis (DB): Okay, first things first, it is not called *Gweilo*, it is actually called *Gwulo: Hong Kong*.² “Gwu lo” is roughly how “古老” sounds in Cantonese. It means ancient or old-fashioned in Chinese. Very often, we have people writing to us, saying that we’ve got “Gweilo” spelled wrong!

My original background is in computer science, and has nothing to do with history at all, so I don’t have any formal training as a historian. About 10 years ago, I started a blog with a friend, and this blog is about living in Hong Kong. Over time, I found that I was writing more and more about history, and less and less about the current life in Hong Kong. So it only made sense to split the blog up into a separate website. The *Gwulo.com* website derived from the idea of making documentary records of different things that I see in my daily life in Hong Kong. For example, when I am wandering around the streets in Hong Kong and I see something curious, I will write about it in a kind of casual, informal manner. Perhaps, I would also do a little more digging to see what is the whole story behind it.

For *Gwulo.com*, the big step forward was when readers started joining in and adding their comments and photos to the stories I’d written. Later, people started asking questions and sharing their own stories. So although most visitors just enjoy looking at the old photos, a growing number join in with contributions. We’ve snowballed gradually from there, and our Website is growing little by little every day.

To summarize, I would say we are a bunch of happy amateurs writing about whatever catches our interest. People are welcome to write about anything related to old Hong Kong—a fond memory or maybe just a very simple question about their own family; or they may see something (an old street sign, an old tree, or a fire hydrant) that they do not understand, and they would just come in and join the conversation.

¹ Gweilo (鬼佬) is a common Cantonese slang term referring to foreigners who are Caucasians by race.

² *Gwulo: Hong Kong*. Available at: <http://gwulo.com/>



Photo 1. 1917. 25th Middlesex Regiment Concert Party in Hong Kong

PL: How long has this Gwub.com website been around?

DB: Since 2006, we have been running for about 7 years now.

PL: How long have you been living in Hong Kong?

DB: I have been living in Hong Kong for about 20 years.

PL: What made you come to Hong Kong in the first place?

DB: More than 20 years ago, I was on my way to Australia and I decided to make a quick stopover in Hong Kong. It was because during that time, with a UK passport you could get off the plane in Hong Kong without the need of applying for a visa for entering Hong Kong, so it was very easy and convenient. Eventually, I did go on to Australia and returned to Britain. But I soon realized that I missed Hong Kong very much. Then, I worked to save up enough money to buy a plane ticket to return to Hong Kong, and I have been here ever since.

PL: Why do you like Hong Kong so much?

DB: Hong Kong is definitely much warmer, it has much better food, and the City itself is always busy and exciting. Plus I married a local Hong Kong lady and we have two young daughters here. So Hong Kong is home for me now.

PL: What started your interest in the local culture and history of Hong Kong?

DB: I would say the air-raid shelters in Hong Kong.³⁴ The first thing we wrote about on our *Gwulo.com* website was the air-raid tunnels in Hong Kong. Air-raid tunnels are all over Hong Kong. They were built during the early 1940s, shortly before the Japanese invasion. Unfortunately, several have already disappeared, as the hills they were bored through have since been dug away. Others are disappearing from our sight and memory as their entrances get covered over during re-development work.

PL: Your interest in history, has it always been war- or military-related? Or are you just interested in the little things of everyday life amongst the ordinary people in an exotic city?

DB: My interests are not limited to military-related subject matters. I think my interests are about looking at something or anything, and then I'm not quite sure about the story behind it, so I get a bit curious, and this often leads me to do more research, doing more digging and more exploring. For many of the things that we write about on our website, very often people in Hong Kong just take them for granted and don't even notice that they exist at all. At the same time, I found that most people who are involved with our *Gwulo.com* website tend to have that 'curious nature'. In other words, they like looking at things and asking questions.

PL: Your original idea of developing this Gwulo.com website—was it just meant for the sharing of common interests amongst the amateur historians in Hong Kong? Or it was meant to be a public forum for promoting awareness of local history and culture in Hong Kong?

DB: I cannot say there was any grand plan during the initial stage. It started off with the idea of sharing what I found interesting in Hong Kong, and then as people started sending in pictures to the website, that has definitely encouraged more and more people to join in and add more pictures. And then over time, a bit more structure has gradually appeared on our website. I have gradually developed an idea of how I want to continue to develop the website—to be less of an unstructured blog, to put more structure to it by providing better and clearer linkages between people,

³ "Air-raid shelters under Kowloon Park." *Gwulo.com*. Available at: <http://gwulo.com/kowloonparkarp>

⁴ "Life in Hong Kong's ARP tunnels." *Gwulo.com*. Available at: <http://gwulo.com/life-in-hong-kongs-ARP-tunnels>

organizations, and places—so that our users could navigate through the website more seamlessly. Hopefully, as you enter the website, you will be able to follow your line of interests via the various webpages according to the different subject contents...

PL: Why did you choose to call your Website “Gwulo: Hong Kong”?

DB: The answer is very simple. When you are developing a website, you need to choose a short name for its domain. I found that likely English names such as “Old Hong Kong” were already taken, so I had no choice but to choose a Cantonese name instead. I asked my wife for suggestions, and “Gwulo” seems to be an appropriate and reasonable choice, because it is easy to remember, and it is not too long, plus the name is also Chinese.



Photo 2. 1920s Queen’s Road Central, Hong Kong Island

PL: Do you think your Gwulo.com website is making contributions in terms of promoting the awareness of local history and culture amongst the general public in Hong Kong?

DB: In its own little way, I would say yes. I think it encourages people who might otherwise think what they are interested in somehow is not worth sharing or mentioning. There are a lot of people who might think, “I am the only one who is interested in this research, and no one else would be interested in this...” Or maybe, “I am not a professional historian and what I am writing does not deserve to be made public at all...” And via this Gwulo.com website, we hope to encourage more people to join in, to share their interests, and to share what they know. I think it is helping with that.

DB: How many photographs do you have on your website so far?

DB: At the end of the last year [2012], we had up to about 6,000 photographs in total. They are a mix. Some are modern photos of old things, and some photos were taken in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 60s. Some of them came from the early 1900s, so I would say they are all over the place really. As of January, 2013, our website has over 11,000 pages and over half of them are photos (for details regarding statistics about contents of Gwulo.com, see Appendix). Photos are indeed the most popular thing by far on our website. We also have many pages about people, so family history is another big thing at the moment. With reference to family history, there are people with family members who have previously lived in Hong Kong maybe in the 1950s or maybe even 100 years ago. These people usually try to trace some family history or maybe to look for other people who might know their family members. [Part of our audience] are interested in old buildings in Hong Kong. So we are never short of materials or subject contents for our Website.

PL: Would you say Gwulo.com is the only website that is devoted to the documentation of the local history and heritage of Hong Kong? Do you know if there are other similar websites out there that are developed by other non-professional historians like yourself?

DB: We are not the only one. You can go to the local public libraries⁵ websites and the PRO [Hong Kong Public Records Office]⁶ website and see different collections of old photos of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong Museum of History⁷ also has a collection of old Hong Kong photos, but these are the professional organizations.

A couple of other local websites that focus on local history include Hong Kong (& Macau) Stuff⁸, and Hong Kong's First⁹. They both turn up lots of interesting information, but in a slightly different way. They use a "blog with comments" style, but Gwulo.com also encourages people to contribute their own stories and photos, so

⁵ Hong Kong Public Libraries – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hkpl.gov.hk/eindex.html>

⁶ Hong Kong Public Records Office – Homepage. Available at: http://www.grs.gov.hk/ws/english/org_pro.htm

⁷ Hong Kong Museum of History – Homepage. Available at: http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/Museum/History/en_US/web/mh/index.html

⁸ *Hong Kong (& Macau) Stuff* - Homepage. Available at: <http://orientalsweetlips.wordpress.com/>

⁹ *Hong Kong's First* – Homepage. Available at: <http://hongkongfirst.blogspot.jp/>

it is more of a community website.

PL: You said you have different people contributing whatever they want to your Website. Do you have some sort of guidelines, for example in case these photos look nice, but they do not really fit into the overall theme of your website, so you would have to turn them down at the end. Or do you accept pretty much anything or everything submitted by anyone? If that is the case, do you exercise some sort of censorship when you are accepting photos from the users?

DB: I have to take materials off the website every day, but that is only because they are spam postings— people trying to sell sneakers, or perfume, and so on. Literally, so far, there were only 2 or 3 occasions that I had people who got too passionate about their subjects, and they started getting into personal attacks and that had to be stopped, so such personal attacks or unpleasant comments had to be taken off the website. But as long as you are writing something about old Hong Kong, pretty much anything is welcome.

I can give you a couple of examples. We had an old picture featuring some old ice-cream delivery tricycles on Des Voeux Road in Central. Somebody saw those old photos and wrote in saying, “My grandfather used to drive one of those ice-cream tricycles in Hong Kong.”¹⁰ That I think is a lovely story to have on our website, because it has definitely brought the whole picture to life.

We have another contributor who is an expert on Hong Kong cinemas, and you might think this is of limited use. But if you look at those old photos, you often see a poster for an old movie, and this movie expert could look at the poster, and tell you the date that picture was actually taken, because he knew when the movie played in Hong Kong. All these odd and seemingly unrelated interests, they all link up together somehow, and they all help to better describe the pictures.

PL: I understand your home and family are now in Hong Kong, but you still have not told me in details why you find the culture and history of a foreign city like Hong Kong so appealing. Since you are not getting paid for what you doing, and considering the amount of time, energy and resources that you have investigated in developing this website, I take it that you must derive some kind of satisfaction by doing this. Creating and maintaining this Gwub.com—could you tell me why you find such experience so rewarding?

¹⁰ Ice-cream tricycles in Hong Kong - see photo at: <http://gwulo.com/node/13803#comment-22593>

DB: I have given a couple of interviews in Hong Kong recently, to reporters who are local Chinese people. They asked similar questions, “Why are you doing this? Why would you want to do this, when there is no financial reward?” It might seem a bit odd here in Hong Kong, but I think it is partly a cultural difference. Back in the UK, it is quite normal to have a hobby, even when it is considered to be an ‘odd hobby’. But in Hong Kong, many people consider a hobby is a waste of time when you could be using your time to do something else for financial reward.

Then what is so appealing about Hong Kong’s history? Honestly, it’s just where I’m living, so that’s what I write about. I find subjects to write about, by seeing something that raises a question. If you use that way to get into history, you have to write about what is around you. I cannot write about Wales or England, because I am not there. And I am not seeing things in Wales every day. I wrote about air-raid shelters here in Hong Kong, because I walk past them every day and I have seen them many times. If I wonder why the land reclamations here in Hong Kong have gone a certain way it’s because they are all around me here.

PL: When you find something interesting, is it because of you find it aesthetically pleasing to you, or because it is of importance to our past or other people’s past in Hong Kong?

DB: It would be a lot more grand to say that. Again, it is just about my own personal curiosity. I see something and I don’t know why it is like that, and I want to know why, and go to look for the answer. It is just as simple as that. And then I write the answer down, and that raises another question, so I go to look for that. That ongoing process of research and enquiry— I find it very exciting.

There are two questions I am thinking about at the moment. Both have come from some paid research I’m working on, sourcing old photos for a publication. First I’m trying to find who Arbuthnot Road was named after. I don’t know that answer, so I will try to spend some time to find out, and that would probably raise some other questions too.

The other one question is, you know that wooden cangue that used to go around a prisoner’s neck for public humiliation and corporal punishment in China? So was this wooden cangue ever used in Hong Kong or not? I don’t know, so I tried to find out the answer. And we found an old photo of someone in a cangue, and it said it was taken in Hong Kong. But it now seems that photo might have been taken in

Shanghai instead. So every question you ask, there are more questions, and I just enjoy this ongoing enquiry process very much. It is like doing a jigsaw puzzle; it is the interest of trying to find out the answers.

PL: Why did the customer approach you to do the research, instead of hiring a professional historian for their history project?

DB: Coincidentally, one of customer's managers is also a subscriber of our Gwulo.com's newsletter, which I send out on a regular basis. Since I spend a lot of time looking for and looking at old photos and writing about them, they thought that I might be able to do the same for them, so they gave me the job.

PL: The photos you are looking for, since they do not come from your website, how would you go about finding their source?

DB: First of all is knowing which local archives have collections of Hong Kong photos. If the archive has online access, I can always search them online. Last month, I was in the UK for a family trip, so I used that as a chance to visit the UK National Archives¹¹; to visit the Royal Asiatic Society [of Great Britain and Ireland]¹² and also found some old Hong Kong photos there. I would also ask the subscribers to our website, to see if they would know anyone else who could help me to find old photos of Hong Kong.



Photo 3. c.1935 Drinking tea at Happy Valley racecourse

¹¹ The National Archives – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

¹² Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org/site/>

PL: Have there been any scholars, researchers, academics or students who approached you in the past, and asked if they could use the photos from your website? Or have they asked you to provide information to help them with their research?

DB: Very minimal, and almost no requests for photographs. I was talking to someone else who runs an archive in Hong Kong about our Gwulo.com website – according to what he told me, people who do research here in Hong Kong often know about the Gwulo website, and they said they use it regularly. However, it is rather strange that we do not hear from them. For these people who are using our website, I am curious to know if there are professional historians or researchers, and I would like to know how we could better encourage them to join in and contribute, rather than just using our information and photos. The people we tend to hear from are mostly amateur historians with a keen interest in local history who are willing to share. So I am not sure why we do not hear from these professional historians or researchers if they are really using our website.

PL: As the creator of this Gwulo.com website, what part of such experience do you find most rewarding?

DB: I think the most rewarding part is about the people. It's great to hear from someone who lived in Hong Kong, maybe in the 1950s or 60s, and is now quite elderly, and via our photos, they're really happy to see these old areas the way they remembered, and maybe to bring back some happy memories. For the other people who are researching their family history, our website could help them undercover some little mysteries about their family background. The satisfaction and rewards were all around the people-side.

PL: Via using this website, have there been situations that people were able to reconnect with their long-lost family members or learn more about their own family history?

DB: We do not have anything as exciting as re-connecting long-lost family members, but we can definitely help people learn more about their family history. For example, it's hard to imagine what life was like in Hong Kong during the late 19th or early 20th century, and we are able to give them some photos, and to provide them with detailed information of where their ancestors lived and where they worked; or put them in the right direction in terms of 'where to look' in order to continue their research.

PL: With you current Gwulo.com website, are you currently facing any major challenges and frustrations?

DB: There are lots, e.g., we have far more people just reading our website than the number of people who wish to contribute. I suppose that is the nature of the Web or that is how it works, but I love to encourage more people to just come in and write something or anything.

PL: For those people who are contributing to your website, are they mostly locals or foreigners?

DB: In terms of our users or subscribers, it is a really big mix. There are some Western people who have previously lived in Hong Kong, but live overseas now. There are also other local people who have emigrated overseas, but would still like to stay in touch with Hong Kong via our website. Some of them are Western people who are currently living in Hong Kong, while some of our contributors are local Chinese people currently living in Hong Kong. So there is not just one type.

PL: Do the people who are contributing to your website sometimes tell you why they are contributing or tell you what they have gained from using this website?

DB: In the last 2 to 3 weeks, we had someone who grew up here in Hong Kong, but moved back to the UK, and they uploaded over 100 of their own photos taken from 1960s to early 70s. I think they did it as a 'thank you gesture', telling us how much they have enjoyed using our Website, and they would like to give something back in return. But all of us have been pleasantly surprised by the amount of feedback coming from these newly-added photos. For example, other readers would tell us that, "You have got the wrong title for the photo" or "You don't remember where it was taken, but it was actually this place..." And people would even tell you that, "You got the photo wrong way around, and it should be flipped." And I do get thank you messages by email from time to time, which are always good to get.

PL: Please give me some highlights of your Gwulo.com collection.

DB: We have different projects going on under our website. One that I am happy how it has turned out is our Wartime Diaries project.¹³ During the Japanese

¹³ *Gwulo: Old Hong Kong – Wartime Diaries*. Available at: <http://gwulo.com/70-years-ago>

occupation in Hong Kong, many people kept diaries of that time, which I'd like to make available. What we are doing is very slow work. We take a diary, transcribe it, cut it up into daily entries, and then people may subscribe to these wartime diaries by email. So once you become a subscriber, each day you will be sent an email with all the different diary entries from this date 70 years ago. The reader will follow the whole experience of the original authors who witnessed the war first-hand 70 years ago. They will experience it day by day over a period of four years.

PL: How did you find these wartime diaries? Who were writing these wartime diaries? How did you get a copy of such diaries?

DB: There is a discussion group on Yahoo.com, which is about the Stanley Internment Camp (赤柱拘留營)¹⁴ in Hong Kong. And one of the members there is a 94-year-old lady who was interned in Stanley. She now lives in England, and she would often mention extracts from her diary. As we were coming up to the 70th anniversary of the invasion of Hong Kong, I got in touch with her and she kindly agreed to send the text of her diary. Then I also asked other people, to see if they could offer more materials on the related topic.

We have another diary written by the man who was the Editor of the *South China Morning Post*¹⁵ at the time. It was supplied by his son. The Editor was a Eurasian, living in Happy Valley outside of the internment camp during the Japanese occupation. He gave a very different experience of those years during the Sino-Japanese War.

I am hoping that as people read these diaries, they would come forward and tell me that, "I have also got a family diary and would like to add the diary to the Gwub.com website." So far, we have got three very complete diaries, and we have got other people who have written about certain major incidents. For example, we are including contemporary intelligence reports from the BAAG [British Army Aid Group]. They were based in China, but had spies in Hong Kong reporting on conditions here. As you can see, we are mixing all these materials together. So on different dates, subscribers obtain different angles on different events, depending on what materials we have on that day. And I am quite excited about that one.

I also enjoy old maps. We take the old maps, overlaying them onto the current maps

¹⁴ Stanley Internment Camp (赤柱拘留營). Further information available at: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stanley_camp/

¹⁵ *South China Morning Post* – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.scmp.com/>

and then overlaying them onto the buildings that we know about, and allow people explore that way – that gets me excited also.

In addition, I'd love to do a book, because it could get to a different audience, and I think the book and the website can help each other. I think the people who enjoyed the website might like to buy the book to see the photos in a larger format, and people who read the book might also like to come to the website and contribute. I write an article about once week and that goes to the subscribers, and eventually, I will compile them into a book.

PL: Does your lack of formal training as a historian in any way hinder you from doing your job well, or you actually see it as an advantage?

DB: I do not think it matters at all. Because we write about what is interesting to us in a sort of 'natural voice', I hope it makes it easier for anyone reading to see they can just join in and take part in our discussions. Maybe a professional historian who looks at our materials might find it a little careless, or not 100% accurate. On the other hand, we encourage everyone or anyone to just join in. We do not mind mistakes at all, and we certainly do not mind half knowledge, e.g., "I am only guessing this...", as long as we know it is a 'guess'. They will all get corrected over time.

PL: Do you have plans for future developments for your Website?

DB: If someone offered to give me a cheque tomorrow, I would pay for all the early jury lists in Hong Kong to be transcribed and be added to our website. Because from the late 1800s to 1940, during the British colonial period, the Hong Kong Government would put out a list of people who were on the jury. And on that jury list, there would be each juror's name, occupation, company, address, which I think is a wonderful resource.

PL: Why do you think such jury list is so important?

DB: Because if you search for information about someone who lived in Hong Kong in 1900, for example, the jury list can give you a lot of useful clues. You can immediately find out where they lived and worked. By comparing lists from different years, you can track where they lived and worked over a range of years. It's very difficult to find this information any other way, so the jury lists are a wonderful resource.

PL: In what contexts or situations would such information be useful? Or what kind of people would find such information useful?

DB: For example, take someone who is doing research on a great-grandfather who previously lived in Hong Kong. With the jury list information, we would be able to tell them that they were in Hong Kong during these years; they started off in this company and they worked there for two years. And then they were promoted and after a few years, they moved to this company; and during that time, they lived at these addresses. We are currently relying on volunteers to transfer such information onto our Website, but it has been a very slow process. To be honest, I would rather pay someone to get the whole thing done.

PL: Do you have anything to add before closing this interview?

DB: For anyone who is reading this interview, if you have any old photos or old stories, or old memories of working or living in Hong Kong; or if you have questions regarding Hong Kong—anything like this, please come along to our Gwulb.com website and join in. This is our Website address: <http://gwulb.com/>

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Appendix

Statistics about Contents of *Gwulo.com*

The following statistical data are taken from *Gwulo.com* at:
<http://gwulo.com/node/14415>

2012 in numbers

Here's how all that content you've created looks like in numbers:

Pages on website	2012	2011	2010
Stories	243	213	170
Forum topics	639	525	350
Places	2,035	1,623	1,310
People	1,000	28	
Photos	6,359	5,725	4,330
Diary pages	1,589		
<i>Total pages</i>	<i>11,865</i>	<i>8,114</i>	<i>6,160</i>
<i>Total comments</i>	<i>17,477</i>	<i>14,910</i>	<i>11,370</i>
Jurors Lists (years)	27	19	11

Newsletter Subscribers

Email subscriptions	603	353	180
RSS subscriptions	82	53	
Facebook 'likes'	463	273	
Twitter	43	33	
<i>Total</i>	<i>1,191</i>	<i>712</i>	<i>180</i>

Wartime Diaries subscribers

71 years ago	81
70 years ago	37

Website traffic (thousands)

Visits	250	200	157
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Unique visitors	150	113	88
Pageviews	1,149	919	872