

Preserving Local Documentary Heritage: Conversations with Special Library Managers and Archivists in Hong Kong

By Lo Patrick

City University of Hong Kong Press

Hong Kong

2015

344pp.

USD\$ 38.00 (hard cover)

Review DOI 10.1108/AEDS-04-2019-153

Archival and library sciences are two disciplines of knowledge unfamiliar to most Hong Kong people. In his maiden book, *Preserving Local Documentary Heritage: Conversations with Special Library Managers and Archivists in Hong Kong*, Patrick Lo, a Scholar in Library and Information Science who teaches in Japan, presents an easy-to-read introduction to the two fields through first-person accounts given by 22 practitioners and archives law campaigners in his home city.

In Lo's own words in the preface, the primary purpose of his book is "to serve as a reference guide for current students and graduates who are choosing a career in the archival science or library information (LIS) profession" (p. xv). Before going further to review this book, I wish to state that I do not belong to his group of target readers and am giving an independent view of the publication as a Journalist and frequent user of public records.

The title consists of 16 chapters, each containing the transcript of an interview preceded by a brief introduction and followed by one to several paragraphs of the author's afterthoughts.

In spite of a well-established administrative structure of the government and a mature common law system that both date back to the British colonial era, at the time of writing Hong Kong still does not have a law that governs the management of public records. This is in contrast with many other jurisdictions in the developed world. The lack of such legislation has come to the attention of the media, pressure groups and some politicians in recent years. Amid increased public calls for such a law, the government-appointed Law Reform Commission set up a sub-committee in 2013 to review the present situation of public record management and study relevant legislations in other jurisdictions, with a view to "making appropriate recommendations on possible options for reform if need be". Now five years have passed, and the commission has set a plan to announce its recommendations and launch a public consultation within 2018.

The territory has a Government Records Service (GRS) which manages selected records transferred from various governmental units and opens archives to public access through its Public Records Office. There are also very few formally trained archivists, as no local university offers any degree programme specialised in archival studies.

The first three chapters of the book present the author's conversations with three people knowledgeable of public archive management in Hong Kong, covering their experience as government's archivists or as an activist fighting for an archives law. Two of the interviewees are former senior officials in government archives – Simon Chu, a local Archivist who worked at the GRS for 22 years until his retirement as its Director in 2007, and Don Brech, a British-Australian Archivist who was brought to Hong Kong to take charge of a special five-year project as the Government Records Co-ordinator from 1987 to 1992. Both are now vocal advocates for an archives law in Hong Kong.



Another interviewee in this part of the book, William Waung, is a former Judge of the city's High Court. Despite never having worked as an Archivist, he became active in the campaign for an archives legislation after his retirement in 2008 and co-founded the Archives Action Group with Chu, Brech and others for this purpose. With his legal expertise, he initiated the drafting of an Archives Bill, which the Group rolled out in 2010 with a revised edition made in 2017.

These three interviews tell of the appalling situation of public archive preservation in Hong Kong. They also form useful materials to explain to lay readers why the proper keeping of governmental records and a relevant legislation are beyond the interests of historians and researchers alike but are vital to good governance, thus affecting all citizens in a society. In his interview in Chapter 1, Chu explains the essence of a typical archives law based on existing legislations around the world. A key message he conveys is that the absence of an archives law allows public office bearers to destroy important records without any penalty, or even not to create necessary records in the first place, which have sadly been happening in Hong Kong for years. From his experience, bureaux rarely transfer records pertaining to their policy formulation processes to the GRS, hindering the public from finding out what happened behind the government's important decisions.

A tragic example was then given by Waung in Chapter 2. In 2012, two ferries collided off Lamma Island waters in Hong Kong, killing 39 people and injuring 92. A subsequent investigation found that a law which required ferries to have children's lifejackets on board had been ignored. When asked to explain this at a public hearing, the Marine Department claimed that there was a policy of not enforcing this law on ships built before its enactment. However, the department failed to show any document on such a policy and said the practice was only passed verbally from officer to officer. Waung observed that the case highlighted a serious shortcoming in the department's record keeping.

In Chapter 3, Brech narrates the history of the development of government bodies responsible for handling archives in the colonial period of Hong Kong. As the proponent of the establishment of today's GRS, he tells the story of how the unit was set up and briefs the author on how government archives were handled before then. A highlight in the interview is his experience of spearheading a special microfilming project to make copies of the local government secretariat's records and to transfer them to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London so that Britain would be able to use the archives for monitoring Hong Kong in the 50 years after the handover of the city's sovereignty to China in 1997. Ironically, according to Brech, it remains a mystery as to why the former colonial government did not follow Britain to make an archives law because there is no record of any discussion on this issue.

Chapters 4–16 concern archiving and librarianship at academic and private institutions. Interviewees include professional and amateur archivists who run different archival platforms either as a career or simply as a hobby, and managers of special libraries and resource centres. Among them are the chief archivist of the University of Hong Kong, the oldest university in the territory; the head librarian of TVB, a free-to-air television broadcaster in Hong Kong; the founder of Gwulo.com, a website run as an open-source archive for the general public to share old photographs and other online materials about Hong Kong history; and the chief executive officer of the International Guoshu Association, which keeps a digital archive of Chinese martial arts. In these chapters, the interviewees introduce the archives, libraries or resource centres that they manage, explain how they serve the functions of the larger organisations to which they belong, and share their personal career experience.

Since the main purpose of the book is to serve as a career guide to students and graduates considering entering the professional fields of either archival management or librarianship, the personal experience of practitioners shared in the interviews may offer the target readers with some useful insights.

An advantage of the language used in the book is that it does not contain any jargons. The only exceptions occur when the interviewees use acronyms, to which the author would add footnotes. However, the presentation of the book as largely a collection of raw interview transcripts has prevented its content from being organised into coherent themes. For example, while many of the interviewees talk about their satisfaction, and at times frustration, on their jobs, it is difficult to find any link across the sentiments of these individuals.

In the preface, the author explains that he has chosen face-to-face interview as a qualitative research method so that practising archivists and librarians (in fact some of the interviewees have never been career archivists or librarians, namely David Wong, News Production Manager at TVB, David Bellis, Founder of Gwulo.com website and William Waung, a retired Judge) can express themselves in their own words. Whilst interview is a perfectly legitimate method commonly used in qualitative research, the publication could have carried much more depth and weight had the research gone beyond raw transcripts and conducted his own corroborative and analytical work with the materials obtained from the interviews.

Another cost of preserving the “naturalness” of conversations is that the presentation of the book became clumsy. It is distracting that a lot of irrelevant materials, of which appearance is perfectly normal in natural conversations, were presented to readers word by word. For example, almost three pages were spent on Brech’s response to the author’s request for him to introduce himself (pp. 50-53), including details such as in what year he got married while his professional profile could in fact be summarised in one paragraph. Transcripts can also expose an interviewer’s weaknesses in the preparation for the interviews. For example, Chu is well known in Hong Kong as a retired Director of the GRS and has spelt out his career path in detail at the beginning of the interview as requested by the author. But in the middle of the interview, the author all of a sudden asked him whether he had worked as an Archivist of the Legislative Council.

Overall, the book is a good starter for anyone interested in an introduction to the work of archivists and special librarians.

Fanny W.Y. Fung
News Features, Hong Kong Cable TV, Hong Kong