

Chapter 1

Why Hong Kong Needs an Archives Law



Interview with Simon CHU

President, Hong Kong Archives Society

What exactly is an archives law? An archive is an accumulation of historical records of events that took place during the lifetime of an organisation. Such archival records are preserved to document the functions of that organisation. They are a repository of factual information, and they are necessary for helping us understand the history and identity as well as the functions of that particular organisation. According to Simon Chu, president of the Hong Kong Archives Society and former director of the Government Records Service, “an archives law is actually a very general piece of legislation. Such a law aims to govern the operations and the management of archives in a government, for ensuring that the government officials will have to create records to document their official transactions, as a result of their official duties”. To ensure maintenance of a good archives system, many modern jurisdictions have such an archives law, including many Asian countries. Hong Kong, however, is an exception.

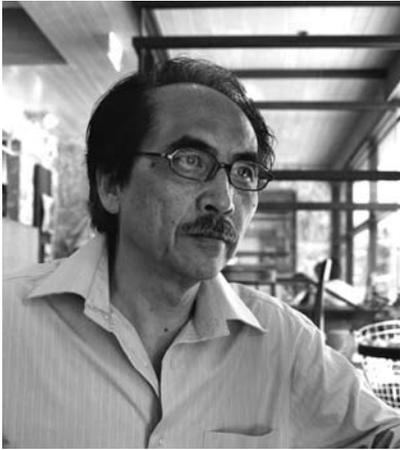
In this chapter, Simon Chu will discuss in detail his past experiences as an archivist for the Hong Kong Government, as well as the implications of, and the urgent need for, introducing an archives law in Hong Kong.

Self-Introduction

Could you begin this interview by introducing yourself and your working experiences?

My name is Simon Chu, and I am an archivist by profession. I have worked as an archivist for the [Hong Kong] Government Archives for over 22 years, before retiring in 2007. All my life, I have worked as an archivist. I am currently serving as the President of the Hong Kong Archives Society.¹ I only became the

1. Hong Kong Archives Society. Homepage available at: www.archives.org.hk/about.html



Simon CHU

President about two years ago (2011). On top of being the President of the Archives Society, internationally, I am also the Secretary General of EASTICA.² EASTICA is the acronym for the East Asian Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives. And ICA is the International Council on Archives,³ which is similar to IFLA for the International Federation of

Library Associations and Institutions⁴ for libraries and librarians worldwide. In addition, I am the Advisor for the Asia Pacific Committee of the UNESCO⁵ Memoir of the World Programme. In fact, I have been working for the UNESCO for over 15 years.

I am also teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong,⁶ and at Hong Kong University-SPACE,⁷ so I am the Adjunct Associate Professor of two different universities in Hong Kong. Furthermore, I am a member of the standing committee of the Chinese National Committee for Archive and Documentary Heritage Programme. This Chinese National Committee is actually responsible for appraising and selecting the documentary

2. EASTICA. Homepage available at: www.eastica.org/

3. International Council on Archives. Homepage available at: www.ica.org/3/homepage/home.html

4. IFLA. Homepage available at: www.ifla.org/

5. UNESCO. Homepage available at: <http://whc.unesco.org/>

6. The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Homepage available at: www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/index.html

7. University of Hong Kong, School of Professional and Continuing Education (SPACE Community College). Homepage available at: <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/>

heritage of Mainland China, and I am preparing them for the submission to the international register. Basically, these are all the things that I am doing at the moment.

Did you begin your career as an archivist in Hong Kong immediately after you graduated from university?

No, after I finished my studies in Canada, I taught in Canada for a while at the Medicine Hat College⁸ which is about a two-hour drive from Calgary. I had also obtained my MLIS⁹ degree in Canada before I started my career as an archivist in Hong Kong.

How did you develop an interest in archival work? I can feel that you have such a keen interest and strong passion for archival work?

I was a history student. When I was a student, I spent most of my time doing my research in archives. I guess my passion for archival work developed gradually during my time as a student in Canada. All seemed very natural to me.

Establishment of the Hong Kong Archives Society

Are you one of the founders of the Hong Kong Archives Society?

Yes, I am one of the founding members of the Archives Society in Hong Kong. Without being too humble, I should say that I initiated the whole idea. With this Society, we try to establish a platform, via which we aim to advocate the archives law, as a hidden agenda for Hong Kong.

8. Medicine Hat College. Homepage available at: www.mhc.ab.ca/

9. MLIS – Master of Library and Information Science.

Did you establish the Hong Kong Archives Society after you have retired from the Hong Kong Government?

I think it was back in 1999. It was around that time when we founded the Hong Kong Archives Society, and I was still working as an archivist for the Hong Kong Government then.

What were the goals and purposes for founding this Hong Kong Archives Society? What are the current functions of the Hong Kong Archives Society?

The general public in Hong Kong does not have any clear and correct concepts and perceptions about archives, and what kind of work that is involved in an archive. They tend to mix up archival work with librarianship, or museum curator work. In fact, very few people have clear ideas about what an archive is, and what archivists actually do in an archive. Such common misconceptions tend to have significant impacts on the financial resources being provided for archival work, including archival work being carried out in both public and private organisations. Because of such wrong perceptions, people in Hong Kong think that archival work can be taken up by librarians or museum curators, etc. This is the actual situation in Hong Kong, both then and now. It has not improved very much, although it seems to be improving slowly.

For the Hong Kong Archives Society, one of our objectives is to promote “professionalism”, that is, “archival professionalism”. We also aim to promote awareness among members of the public, the importance, the values, and the uniqueness of an archive, that is the unique evidential values of an archive. We aim to teach people to distinguish archival materials from the other library materials or museum objects. With the Society, we simply aim to create more archives, that is, to create more archival objects, more professionals, and more career opportunities, etc. Unlike many other countries, where archives law is actually very common among many civilised jurisdictions, there is an absence of an

“archives law” in Hong Kong. In the West, as well as a majority of the Asian countries, they have this archives law which is a very general piece of legislation. Such a law applies to the government, and also applies to the public officials, but does not deal with the private or commercial institutions. In other words, it is a law that governs the operations and the management of archives in a government, for ensuring that the government officials will have to create records to document their official transactions, as a result of their official duties.

Thus the law also ensures that all the created records will be professionally managed, according to the professional standards, for example, the ICA Standards,¹⁰ the ISO Standards¹¹... and all the other international standards. Finally, this archives law also makes sure that after the records are created, they will be transferred to the archives authority for proper appraisal. This law also ensures that the public offices have no rights to dispose any of the records without the proper approvals from the archival authority. For those records that are appraised to have “permanent archival value”, the archivists would then recommend those records to be transferred to the archives for permanent upkeep.

The last provision of the archives law is that, after a certain period of closure or custody in the archives, usually it would take about 20 to 30 years, the archival records will have to be opened for public access. In short, the archives law covers these basic four provisions:

- (1) The archival records have to be created by the public officials as a result of their work, or as their official duties.

10. International Council on Archives, Committee on Descriptive Standards. Homepage available at: www.icacds.org.uk/eng/standards.htm

11. International Organization for Standardization. Homepage available at: www.iso.org/iso/home.html

- (2) The created archival records have to be managed professionally.
- (3) The finished records have to be transferred to the archives for proper appraisal.
- (4) The records will then be transferred to the archives for permanent retention, and eventually, they have to be opened for public access.

But in the absence of the archives law, the Hong Kong public officials are not obliged to create these records. Even after they have created records as such, they can turn around and say, “Oh sorry, we do not have such records created”, if they do not want to show you these records as printed evidence of their Government’s transactions.

Secondly, because of the absence of the archives law, they can easily destroy the records without the approval from the archival authority. Moreover, without the archives law, the archival records in the archives, whether they will be opened for public access is entirely up to them – up to their discretion – thereby depriving Hong Kong people of their rights to know. And when you are talking about the freedom of information, there are many Western countries that have this legislation called “the Freedom of Information [Act]”, by which, citizens can ask for access to information within the government. We do not have this archives law, and also we do not have this “Freedom of Information Act”. But in this place, we do have this so-called “Code on Access to Information”. However it is not a law, which in fact, is only a “code”. As a result, granting access to information about the Government is not a legal obligation on the part of the Government, and getting information from the Government is not within our legal rights!

In other words, the “Archives Law” and the “Freedom of Information Act” are all closely related. These two laws guarantee people’s right to know, and also serve as the basis

of democracy. These two laws are also the basis of ensuring government transparency, therefore the basis of our Government's accountability. So without these two laws, the Government can do whatever they like. As a result, the Hong Kong Archives Society is advocating strongly for the alignments of these two laws.

Archival Work in the Hong Kong Government

Were you working as an archivist for the Hong Kong Legislative Council?

No, I was the archivist for the Hong Kong Government, not the Hong Kong Legislative Council;¹² they are two different things. With reference to the Legislative Council, my two former colleagues in the Government Archives, because of their activities to advocate for the archives law, they were not very much welcomed by the Government. So they quit the Government and joined the Legislative Council instead. In fact, one of them is actually the founder of the Legislative Council Archives.¹³

When you were working as an archivist for the Hong Kong Government, what were your major duties?

The major duties were actually kind of routine tasks. I am not saying that because the governmental departments do not transfer the records to us as they do not have this “legal obligations” to do so. In fact, over the years, records still get transferred from the

12. Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region of the People's Republic of China (Legco). Homepage available at: www.legco.gov.hk/index.html

13. Hong Kong Legislative Council Archives. Further information available at: <http://legco.gov.hk/general/english/visiting/archives.pdf>

Government, but we are not getting records from those major vital bureaus. As you understand, the bureaus are the decision-making units, and the departments are responsible for the actual implementations. Hence, records from the bureaus are far more important than the records from the individual departments in terms of their historical and archival values. Hence, we still had some of the routine work like doing record appraisals and accessioning, which are similar to what you do as a librarian, that is, you catalogue, advise, describe and arrange the archives for access purposes, etc. Even though we do not have the archives law, we have another rule called the “Code of Access Rule”, which is public-record-access rule. This access rule gives you some rights, while not legal rights, to gain access to the Archives.

When I first joined the Hong Kong Government Archives during the 1980s, maybe in 1982, I was very lucky to have worked with the founding archivist, Ian Arthur Diamond. He was very keen and very enthusiastic about archival work. Because after 1940s, the War [the Second World War] ended in 1945, most of the Hong Kong Government records – the pre-1940s, pre-War records – were destroyed by the Japanese Occupation (1941–1945) during the War. So we started building the Government Archives by going into those old basements of different government departments to search for those lost records or hidden records. We also started building up the Archives by making purchases of different records, for example, from the Foreign Office in London, and also from the former colonial offices in London. That is how we started building up the Hong Kong Government Archives. Actually, it is very ironical to say that, in terms of the holdings, before the War, which is before 1945, we have almost a complete set of records. It is because we bought the microfilms from the London Office. But since then, in terms of the completeness of the Archives, from 1945 until 1997, during this period, we do not have a great number of records documenting the Government’s activities.

When you said from 1945 to 1997, were you referring to the British colonial period in Hong Kong?

Yes, I meant the British Colonial Government in Hong Kong from 1945 to 1997. When I said there was no archives law, meaning that the government departments were not obliged to transfer the records to us. In other words, there was no regular transfer of records in accordance with the archives legislation. So, the Hong Kong Government was like a vessel trying to sail, but without any wind to fill its sails. The situation after 1997 became even worse!

How has it become worse?

From 1945 to 1997, there were still some British colonial officials who were “amateur historians”. They knew about our [Hong Kong Government Archives] existence, and they were sympathetic about our work as archivists. So we got some support from the Government during that time. But after 1997, we lost a whole bunch of those British colonial officials. In short, from 1945 to 1997, we did not have many important classes of records coming in. When I say “important classes of records”, I meant the records created by the bureaus – those decision-making bodies. And from 1997 until now, the situations has become much worse than before, that is no important classes of records coming in at all.

Do you think there is an obvious political agenda behind such low transactions of records?

Yes! There is an obvious political agenda, because first of all, this [record transfer] is not their primary task within their own agency. The officials have their own work to do, and they are all very busy. The business of minding the records is not on their agendas. So, if they do not have to, why should they give a damn about the records? If their records end up accumulating, and if their records are lost, it is not a matter of concern for them.

During your time working for the Hong Kong Government Archives, what kind of people would come to ask for your services, and what kinds of service did you provide on a regular basis?

They were mostly academic people.

Did people from the different departments within the Hong Kong Government also come to the Archives to ask for your services?

There were some cases, as they wanted to check the records about some past policies. If they couldn't find the records in their own agencies, and they knew "Oh, we have the Archives", they would come to us. But most of the time, we couldn't give them much assistance, because as I said before, we don't have many records ourselves. So they did sometimes come to us, and ask for help to locate certain pieces of records. But I should say, most of the users were academics, lawyers, and reporters, etc. These were the three main classes of users of the Government Archives.

Could you give me a situation where you think your work as an archivist has made major contributions to our documentary heritage, and to the overall development of the archives profession?

Back in 1994, the Government Archives was located on the mezzanine floor of the Murray Road multistorey car park on Hong Kong Island. That building is just right opposite to the Hutchison House. And in the 1990s, the Hong Kong ICAC¹⁴ wanted to expand their Operations Department. As the commercial premises did not want to rent the premises to ICAC and we were a floor under them, so the Hong Kong Government decided to move us out of that multistorey carpark building and

14. Hong Kong Independent Commission against Corruption (ICAC). Homepage available at: www.icac.org.hk/

attempted to relocate us all the way to Tuen Mun – into a factory building named Sun Yik, which was located in the middle of an industrial slum. Right beside it was a warehouse for dangerous goods, and there was also a candle production manufacturing factory nearby. That factory building used to serve as a closed camp for the Vietnamese refugees. But after all the refugees had been expatriated, the whole commercial factory building became vacant. As a result, the Government “generously” handed the building over to us.

As you understand, the environmentally hazardous ashes and waters just kept coming from these factory buildings – and I made them all known to the press, of course in a secretive way, telling them that “the Government has this plan of moving or exiling the Archives to Tuen Mun”. As a group effort, the Royal Society of Hong Kong and some of my friends at HKU [The University of Hong Kong] and Chinese U [The Chinese University of Hong Kong], they started writing to the newspapers, accusing the Government for taking such a stupid move. Never in the history of archives would a government select such a location for the “documentary heritage” – a location site that is in the middle of industrial pollutions. So there was a public hearing afterwards, and also some public protests against the Government’s move. There were also various public accusations against the Government’s attempt to destroy all the records. Because if there had been a fire around that area in Tuen Mun, all the documentary heritage of Hong Kong, all the history of Hong Kong, will be burned and turned to ashes. So after the public hearings, under the pressures, the Government decided to find a more suitable location in the city for us to build a proper purpose-built archives building. And the Archive now standing on Tsui Ping Road in Kwun Tong is a purpose-built archive. So, this was my work and my two archivist colleagues whom I mentioned earlier – our work as a team. But we are still in the same situation, as we are fighting for the archives law, which I think is even more difficult than fighting for an archives building.

Archival Work versus Government's Agenda

Have there always been conflicts between your work as an archivist and the Government's agendas? You were employed as a civil servant, but at the same time you were constantly working against them; with such working relationship, how did it work?

There were constant conflicts between my work and the Government. But to be honest, this is very common among archivists throughout the world. As an archivist, if you want to uphold the professional ethics, and do your best as a professional archivist, one is bound to come into conflicts with the government. The reason is very simple – the government wants to destroy the records because they do not want any of their misdeeds or stupid acts to be documented as records of evidence. But as an archivist, you want to say, “No, it is better to keep it”. This has always been the source of conflict.

When the Government wanted to relocate us to Tuen Mun, I said “No!”, because Tuen Mun was not an ideal place for housing our documentary heritage. So how did I work? I had no choice, unless I just tried to forget that I was an archivist, and tried to brush aside my moral obligations, or professional obligations, so that I could live happily with my boss. There were many difficult years. It was difficult because I was always engaged in constant emails, discourses, fights, and debates, etc.

Over the years working for the Hong Kong Government, the relationship between me and my boss could be very difficult at times. But they could not get rid of me, because I was a civil servant, and I was also pensionable. It meant unless I had committed a crime, a very serious crime, otherwise, they could not get rid of me – so that was the beauty of it. And because I was already in the archivist position, they could not demote me either. If they could demote me, they would have found every single valid excuse to do so.

The Government is usually very bureaucratic and they would prefer their staff to be compliant. It is kind of rare to find a person of your character to be working for the local Hong Kong Government. Is my observation correct?

I took that as a very good view. After several years working in the civil service, I regarded myself as not suitable for the job. But my job in the Archives was very different from working in other Government agencies or departments. Because working in the Archives, the Government would leave us alone most of the time. I could do my research, and do my appraisals, and work on my historical research, and also do my cataloguing, making the Archives available for the future access – there was a big satisfaction there. Also, as a historian doing archival research, it is always a challenge and at the same time, a bliss. So when I joined the Government, I found it very interesting and entertaining, and at the same time, very challenging. These conflicts and constant struggles with the Government only came a little later. Only after they tried to move us to Tuen Mun, the relationship between us kind of deteriorated gradually. But before that, I was nothing, and they did not care, as long as I was not creating any trouble.

What did you find most rewarding about your job as the Archivist for the Hong Kong Government?

Aside from that “Archives Building issue”, I think the most rewarding thing was that I have made acquaintance with a lot of archivist friends from different countries, broadening my horizon and my perceptions. The satisfaction was that even though I did not see myself as an effective guardian, because without the backing of the archives law, I was crippled in my work as an archivist, I should think of myself as a guardian of this commodity – collecting memories. I still could perform some of the functions as an archivist in that regard. My satisfaction as an archivist also came from raising the general awareness among the public about archives, and the importance of archival work.

Do you think there is a difference in terms of attitudes towards archival work before and after 1997? People in Hong Kong seem to have developed a stronger awareness for the preservation of the local Hong Kong identity, history, and culture, etc., after 1997, fearing that all these things we have taken for granted in the past might be gone one day.

You are perfectly right. After 1997, people started looking for their “roots”, and started talking about the collective Hong Kong identity – all these are linked to the historical studies of Hong Kong, pursuing records of artifacts that would lead to the past. Indeed, after 1997, there has been a rise of Hong Kong studies as an academic subject. Taking the local secondary school curriculum as an example, Hong Kong history has recently become a subject; before 1997, there was nothing. And also at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, one can now study Hong Kong history and Hong Kong culture, and you can also find much more research being carried out on various Hong Kong-related subjects.

With this enhanced awareness for the local Hong Kong history and identity, has this made your job easier as an archivist?

No, people’s conceptions towards archives are still very foggy. I would not say it has made our job easier, but it is the perfect time to raise the public awareness about archival work in Hong Kong. And I have to say we couldn’t find a better time to do the job.

Are there any differences in terms of archival work being carried out before 1997 and after 1997? Did the Government give you more funding, more people, and more materials to handle after 1997?

In terms of the Government, as I mentioned before, it is worse. Before 1997, there were some British colonial officials, those

Gweilo,¹⁵ who were more interested in Hong Kong history. But after 1997, the local Chinese officials, the Chinese AOs [Administrative Officers] don't read books; they are not interested in history. After 1997, the archival policy and archival work have become worse, as far as my experiences are concerned.

Are you referring to the Hong Kong SAR¹⁶ Government officials or the Mainland Chinese officials from the PRC¹⁷ Government?

When I say the Chinese officials, I am talking about the Chinese officials from the local Hong Kong SAR Government, in comparison to the Westerners, the *Gweilo* from the British Colonial Government in Hong Kong before 1997. As I mentioned earlier, the local Chinese officials who are in charge of Hong Kong now, they don't read much history. I can single out one incident as an example. Before 1997, when our heads in the Colonial Government came to visit our Archives, they were very impressed with our holdings, especially impressed with our pre-War, and early nineteenth-century records, and spent time looking around in the Archives. But after 1997, with these Chinese AOs becoming our heads, when they came to visit us at the Archives, as usual, we arranged the visit programme and showed these local Chinese officials around the Archives. During this very polite visit, I could see the difference. They just looked around very quickly, and then wanted to leave – to return to their Government headquarters. When I showed them these pre-War records or our 1,843 records of land of Hong Kong, they were simply not interested in them. They just walked past everything very quickly. Maybe I exaggerated a little bit, but this is the impression I got from them. After 1997, the local Hong Kong SAR Chinese officials are not interested in archival work.

15. *Gweilo* (鬼佬) is a common Cantonese slang term referring to foreigners who are Caucasians by race. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gweilo>

16. SAR – Special Administrative Region.

17. PRC – People's Republic of China.

Did you see any differences in terms of the Archives' usage rates or access rates before 1997 and after 1997?

Maybe after 1997 there are more younger clients and younger readers coming in, because Hong Kong history has become a curriculum in the local secondary schools. And there are younger students coming to the Archives, which was considered quite rare before 1997.

Archival Work in Hong Kong versus Mainland China

Do you see there are many differences between the archival work done by the Hong Kong SAR Government and Mainland Chinese PRC Government?

In Mainland China, the archivists or record managers performing archival work in a government agency, and when we are talking about the descriptive part of archival work, that is, cataloging and describing the records, they are the same. But in Mainland China, they have the archives law; this is a legal obligation that they have to follow and perform, in terms of management and preservation according to the Chinese archives law.

Unfortunately, Hong Kong archivists working for the local Government are working without the support of this archives law. As a result, receiving records is at the mercy of the Government – it is all very passive work. In Mainland China, archivists are taking a more proactive role, whereas in Hong Kong, the whole environment does not allow you to do so. The only proactive role we attempted and undertook was that we went out to the different governmental departments to acquire the records and make some enquiries. But if a public archives in Hong Kong is staffed by those archivists who are not so enthusiastic, these archivists could choose not to do all these extra work and duties. So after all, they are very passive!

To advocate the archives law – is it one of the major duties or goals of the Hong Kong Archives Society?

With the Archives Society, we try to advocate the archives law. But advocating the archives law so publicly in Hong Kong could frighten some of the members in our Society, especially those institutional members. We have membership category called institutional members in our Archives Society. Some of these institutions have good relationships and connections with the local Government. This is another reason why our Society does not advocate so publicly for the archives law in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is a rather democratic society; don't you find it ironic that the senior management of our Government is so frightened of this archives law while Mainland China already has it in place long time ago?

First of all, you are making an assumption that Hong Kong is a democratic place, but in fact it is not a democratic city. I mean, for the Hong Kong Government officials, they are not democratically elected by the general public. As a result, they do not have to answer to the people in Hong Kong. Therefore, for the Government officials, if they choose not to be accountable for, they can do that. That means if I do not have to show the evidence of what I have done, I would not show it. Because this archives law governs the behaviours and actions of the public officials, this law will also create some kind of controls over them in return. As a Government official, do you want to introduce a law that could eventually control yourself in return? Let's put it this way, for the people working in the Government, they would want to introduce a law to control you as the people, as the citizens, for example, the "Public Safety Act" or the "[Hong Kong Basic Law] Article 23"¹⁸, but not controlling themselves as

18. Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23 – for details, please see: www.basiclaw23.gov.hk/; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_Basic_Law_Article_23; www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_2.html

Government officials. The archives law is a law that could control the Governmental bodies themselves.

By comparison, it is very natural for countries like Canada, USA – those bi-party democratic countries – with those dual-party political systems to have archival law: when Party A is in control and in power, Party B is the opposition party, and they will make sure that what Party A has said and has done to be documented and recorded. And when Party A steps down and becomes the opposition, they would also want to make sure that Party B's actions are equally accountable for. That is [why] the archives law is so important and is a must. But in Hong Kong, that are no such incentives.

Why does the Mainland Chinese Government create such an archives law then, since China is not a bi-party democratic country?

This is my own personal understanding, and maybe I am wrong. The Communist Party as a totalitarian party tries to control everything, and they want to control all access and flows of information. They want to make sure that all the municipal and provincial governments will agree to create the records, so that they can control them. For them, the archives law also serves some other purposes. But for us, our interpretations and expectations of the archives law are a little bit different from them.

For our archives law, we also emphasise much more on the rights and freedom of public access to archive records to that end. Maybe in China, the law also meets the proper provision for public access. But in real practice, we do not know how liberal they are. The law can be turned to political advantages for different governmental parties. But for the Hong Kong Government, there is no need for that. I don't know if you agree with me on that or not.

Archival Education and Career Roadmap

What major activities or events did the Hong Kong Archives Society hold in the past and also plans to hold in the future?

Our Society has held two major events. One was the International Archives Day Celebration¹⁹ in Hong Kong in June 2012, and another one was the Oral History Workshop²⁰ which was held in October 2012. We also held different public seminars, public talks, with topics ranging from archives management, relations between archives and democracy, as well as the advocacy of archives law for various professionals and the general public in Hong Kong.

What would you say to those young people who want to take up a career as an archivist?

You mean to take up a career in archival work in Hong Kong? I would advise them to try to figure out another choice or maybe to take it as a second choice.

First of all, because the biggest employer for archivists is the Hong Kong Government; and you know, the Hong Kong Records Office is hiring archivists right now. They are hiring people in response to a very serious attack or comments made by the Auditor General on the archival work done by the Hong Kong Government.

The Hong Kong Auditor General published the report in 2011 attacking the Government Records Services, the Public Records Office, and all the other offices under the Government

19. For further information on International Archives Day 2012 in Hong Kong, please see: www.ica.org/?lid=13103&bid=341

20. Hong Kong: Voices and History (Oral History Seminar and Workshop). Further information available at: <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/event/20121020/hk-voices-and-history>

Records Services, criticising the deficiency, the inefficiency and the ineffectiveness of the archival work done by the Government. Actually, these were all frontal attacks on all the archival and record management within the Government Records Services. And in response to the Auditor's attack, the Government Records Services attempted to reinvent themselves by trying to do a small reform, which is why they started hiring professional archivists. And I can only say that this Auditor's attack was also our making; because during the past year, we tried to expose the general problems found in the archival operations in Hong Kong. Because of that they are hiring people. And other employers of archivists are big corporations, for example, the Hong Kong Bank, the Standard Chartered Bank, and Swire Group. They started to hire professional archivists, rather than librarians or other related professionals to manage their archives. Yes, there are some employment opportunities, but they are not enough. So, I won't encourage young people to go into the archives business.

Besides, we don't have a formal archival school in Hong Kong. We do have a library school in Hong Kong at HKU-SPACE. And HKU-SPACE is collaborating with the Charles Sturt University, Australia, offering library studies degree programmes.²¹ But we do not have an institution in Hong Kong that offers a higher degree in archival science.

Based on my understanding, you can still take archival studies as part of the MLIS curriculum at HKU-SPACE?

But there is no such a concentration or a module on archival studies in MLIS programmes in general. At HKU, they also have

21. Master of Information Studies degree programme in Hong Kong, jointly offered by Charles Sturt University, Australia, and HKU-SPACE: <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/program/master-of-info-studies>

an MLIS programme²² but they do not have such a concentration on archival studies.

Would you agree that archival work should be learned on the job rather than studying it as an academic discipline?

I agree partially of course. The practical side of learning, learning in the actual environment, is of course very important for archival work. Actually this is a major component in the curriculum of archives studies in the university programmes – I mean the practicum part. Both theory and the practical parts are equally important! If you have no other options, on-the-job training is a workable solution. Provided that there is a sufficient professional staff in the agency to train you, and provided that the professional staff have the time to train you – of course, this would be the ideal.

So what kinds of practical skills, knowledge which you think are so important that cannot be learned from a textbook or inside the classroom?

I think learning from textbook is one thing, but when you are coming to the actual environment, and when you really have to set your mind on doing it – they are actually very different. The textbook can give you all the principles; it can teach you all these techniques on how to do it like a manual. But when you have to apply them in an actual environment, there could be major differences. I would say, the actual practicum is very important. But in Hong Kong, there are no schools that could offer both theory and practical training.

22. University of Hong Kong, Master of Science in Library and Information Management (MSc[LIM]). Homepage available at: <http://web.edu.hku.hk/programme/mlim/>

What kind of archival training would you give to a fresh graduate to start with?

For the Hong Kong Government Archives, because it is not possible for us to recruit professional archivists, we recruited students with history, or political science or public administration degrees, and with a few years of research experience; this is the “entry requirement” for the junior archivists. In fact, many of our junior archivists are already master’s-degree holders. Once they are in the job, we provide in-house training for them, which would last for a minimum of two years. And within these two years, we will try to expose these trainees to every aspect of archival work from appraisal, description, reference services to arrangement, etc. These are the four major areas of archival work. This new recruit will be going through these four aspects of archival work under a mentorship. I am talking about the Hong Kong situation here. At the end of this two-year training programme, we will issue an examination for them. If they pass, we will send them overseas for further education. In the past, we would send them to either Australia or Canada for a one-year study programme, in order for them to get the professional qualification. So after they come back, they are regarded as full-fledged professionals.

To summarise, four years of first degree, two years of research training, then two years of in-house training, and then one year overseas study – so almost nine years in total. After he or she has successfully completed all the professional training and studies, one is then eligible to be promoted to the professional rank, that is the “Assistant Archivist”. This is actually the path which I went through myself.

How many of such qualified professional archivists are now working in Hong Kong?

If you are talking about the Hong Kong Government Archives, there is only one. All the others, they did not receive the formal

qualifications to work as archivists. So, they are not full-fledged. There are another two archivists working for the Legislative Council Archives instead. So, I would say there used to be four full-fledged archivists in Hong Kong. Since I am now retired, there are currently only three in total, with one of them work for the Hong Kong Government, while two of them work for the Legislative Council.

There are also archivists working for different academic libraries, but it does not seem that they need to go through the same kind of training as you just mentioned.

These are the people who call themselves or claim to be archivists, without actually going through the actual professional “path”. For librarians, it is the same. You have to have a librarian degree, that is, master’s degree in librarianship, and then some years of on-the-job experience in order to become a truly professional librarian. And in the archival work field, those three people whom I mentioned earlier are also fully-certified archivists. They are fully certified by a professional archival body in the United States.

Difficulties and Challenges

Are there major differences between the archival work being done now and the archival work done in the past, for example, during the years when you first started your career as an archivist?

Yes, there is a big difference, and all because of the onslaught of the digital world. Because of the emergence of digitised records, the emails, they are making a big difference in archival work. When I first joined the Archives, our world was paper-based, the “paper world”. After a few years, we started to feel the

differences, for example, the emails, the electronic records, the digitalisation; you know all the digital aspects of our business, this could be very frightening! As an archivist, I always say this is a “nightmare”! Up to now, with my limited exposure to this, I don’t think the international archival community has come up with a very effective solution in managing and preserving records in electronic format. It is indeed a big threat and challenge! I am lucky that I am no longer in the archives business. It really scares me, because we still haven’t found any management software that could effectively classify, dispose and preserve the archival records in the digital environment.

Such difficulties and challenges are caused by the diversity or incompatibility of different record formats or record management software/systems?

Yes, because of the format, also because of the different data structures, and because of everything. When you are talking about digitalisation in the library field, you are more concerned with the information dissemination. But in the actual archival world, dissemination and access is one thing, and preservation is another. When we are talking about preservation, we archivists are not talking about preservation for 10 years, but preservation for 100 years, and over 1,000 years. So, that part of archival work is scary!

Are you saying that as an archivist, you always have to be concerned about the problems caused by data migration and the operational software being obsolete?

It is indeed one of the problems relating to the obsolescence of record formats and data migration. But we are talking about the data transfer and also the formatting and everything. One of the problems relating to this is because technologies change so fast, and data formats became obsolete so easily. And we need to transfer data from one format to another.

Having to provide a centralised access for the records in different data formats and structures, is this one of the most difficult aspects of archival work that most modern archivists are currently facing?

For us archivists, we keep emphasising the integrity and the authenticity of the records, because archival records should serve as historical evidence. And as evidence, they have to be authentic! Such integrity cannot be tampered with. This is why archival work is different from librarianship. And we are always talking about the uniqueness of that single and particular piece of record. Because we need to preserve the authenticity and the integrity of the records, we have to have a management software that will guarantee that.

When a piece of record is being transferred to another format, you do not know whether any of the data will be lost, or will there be any metadata loss? If there is data loss, we cannot guarantee the authenticity and the integrity of the records as valid evidence. So, these are all the issues that we have to deal with. For the records to be transferred from the present-generation formats to the next- or another-generation of records, while ensuring the authenticity and integrity of all records being handled, it is definitely not that simple!

Afterthoughts

Hong Kong has always been cherished for being “Asia’s World City” – a model for government “best practice”. At the same time, the Hong Kong SAR Government persistently refuses to acknowledge the urgent need to implement an archives law. A bill was proposed that any public officer who failed to create or manage public records properly would face a maximum penalty of HK\$100,000 or twelve months in jail, and that those

who destroyed public records would face double the penalty.²³ Unfortunately, in November 2011, the motion on “Enacting an archives law” was rejected by the Hong Kong Legislative Council (Legco). As reported by Vivian Ng,

*among the 51 present Legco members, 24 voted for the motion, 1 against and 25 abstained from voting. The newly appointed Chief Secretary, Stephen Lam Sui-lung, said in the meeting that Hong Kong has already established its system for archival keeping, and that there is no urgent need for Hong Kong to enact such law. He stressed that with the existing mandatory regulations, the government has standardized its management of archives among bureaus and departments.*²⁴

Meanwhile, the Hong Kong Government publicly admitted in 2011 that, before relocating to their new headquarters, it destroyed a large quantity of its official documents, with the amount shockingly equal to three times the height of the two IFC buildings.²⁵ A conservation adviser also found in a 2002 survey that 30% of 1,600 selected government records were already in deteriorating conditions.²⁶ The archives legislation is imperative to ensure that government officials are held accountable for both their actions and decisions. “Without the archives legislation,

23. Waung, “Good Governance and Preserving History”.

24. Ng, Vivian. “Archives Law: a Missing Fundamentals in Hong Kong Governance”. *UPI Next*. 14 December 2011. Available at: <http://next.upi.com/archive/2011/12/14/Archives-Law-a-missing-fundamentals-in-Hong-Kong-governance/4851317003313/>

25. The taller of the two IFC (International Financial Centre) skyscrapers in Hong Kong. Homepage available at: www.ifc.com.hk/en/index.html. See also ARCHIVES ACTION GROUP. “Number of documents destroyed = 3 X IFC 2’s height”, at http://archivesactiongroup.org/main/?page_id=379

26. Wong, Olga. “Call for Archive Law to Protect Valuable Government Data”. *South China Morning Post*. 5 January 2013. Available at: www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1120068/call-archive-law-protect-valuable-government-data

any access rights provided by freedom of information are of little value as there is no assurance that the information sought is properly recorded, complete, reliable and readily accessible.”²⁷

After draft archives legislation was rejected, Simon Chu and the other Archives Action Group²⁸ and Hong Kong Archives Society members have not given up on pursuing this issue. On the contrary, they continued to seek support from different political parties to pressure the Hong Kong Government, as well as to arouse more public attention through public forums and university education – by organising more seminars, talks, exhibitions, workshops, or even rallying on the streets, etc. As Simon Chu puts it, “we should not be passive and pessimistic on this issue. We should not take it as a long way to go; rather, we should take it as an urgent battle to fight.”²⁹

27. Archives Action Group. “How Does Archives Legislation Work?”. Available at: http://archivesactiongroup.org/main/?page_id=2

28. Archives Action Group. Homepage available at: http://archivesactiongroup.org/main/?page_id=2

29. Ng, “Archives Law”.