

**Why Hong Kong Needs an Archives Law –  
An Interview with Simon Chu (朱福強),  
Chairman of Hong Kong Archive Society**

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**Introduction**

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What exactly is an archives law? An archive is an accumulation of historical records of events that took place during the lifetime of an organization, preserved to document the functions of that organization. They are a repository of factual information and are necessary for helping us understand the history and identity as well as functions of that particular organization. According to Simon Chu, Chairman of the Hong Kong Archive Society, “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 that a country has a good archives system, many modern jurisdictions have an archives law. In many Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Mongolia and Macau, they all have archives legislation. Only Hong Kong is the exception. In the following interview, Simon Chu discusses his past experiences as an archivist for the Hong Kong Government, as well as the implications and benefits of introducing an archives law to Hong Kong.

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The following interview with Simon Chu (朱福強), Chairman of Hong Kong Archive Society was conducted on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2013

***Patrick LO (PL): Could you please begin this interview by first introducing yourself and your working experiences?***

Simon Chu (SC): . . . My name is Simon Chu, and I am an archivist by profession. I worked as an archivist for the [Hong Kong] Government Archive for over 22 years, until I retired in 2007. All my life, I worked as an archivist. I am currently serving as the President of the Hong Kong Archive Society<sup>1</sup>. I only became the President

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Archive Society. Homepage available at: <http://www.archives.org.hk/about.html>

about 2 years ago. . . . On top of being the President of the Archive Society, internationally, I am also the Secretary General of EASTICA<sup>2</sup>. EASTICA is the acronym for the International Council on Archives East Asian Regional Branch. The International Council on Archives<sup>3</sup> is similar to IFLA for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions<sup>4</sup> for libraries and librarian worldwide. In addition, I am the Advisor for the Asia Pacific Committee of the UNESCO<sup>5</sup> Memoir of World Programme. In fact, I have been working for the UNESCO over 15 years.

Moreover, I am teaching at the Chinese University of Hong Kong<sup>6</sup>, and at Hong Kong University, SPACE<sup>7</sup>, so I am the Adjacent Associate Professor of 2 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 heritage of Mainland China, and I am preparing them for the submission to the international register. So, basically these are all the things that I am doing at the moment.

***PL: Are you one of the founders of the Hong Kong Archive Society?***

SC: Yes, I am one of the founding members of the Archive Society in Hong Kong. . . . 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.

***PL: Did you begin your career as an archivist in Hong Kong immediately after you graduated from university? Or did you work as a teacher before becoming an archivist?***

SC: No, after I finished my studies in Canada, I taught in Canada for a while at Medicine Hat College<sup>8</sup>, a college about a 2-hour drive from Calgary. I was educated

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<sup>2</sup> EASTICA. Homepage available at: <http://www.eastica.org/>

<sup>3</sup> International Council on Archive. Homepage available at: <http://www.ica.org/3/homepage/home.html>

<sup>4</sup> IFLA. Homepage available at: <http://www.ifla.org/>

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

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

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

<sup>8</sup> Medicine Hat College. Homepage available at: <http://www.mhc.ab.ca/>

in Calgary, and I also obtained my MLIS degree in Canada. . . .

***PL: 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.***

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

***PL: Did you establish the Hong Kong Archive Society after you retired from the Hong Kong Government?***

SC: I think it was back in 1992, or 1994. It was around that time, when we founded the Hong Kong Archive Society, and I was still working as an archivist for the Hong Kong Government then.

***PL: What were the goals and purposes for founding this Hong Kong Archive Society? What are the current functions of the Hong Kong Archive Society?***

SC: The general public in Hong Kong does not have any clear concepts about archives, and what kind of work 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 carried out in both public and private organizations. Because of such wrong perceptions, people in Hong Kong think that archival work can be taken up by librarians or museum curators. This is the actual situation in Hong Kong, both then and now. It has not improved very much, although it seems to be improving, but slowly.

For the Hong Kong Archivist Society, one of our objectives is to promote, 'professionalism', i.e., 'archival professionalism'. Also, we aim to promote the awareness amongst members of the public, the importance, the values, and the uniqueness of an archive, i.e., 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 archive, i.e., to create more archival objects, more professionals, and more career opportunities, etc.

Unlike many other countries, because in Hong Kong, there is an absence of an “archives law” – which is actually very common amongst many civilized jurisdictions. In the West, as well as a majority of the Asian countries, they have this archives law. Such archives law is very general piece of legislation . . . that 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, ensuring that the government officials will have to create records to document their official transactions [resulting from] . . . their official duties.

This the law also ensures that all the created records will be professionally managed, according to the professional standards such as the ICA Standards<sup>9</sup>, the ISO Standards<sup>10</sup>... 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 archive authority for proper appraisal. This law also ensures that the public offices have no right to dispose of 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 archive for permanent upkeep.

The last provision of the archives law is that, after a certain period of closure, or custody in the archive, usually it would be take about 20 to 30 years, the archive records will have to be opened for public access. In short, the archives law covers these basic 4 provisions:

- (1) the archive records have to be created by the public officials as a result of their work, or in their official duties;
- (2) the created archive records have to be managed professionally;
- (3) the finished records have to be transferred to the archive for proper appraisal;
- (4) the records will then be transferred to the archive for permanent retention, and eventually, they have to be opened for public access.

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<sup>9</sup> International Council on Archives Committee on Descriptive Standards. Homepage available at://www.icacds.org.uk/eng/standards.htm

<sup>10</sup> International Organization for Standardization. Homepage available at: <http://www.iso.org/iso/home.html>

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 approval from the archival authority. Moreover, without the archives law, the archival records in the archive, whether they will be opened for public access is entirely . . . up to their discretion, thereby depriving Hong Kong people [of their] right 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”, and by which, citizens can ask for access to information within the government. But in Hong Kong, we do not have this archives law, and also we do not have this so-called “Freedom of Information Act”. [In its] place, we do have this so-called the “Code on Access to Information”. However the “Code on Access to information” is not a law, [it is] in fact, only a ‘code’. As a result, granting the access to information about the Government is not a legal obligation on the part of the Government. In other words, getting information from the Government is not within our legal rights!

But even this “Code on Access to Information” has to first become a law, in order to guarantee the general public the legal rights to access information from the Government. But without this archives law, the Government can always say they do not have that kind of records created in the first place. In other words, the “**archives law**”, “**the code on access**”, and “**our freedom to access information**” are all in fact closely related. These 2 laws guarantee people’s right to know and serve as the basis of democracy and of ensuring government transparency. These 2 laws are therefore the basis of our Government’s accountability. So without these 2 laws, the Government can do whatever they like. As a result, the Hong Kong Archive Society is advocating strongly for the alignments of these 2 laws!

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

SC: No, I was the archivist for the Hong Kong Government. It and the . . . Hong Kong Legislative Council are 2 different things. With reference to the Legislative Council, my 2 former colleagues in the Government Archive, because of their activities to advocate for the archives law, were not very much welcomed by the Government. So they quit! They quit the Government and joined the Legislative Council instead. In fact, one of them is actually the founder of the Legislative Council Archive.

***PL: When you are working as an archivist for Hong Kong Government, what were your major duties?***

SC: Well, the major duties were actually very routine. I am not saying that because governmental departments do not have this 'legal obligation', they do not transfer records to us. Over the years, records still get transferred from the Government, . . . but we are not getting records from major vital bureaus. I mean the records that have been transferred to the Government Archive are not from major policy-making departments or agencies within the Hong Kong Government. As you understand, the bureaus are the decision-making units, and the departments are responsible for the actual implementation. Hence, records from the bureaus are far more important than the records from the individual departments, in terms of their historical and archival values. . . . We still had some of the routine work like doing record appraisals and accessioning, which are similar to what you do as a librarian—you catalogue, advise, describe and arrange the archives for access purposes. 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 access to the Archive.

When I first joined the Hong Kong Archive during the 1980s, maybe in 1982, I was very lucky to have worked with a founding archivist. He was very keen and very enthusiastic about archival work. . . . The War [the Second Sino-Japanese War] ended in 1945, and most of the Hong Kong Government records—the pre-1940s, pre-War records—were destroyed by the Japanese Occupation during the War. . . . [W]e started building the Government Archive by going into . . . basements of different Government departments to search for those lost records or hidden records. We also started building up the Archive by making purchases of different records 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 Archive. Actually, it is very ironic to say that, in terms of the holdings, before the War, or before 1945, we have almost a complete set of records. It is because we bought the microfilms from the London Office. But then, in terms of the completeness of the Archive, after 1945 until 1997, during this period, we do not have a great number of records, documenting the Government's activities.

***PL: 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. . . . [T]here 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 archive legislation. . . . The situation after 1997 has become even worse!

***PL: How has it become worse?***

From 1945 to 1997 [during the colonial period], there were still some British colonial officials, and they were amateur historians. They knew about our [Hong Kong Government Archive] 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 . . . those British colonial officials, whom I called amateur historians, and were sympathetic about our archival work. 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. But from 1997 until now, the situation has become much worse than before [because] no important classes of records are coming in at all.

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

SC: . . . , this [record transfer] is not their primary task within their own agency. They have their own work to do, and they are all very busy. The business of minding the records is not on their agendas. . . . it is not a matter of concern for them.

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

SC: Well, they were mostly academic people.

***PL: Did people from the different departments within the Hong Kong Government also come to the Archive to ask for your services?***

SC: There were some cases, as they . . . wanted to check the records about some past policies, and if they couldn't find the records in their own agencies, and they knew "Oh, we have the archive", so 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. These were the 3 main classes of users of the Government Archive.

***PL: 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?***

SC: For my own personal contributions, . . . back in 1994, the Government was located on the mezzanine floor the Multistory Car Park [Building] located on Murray Road on Hong Kong Island. . . . And in the 1990s, the Hong Kong ICAC<sup>11</sup> wanted to expand . . . their Operation Department. The ICAC's Operation Department wanted to rent the commercial premises, but the commercial premises did not want to rent the premise to them. So the ICAC wanted to expand, and we were under them, and the Hong Kong Government decided to move us out of that Multistory Carpark Building, and 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 used to serve as a camp for the Vietnamese refugees. But after all the refugees had been expatriated, the whole commercial whole factory building became vacant. As a result, the Government 'generously' handed building over to us.

. . . [T]he environmentally hazardous ashes and waters just kept coming from these factory buildings, and I made them all known to the press, . . . telling them that "the Government has this plan of moving or exiling the Archive to Tuen Mun". As a group effort, the Royal Society of Hong Kong and some of my friends at HKU<sup>12</sup> and Chinese U<sup>13</sup> started writing to the newspapers, accusing the Government for [making] a stupid move, because . . . never in the history of archives has a government selected such a location for the documentary heritage, a site that is in the middle of industrial pollutions. So there was a public hearing afterwards, and also some public protests

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<sup>11</sup> Hong Kong Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Homepage available at: <http://www.icac.org.hk/>

<sup>12</sup> The University of Hong Kong. Homepage available at: <http://www.hku.hk/>

<sup>13</sup> The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Homepage available: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/index.html>

against the Government's move, and there were also various public accusations against the Government, [accusing it of attempting] to destroy all the records. Because if it had been a fire around that area in Tuen Mun, all the documentary heritage of Hong Kong, all the history of Hong Kong, would have been burned and turned to ashes. So after the public hearings, under pressure, the Government decided to find a more suitable location in the city for us to build a proper archive building. And the Archive now standing on Tsui Ping Road, in Kwun Tong, is an archive built for that purpose. So, this was my work and my 2 archivist colleagues . . . this was our work as a team. . . . [W]e informed the press, and we also tried to leak this information to the members of the Legislative Council, all of which led to the public hearings and press conferences. 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 archive building.

***PL: You have been saying there have always been conflicts between your work as an archivist and the Government's agendas. With such a working relationship, how did it work? Because you were employed as a civil servant, they paid you for your work, but at the same time you were constantly working against them?***

SC: Yes, your observation is correct. There were constant conflicts between my work and my Government. It was always about conflicts. But to be honest, this is very common amongst archivists, throughout the world. As an archivist, if you want to uphold professional ethics, and if you want to 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. . . . so they will make attempts to destroy them. But as an archivist, you want to say “No, it is better to keep it”. This has always been the conflict of interests.

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. So, there were many difficult years. It was difficult because I was always engaged in constant emails, discourses, fights, and debates. 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, . . . they could not get rid of me . . . . Also, 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.

***PL: I think it is kind of rare to find a person of your character to be working for the local Hong Kong Government. The Government is very bureaucratic and they would usually prefer their staff to be compliant and willing to follow protocols without asking too many questions. If my observation correct?***

SC: [Substantially]. After several years working in the civil service, I regarded myself as not suitable for the job. But my job in the Archive was very different from working in other Government agencies or departments. Because working in the Archive means the Government would leave us alone most of the time. I could do my research, do my appraisals, work on my historical research, and also do my cataloguing, making the Archive available for the future access. There was great satisfaction there. Also, as a historian, doing archival research, 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. But these conflicts and constant struggles with the Government only came a little later. Only after they tried to move us to Tuen Mun did the relationship between us begin to deteriorate gradually. But before that, I was nothing, and they did not care, as long as I was not creating any troubles.

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

SC: . . . I think the most rewarding thing was that I got to make acquaintance of a lot of archivist friends from different countries, broadening my horizon and my perceptions. And 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 amongst the public about the Archive and the importance of archival work.

***PL: Do think before 1997 [the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong] and after 1997, there is a difference in terms of attitudes towards archival work?***

SC: You mean using the 1997 as the dividing timeline? Are you referring to the general public's or the Government's attitudes?

***PL: Both. Because I can see that 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, fearing that all these things we have taken for granted in the past might be gone one day.***

SC: 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. Yes, 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. But before 1997, there was nothing. And also at the Chinese University, one can now study Hong Kong history and Hong Kong culture, and you can also find much more research being carried out surrounding various Hong Kong-related subjects. Yes, after 1997, there are much more interests in Hong Kong history, Hong Kong identity and Hong Kong local culture.

***PL: Has this enhanced awareness of local Hong Kong history and identify made your job easier as an archivist?***

SC: No, but still, as I said, people's concept of the Archive is 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.

***PL: Are there any differences in terms of archival work being carried out before 1997 and after 1997? Has the Government given you more funding, more people, and more materials to handle after 1997?***

SC: . . .T]he Government . . . is worse. I think I mentioned that before. before 1997, there were some British colonial officials, those *Gweilo*<sup>14</sup>, they were more interested in Hong Kong history. But after 1997, the local Chinese officials, the Chinese AOs [Administrative Officers], they don't read books, they don't read history, you know, they are not interested in history. After 1997, archival policy, and archival work

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<sup>14</sup> *Gweilo* – for definition, please see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gweilo>

have become worse, as far as my experience is concerned.

***PL: Are you referring to the Hong Kong SAR<sup>15</sup> Government officials or the Mainland Chinese officials from the PRC<sup>16</sup> Government?***

SC: When I say the Chinese officials, I am not talking about the Chinese officials from Mainland China, I am talking about the Chinese officials from the local Hong Kong SAR Government. You know, 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. In fact, they don't read many books. I think they don't even have a bookshelf at home. I can single out one incident as example. Before 1997, when our heads in the Colonial Government come to visit our Archive, we showed them around the Archive, they were very impressed with our holdings, especially impressed with our pre-War and early 19<sup>th</sup>-Century records. They . . . were very much interested, and spent time looking around in the Archive. But after 1997, with these Chinese Administrative Officers, these AOs, who became our heads, they also came to visit us at the Archive. As usual, we arranged the visit programme, and we showed these local Chinese officials around the Archive. During this very polite visit, I could see the difference, because they were not interested in it. 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 1843 records of land of Hong Kong, they were simply not interested in them. They just walked past everything very quickly. So, I would say, this is the major difference. . . . Maybe I exaggerated a little bit, but this is the impression I got from them. After 1997, those local Hong Kong SAR Chinese officials, they are not interested in archival work.

***PL: So did you see any differences in terms of the Archive's usage rates or access rates before 1997, and after 97?***

SC: Maybe after 1997 there are many more younger clients, and younger readers coming in. Because Hong Kong history has become a [part of the] curriculum in the local secondary schools. And there are younger students coming to the Archive, which was considered quite rare before 1997.

***PL: Do you see there are many differences between the archival work done by the***

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<sup>15</sup> SAR - Special Administrative Region

<sup>16</sup> PRC - People's Republic of China

***Hong Kong SAR Government and Mainland Chinese PRC Government? In terms of job duties and scope, are there any differences between the archival work carried out by the Hong Kong Government archivists and the archivists in Mainland China?***

SC: In Mainland China, they have an archives law. The archivists or record managers performing archival work in a government agency, and . . . the descriptive part of archival work—cataloguing and describing the records—they are the same. But in Mainland China, they have this archives law, and 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, for the Hong Kong archivists working for the local Government, and we have been talking about this for the whole afternoon, they 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. Whereas in Mainland China, archival work is very active. Archivists in Mainland China are taking a more proactive role. By comparison, in Hong Kong, you cannot take a proactive role. The whole environment in Hong Kong 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 making some enquiries. But if a public archive in Hong Kong is staffed by those archivists who are not so enthusiastic, these archivists could choose not to do all this extra work and duties. So after all, they are very passive.

***PL: To advocate the archives law—is it one of your major duties or goals of the Hong Kong Archive Society? Could you also tell me the functions of the Hong Kong Archive Society?***

SC: With the Archive 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 Archive Society. And 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.

***PL: But don't you find it ironic, because of Hong Kong is rather a democratic society and our senior management of our Government is so frightened by this archives law. Whereas for Mainland China, which is far less democratic, but***

***they already have an archives law?***

SC: Well, 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, 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"<sup>17</sup>—they want to introduce a law controlling you, and not controlling themselves as 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 and the USA, those bi-party democratic countries with dual-party political systems. When Party A is in control and is in power, and Party B is the opposition party, Party B will make sure that what Party A has said, and has done, will 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 laws is so important and is a must. But in Hong Kong, that are no such incentives.

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

SC: This is a very good question, and a very legitimate question. You know why there is such a law in China? Because in China, the Chinese Communist Party first of all, is about controlling all information. Well, at least this is my own personal understanding, and maybe I am wrong. The Communist Party as a totalitarian party, they will try 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. Of course, for them, the archives law also serves some other purposes. But for us, our

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<sup>17</sup> *Hong Kong Basic Law Article 23* – for details, please see:  
<http://www.basiclaw23.gov.hk/>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong\\_Kong\\_Basic\\_Law\\_Article\\_23](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hong_Kong_Basic_Law_Article_23)  
[http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter\\_2.html](http://www.basiclaw.gov.hk/en/basiclawtext/chapter_2.html)

interpretations and expectations of the archives law are a little bit different from them. For our archives law, we also emphasize 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 as political advantages for different governmental parties. But for the Hong Kong Government, there is noneed for that. . . .

***PL: What major activities or events did Hong Kong Archive Society hold in the past and also plans to hold in the future?***

SC: Our Society just held 2 major events recently. One was the International Archive Day Celebration<sup>18</sup> in Hong Kong in June 2012, and another one was the Oral History Workshop, 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.

***PL: To my understanding, there is no permanent home for the Hong Kong Archive Society. Is my understanding correct?***

SC: Yes. We have [no permanent home], because we cannot afford to rent premises in Hong Kong.

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

SC: You mean the young people who want 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. I know 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 this report last year in 2011, attacking the Government Records Service, the Public Office, and all the other offices under the Government Representative Offices—criticizing the deficiency, the inefficiency and the ineffectiveness of the archival work done by the Government.

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<sup>18</sup> For further information *International Archive Day 2012 in Hong Kong*, please see: <http://www.ica.org/?lid=13103&bid=341>

Actually, these were all frontal attacks on all the archival and record management within the Government record services. And in response to the Auditor's attack, the Government representative offices attempted to reinvent themselves, by trying to do a small reform, which was that they started hiring professional archivists. And I can only say that this Auditor attack was also our making, because during the past year, we tried to expose the general problems found in archival operations in Hong Kong. Because of that they are hiring people. And other employers of archivists are big corporations, such as the Hong Kong Bank, the Standard Chartered Bank, and Swire. They started to hire professional archivists, rather than librarians or other related professionals to manage their archives. Yes, there are some employment opportunities, but I still think they are not enough. So, I won't encourage young people to go into the archive 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.<sup>19</sup> But we do not have institution in Hong Kong that offers a 'higher' degree in archival science.

***PL: But based on my understanding, you can still take archival studies as part of their MLIS curriculum at HKU-SPACE?***

SC: But there is no such a concentration or a module on archival studies in MLIS programmes in general. At HKU, they also have an MLIS programme<sup>20</sup>, but they do not have such a concentration on archival studies.

***PL: But would you agree that archival work should be learned on the job rather than studying it as an academic discipline?***

SC: 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 archive 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-job training is a workable solution, provided that there is a sufficient professional staff in the agency to train you, and the professional staff has the time to train you. Of course, this would be the idea ***PL: So what kinds of***

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<sup>19</sup> Master of information studies degree programme in Hong Kong, jointly offered by Charles Sturt University, Australia, and HKU-SPACE - <http://hkuspace.hku.hk/prog/master-of-info-studies>

<sup>20</sup> University of Hong Kong, Master of Science in Library and Information Management (MSc[LIM]). Homepage available at: <http://web.edu.hku.hk/programme/mlim/>

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

SC: 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 to actually doing it, they are actually very different. For example, a 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 actually have to apply them in an actual environment, there could be major differences. So, I would say, the actual practicum is very important. But in Hong Kong, there are no schools could offer both theory and practical training.

***PL: But when you have someone who is a fresh graduate, what kind of archival training would you give to this person to start with?***

SC: At the Hong Kong Government Archive, it is not possible for us to recruit professional archivists. So 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 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 minimum 2 years. Within these 2 years, we will try to expose these trainees to every aspect of archival works: appraisal, description, reference services, and arrangement. These are the 4 major areas of archival work. This new recruit will be going through these 4 aspects of archival work under a mentorship. I am talking about the Hong Kong situation here. At the end of this 2-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. After they come back, they are regarded as full-fledged professionals. So to summarize - 4 years of first degree, 2 years of research training, then 2 years of in-house training, and then one year oversea study—altogether almost 9 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, i.e., the “Assistant Archivist”. This is actually the path which I went through myself.

***PL: So how many such qualified professional archivists are now working in Hong Kong?***

SC: How many? Are you referring about the Hong Kong Government Archive? If you are talking about the Hong Kong Government – 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 other 2 archivists, but they are not working for the Government, but working for the Legislative Council Archive instead. So, I would say there used to be 4 full-fledged archivists in Hong Kong. But since I am now retired, there are currently only 3 in total, with one of them working for the Hong Kong Government, while 2 of them working for the Legislative Council.

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

SC: This is the case I have been trying to tell you. These are the people who call themselves or claim to be archivists, without actually going through the actual professional ‘path’. For librarian, it is the same. For librarians, you have to have librarian degree, i.e., 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 3 people whom I mentioned earlier, they are also fully-certified archivists. They are fully certified by a professional archival body in the US.

***PL: Would you say there are major differences between the archival work being done now and the archival work done in the past, e.g., during the years when you first started your career as an archivist?***

SC: Oh YES, there is a big difference, and all because of the onslaught of the digital world. Because of the emergence of digitized records, the emails, they are making a big difference in archival work. When I first joined the Archive, our world was paper-based, the ‘paper world’. After few years, we started to feel the differences, e.g., the emails, the electronic records, the digitalization, etc., 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 archive business. It really scares me, because we still haven’t found any management software that could effectively classify, dispose and preserve archive records in the digital environment.

***PL: Such difficulties and challenges are caused by the diversity or incompatibility of different record formats?***

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

***PL: So, are you saying that if the original format has to become digital, and when you try to store the record in some kind of software system, this software may become obsolete in a few years. And as an archivist, you always have to be concerned about the problems caused by data migration and the operational software being obsolete?***

SC: Yes, it is indeed one of the problems relating to the obsolescence of record formats and data migration too. But we are talking about data transfer and also 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 transfer data from format to another.

***PL: And also because data structures are so different from one another. So, having to provide centralized 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?***

SC: For us archivists, we are always talking about the integrity, and the authenticity of the records. We keep emphasizing that, because archival records should serve as historical evidence. And as evidence, they have to be authentic! Such integrity cannot be tampered with. So, this is why archival work is different from librarianship. Also, 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. Because for a piece of record, when it 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. . . . [I]f 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. It is not very simple. I mean, 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!

***PL: What are your plans for the Archive Society for the next 5 years?***

SC: Well, first of all, I do not know if I will still be the President [for the Hong Kong Archive Society], because we will have a general election very soon. If I am still the President, I will of course try to take the Society another step higher, so that our Society will be more visible in the community, and try to be heard by more people in Hong Kong. So that more people will know about us. In order to achieve that, of course, we need to get more members for our Society. Also, we will organize more seminars, talks, and workshops, and we will provide free sandwiches and tea to attract more people to attend.

***PL: Thank you very much.***