

**Why is the Archives Policy Absolutely Vital for the
Archives Collection to Function?
the Lingnan University Experience**

by

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Introduction

The Lingnan Archives, established around 2010, collects the original and unique records that document the history of the Lingnan University; and its predecessor bodies created and accumulated since its foundation in 1888. Some of its contents are accessible from its webpage¹.

In this interview, Dr. Lau Chi-pang, Director of the Lingnan Archives, and also a renowned scholar of local Hong Kong history, explains the unique characteristics of the archives collection. During the discussions, Dr. Lau also shares with us the critical success factors and other obstacles faced during the implementation of this University Archives Project.

Simon Sin (SS): Could you tell me in which year the Lingnan University Archives Project was established?

Lau Chi-pang (LCP): Our [Lingnan University] Archive was established around 2010. That is rather recent and our archives policy is still not in place. Our University was established in 1967, and our collection is fairly new compared to Tong Wah Group Hospital (TWGH)² which has a history of 144 years. Some of their old documents were hand-written in black ink, which has already started to fade. This kind of old documents

¹ Lingnan University Archives – Homepage. Available at: <http://archives.ln.edu.hk/>

² Tong Wah Group Hospital – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.tungwah.org.hk>

has an urgency to get preserved before they are gone. Our Archives Collection at Lingnan University is fairly new by comparison.

Simon Sin (SS): At Lingnan University, there is a number of faculty staff within the History Department, could you tell me why the University has selected you to build such a unique archives collection? Does it have anything to do with your expertise in local history of Hong Kong?

LCP: Not exactly. The University just wanted someone, preferably a 'trained' historian to do the job. Before the University decided to launch this [Lingnan University] Archives Project in full scale, I was already working on two different projects concurrently by myself, namely the *Lingnan University Archive* and the *History of Lingnan University since 1967*. And the University was talking about these two history projects for some time on and off. Because I have already done the initial background work, and the preparations [for the above two projects], and also because I am a trained historian myself, I appeared to be the most suitable candidate to take over the project. On top of that, I am also well-known for my research and other publications in the field of local Hong Kong history.

SS: What were the original aims and objectives for setting up the Lingnan University Archives? Why did the University suddenly see the need for building an Archives Collection for documenting its history and developments?

LCP: The Lingnan Alumni under the Lingnan Education Organization (嶺南教育機構)³ has always wanted to keep records for the University, as a way to [help] them to provide a full and comprehensive account of the history and developments of the Lingnan University. The Lingnan Education Organization was founded in 1969, and its administration and management structure are in fact completely different from the one of the current Lingnan University's. In other words, it was the Lingnan Alumni who first saw the need to establish an archives collection for the University, and they were the ones who voiced this need to the Senior Management of the University.

Ever since the Guangzhou period [where Lingnan was previously (located) before relocating to Hong Kong], the alumni has a consensus that something has to be done to preserve the history of the Lingnan College. Before the Archives Collection was properly established, the University Library kept some records concerning the Lingnan College in Mainland China from the Guangzhou period. But these are not formal records, only some old publications issued by the old Lingnan College in Guangzhou, China.

SS: The existing Lingnan University Archives – what are its relations to the following?
1. its relations to the local history of the Tuen Mun District in Hong Kong; and

³ Lingnan Education Organization – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.lingnan.org.hk>

2. *its relations to the former Lingnan College (Hong Kong) – as we all understand the Lingnan College was upgraded to become the current University in 1998.*

In addition, within this archives collection, can one expect to find a large number of records documenting the above events, or detailing the gradual transition of this University?

LCP: There is not a great deal of materials relating to the local history of the Tuen Mun District within the Lingnan University Archive Collection. The Lingnan University Archive was established with the sole purpose of acquiring and keeping records of the Lingnan College/University since it was re-opened in Hong Kong in 1967. Despite such a timeline, we have also collected a small number of archival records created before 1967.

SS: Could you tell me what is the current size of the Lingnan Archives Collection? What kind natures and formats of documents could be found in this Archives Collection? In addition to the regular printed/paper documents, I wonder if one could also expect to find other 3-dimensional artifacts being kept as part of the Lingnan Archives Collection?

LCP: Our Archives Collection is still very much at an infant stage; and for this reason, it is not yet operational. In addition, the policy for transferring documents from individual departments and operational units [within the University] to the central Archives is not yet in place. The collection and other items which you saw on our current Lingnan Archives Homepage are already everything we have in our Collection. There are a small number of letters and correspondence documents. Because of its small size, this Archives Collection is actually not very suitable for public access at the moment. We also have a number of artifacts in our Archives Collection dating all the way back to 1967 [such as] several paintings done by the members of the Lingnan Alumni. Furthermore, there are also compilations of theses written by our former Lingnan students who graduated before 1967.

SS: How would this Lingnan University Archives contribute to the overall developments of the University, as well as the study and research of local history of Hong Kong?

LCP: It is hard to say how much the Lingnan Archives Collection could contribute to the overall developments of the University, as there is still no common consent amongst the individual departments and other operational units [within the University] regarding how the records should be transferred to the central archives. This University Archives Collection will certainly be most useful for the study and research of local Hong Kong history, but only in a limited sense, for the reason that Lingnan University is just one of the several local universities in Hong Kong. But you may say the Lingnan University Archives could serve as a small reflection of the history of the tertiary education system and its developments in Hong Kong.

SS: In addition to the University's Management Committee, the President and other faculty members, to what extent can the University Archivist contribute to the design and overall development of an institutional-wide archives policy?

LCP: The role of the University President is to provide full support and useful advice to the University Management Committee for the design and implementation of the University Archives Project. From the viewpoint of a professional archivist, the University President should/could work closely with the professional archivists to develop and to execute the 'agreed' institutional-wide archives policy, as well as to inform the Management Committee about the resources and manpower needed for the actual implementation of the whole Archives Project. I was assigned by the University Management Committee to serve as the Director of the Lingnan Archives to take up this University Archives Project.

Currently, there is a full-time librarian⁴ stationed at the University Library⁵, who is helping with the daily operations of this Archives Project; but she is not a professionally-trained archivist. As the Director of Lingnan Archives, I am perhaps the closest to the role of an 'Archivist' for managing this Collection. Unfortunately, the Lingnan University Archives Collection has ceased to function at the moment for various administrative reasons. With reference to the archives policy, I already mentioned earlier that the Senior Management of the University is not interested in investing too much resources and manpower to fully implement this archives policy. In fact, the former President of the University has completely ignored my repeated requests to develop a top-down institution-wide policy, which is absolutely necessary for this University Archives to function.

SS: Could you tell me the highlights of the Lingnan University Archives Collection? What are the most valuable items to be found in this collection?

LCP: We have not received many items so far. As I mentioned earlier, our Archives Collection is still under an infant stage. The most valuable items would be the records of the Management Committee meetings accumulated since the re-opening of the Lingnan College in Hong Kong in 1967. Unfortunately, many of such documents still have not been transferred to the Central Archives yet. They are still being kept in the University's Main Office, though it is almost 50 years since the former Lingnan College was re-opened in Hong Kong in 1967.

SS: Could you tell us what kinds of resources and conditions are required for establishing an archive collection for a small-scale academic institution like the Lingnan University in Hong Kong?

⁴ Sheila Cheung (Assistant Librarian, Scholarly Communication, Archives Processing and Donations, Lingnan University Library) – details available at: <http://www.library.ln.edu.hk/about/contact-us/sheila-cheung>

⁵ Lingnan University Library – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.library.ln.edu.hk/>

LCP: Please allow me to give you a brief introduction of the policies, procedures and the resources necessary for setting up an archive collection for an academic institute like Lingnan. The first thing you need is 'physical space'. The physical place of storage is often referred as an archives or repository. In other words, you have to designate a large-enough physical place for the safe keeping the archive collection, which is expected to grow continuously. For various practical and operational reasons, archives collections are often found within the library buildings.

With reference to the ways archives are different from libraries, libraries deal mostly with published materials, meaning that a single book title could have multiple copies. In addition to regular printed collection, many libraries nowadays also subscribe to a large number of titles in electronic format. Furthermore, materials in libraries could usually be taken out of the library building for circulation purposes.

Unlike other regular library resources which are always open to all users, and the library collection could be shared amongst other member libraries via interlibrary-loan services, an archive is an independent and stand-alone collection that consists of mostly unique and unpublished items. For this reason, the printed books belonging to an archive are usually rare and out-of-print titles. The ultimate goal of an archive is to collect and preserve. And because of their highly cultural, historical and irreplaceable values, restricted-access policies are usually applied to these rare book items, with the aim of avoiding loss and damages. In addition, photocopying of such materials is almost never allowed. Given their distinctive differences, limited funding and physical facilities are always the key challenges for both libraries and archives.

Since archives deal mostly with the original, rare and irreplaceable materials, if the original items are damaged or missing, they are gone forever and can never be replaced. As a result, having massive storage and long-term preservation are the most important process of maintaining the archives collection. For this reason, archival documents need to be kept in tailor-made acid-free boxes, in order to ensure that such documents would not deteriorate easily and could be preserved for a long period of time. Such tailor-made acid-free boxes could be quite expensive; and you are talking about few hundred dollars for each, depending on their size.

Another technical issue crucial for establishing an archive is the need for an environment-controlled chamber or system. In addition to selecting and acquiring the materials, another core responsibility of an archivist is to ensure that the materials are accessible over time. Environmental control and monitoring are keys to sustainable collection management in an archive. For example, careful control of temperature and relative humidity (especially for the sub-tropical climate in Hong Kong) is the most critical for preservation. Extreme and uncontrolled environmental conditions would simply speed up the deterioration of the materials. Some archives also require their shelves to be raised at certain height from floor – to prevent damage to documents from flood. Such technical issues could usually be resolved rather easily if enough resources and manpower are available.

Having said that, in addition to funding and physical space, another criteria necessary is having an archivist with the professional skills for building the archive collection, as well as the skills for preserving it. However, there are no universal standards for managing an archives collection. And from the perspective of a historian, it would be the most ideal to keep anything and everything as part of the archive, as you never know what you want to see or to research on in ten years' time. But in real practice, you need to exercise professional judgment and other criteria to select documents to the central archive. There are many different types of archives; and the three main categories are namely, governmental, non-governmental (for profit) and religious archives, etc.

SS: In addition to funding and physical space, what are the major challenges & difficulties when building the archives?

LCP: With '**money**', you can always hire more people – people with experiences and professional training to take over the archives. With '**physical space**', you can start acquiring records to build your collection. With an effective archives '**policy**', you can make it mandatory for the individual departments and operational units to start submitting records to the Central Archives on a regular basis. In other words, '**money**', '**physical space**' and '**archives policy**' are all indispensable for building an archives collection of any kind. But I would like to highlight that developing an effective archives *policy* is the thorniest of the whole Archives Project.

SS: Why is the archives policy absolutely vital for the archives collection to function?

LCP: Money and physical space are considered merely technical issues. With money, one can always 'buy' more physical space. Even with limited funding, or limited physical space, one can always start building the collection gradually on a much smaller scale. However, without a top-down institution-wide archives policy, simply nothing can be done. If the University's Senior Management can give a 'green light' to execute the archives policy, the Archives Project can start to operate at any time. The most important question is whether the University's Senior Management could come up with an effective and institution-wide archives policy to drive the whole Project forward.

Another important issue we need to consider is the nature of the archive and how it should be used amongst its users, which could be rather complicated. Public archives normally have a thirty-year policy/rule. Government documents created today can only be released to the general public thirty years from now. And in principle, the *use* of the archives may not be the same as the documents originally being intended to. For example, there is an email between you and me, and no third party is involved; and no one else is expected to see the contents of this email, or even use our email. Email is just a simple case, but for some official documents within government, or some strategic documents which are sensitive in nature, or while the event is still taking shape or not yet finished, finalized or formalized, if the public should request disclosure now, the chance of such request being granted is very unlikely. The policy rule for disclosure could also be thirty years, fifty years, seventy years or even 100 years.

SS: Why is there is thirty-year policy/rule?

LCP: I didn't find out why there is this thirty-year rule. From my experience, it seems that after thirty years most cases should have been settled. Say a government official started to work in government at his twenties, after thirty years he will be in his fifties and it is about time to retire. The disclosure of what he did at his twenties should not have much impact on him, his department or his institute after he retires. This is the minimum I think. I think similar considerations should be taken for school archives. Other more complicated issues are those that involve inter-personal relationship. In some cases, archives will only be released for public access after 100 years.

SS: Does it mean that the archives cannot be accessed while the person is still alive?

LCP: Some people may have life expectancy of 80 or even 90 years. For this reason, access to an archive may have to wait until the person passes away; or sometimes we even have to wait until their next generations have passed away. The creator may be in his twenties or thirties when he created the document. It seems not likely that he will live longer than 100 years. His children can be a few years old. So after 100 years two generations should have already passed. Provided the current and the next generation would not be affected, it would seem relatively safe to open up the collection for public access.

SS: Even without the support of a top-down, institutional-wide policy, you managed to set up an archives collection that is unique for the [Lingnan] University. Given the current successes, is there anything that you would like to do differently if you were given a chance to re-do this Project all over again?

LCP: Not much. The most important thing is to secure the funding source from the parent institute [Lingnan University] for the long-term and ongoing management of the archives collection. Ongoing funding and physical space are the major challenges faced by most librarians and archivists. Before building an archives collection, one must first discuss with their parent organization the funding and space requirements. In other words, getting the senior management to agree and commit to support the establishment of the archives on an ongoing basis is most crucial. Once getting the commitment from the senior management, the archivist may start developing a top-down institution-wide policy for building the archives collection. Even for universities that have holdings that chronicle the business of the universities, they are often done in a very casual and 'unprofessional' way – meaning that there is not always a fully trained or qualified professional to manage the archives collection. Furthermore, additional funding and manpower might not always be available. If that is the case, an immediate solution might be to deploy the existing librarian to oversee the archives collection, provided that adequate training in archival science is given to the librarian.

SS: I understand that there are many non-profit institutes in both Hong Kong and overseas that are requiring the librarian to play dual roles, i.e., to oversee the library, as well as to look after the archives collection at the same time – for the

reason of saving manpower and resources. And very often, this librarian would have very minimal or close to absolute zero training in archival science. I wonder what is your opinion in this matter?

LCP: True, that happens very often in Hong Kong. With the exception of the University of Hong Kong⁶, many local universities expect their librarians to perform dual roles. But many practicing archivists would tell you without any hesitation that archival science and librarianship are very distinct from each other. And institutionally speaking, archives and library collections should each be headed by experts/professionals in their own fields for various administrative, functional, and technical reasons.

With my knowledge in local history and social networks, I successfully initiated and founded the whole Lingnan University Archives Project. However, on an operational level we still need to have a fully qualified and professionally-trained archivist to manage the archives collection on a full-time and day-to-day basis in the long run. During the initial setup of the Lingnan Archives Project, we had to borrow examples from other local university archives and model after their successful practices and experiences. For the University Archivist, she/he must possess the professional knowledge and skills necessary for ensuring the good and proper handling of all materials belonging to this Lingnan Archives for many years to come.

In addition, for the University Archivist project management skills are equally essential for the overall planning, monitoring and delivering special goals within a timeframe and budget. These are complex tasks that might even involve convincing the Senior Management to implement an institutional-wide policy – thereby requiring individual departments within the University to send their records to this central repository regularly for archival purposes.

SS: If there is a change in the Senior Management, President or change of budget holder within the University - would they value or see the Archives differently?

LCP: Of course this would happen. You never know what kind of changes would actually take place within the senior management of the University, once a new President has been appointed. In fact, you can never foresee how much the new management would value, or see the University Archives. Whether an Archives Collection is functional depends entirely on the amount of support and funding received directly from the Senior Management. The University Archives Collection is not an item that exists within the UGC provision.⁷ The Archives Collection is not directly related to the teaching, learning or even research activities of the University. For example, as part of the curriculum, it is the duty and obligation of every new President to help every single student at the University to achieve a minimum number of 120 credits before graduation. However, building a University Archives Collection is not mandatory,

⁶ The University of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hku.hk/>

⁷ UGC (University Grant Commission of the Hong Kong (SAR) Government) – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/index.htm>

because it is simply not written as part of the University President's job description. Our last University President did not demonstrate much interest in history; for this reason, he expressed very little inclination and provided minimal support to the overall establishment of the Lingnan Archives Project, i.e., including the execution of a top-down institution-wide archives policy.

SS: Dr. Lau, is there anything else you would like to add before closing this interview?

LCP: I have nothing else to add. Thank you very much.

Dr. Lau Chi-pang – Biography

Dr. LAU Chi-Pang completed his B.A. and M.Phil. at the University of Hong Kong and received his Ph.D. from the University of Washington, Seattle, U.S.A. He is Associate Professor of History at Lingnan University, teaches Chinese history and Hong Kong history. He is concurrently Coordinator of Hong Kong and South China Historical Research Programme of the same University. He has also actively engaged in community and cultural services, holding memberships in Tuen Mun District Council, Heung Yee Kuk, Antiquities Advisory Board, Advisory Committee on Revitalisation of Historic Buildings, Town Planning Board, History Museum Advisory Panel, Lord Wilson Heritage Trust, and Municipal Services Appeals Board. A contributor to the *National Qing History*, Dr. LAU has widely published on Hong Kong history and is now Director of Hong Kong Local Record Office and Editor-in-Chief of the *Comprehensive Records of Hong Kong* project.

Photos of the Lingnan University Archives Collection:



Photo of Dr. Lau Chi-pang

