

**International Conference on Safeguarding and Increasing Access to the
Documentary Heritage of the Silk Routes of EASTICA**

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**Archival Holdings of the Government Records Service
on Trade along the Maritime Silk Routes**

**Hong Kong Report from the Government Records Service,
Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region
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Foreword

The Silk Routes represented a network of transport routes across land and sea, along which silk and many other commodities were traded between people from different regions. The Maritime Silk Routes, linking the East and West by sea, are in broad sense an integral part of this network. The highly accessible geographical location and the wide and deep harbour of Hong Kong have rendered it an ideal place for ship berthing and have set the stage for its transformation into a major entrepot since the mid-19th century. This geographical advantage is also conducive to Hong Kong's development as a port of origin, a regional hub and a connecting point for liners from different countries, spurring the development of the shipping industry and stimulating population movements and growth in merchandise trade. Besides, foreign firms, Chinese trading firms and ancillary industries such as insurance, shipping, dockyard services and warehousing were set up and went into business one after the other in Hong Kong, reinforcing its role in promoting port trade and cultural exchange.

2. As the central archives of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the Government Records Service (GRS) is committed to appraising and preserving government records having archival value for public access. It is also responsible for promoting the use and appreciation of

documentary heritage among members of the public. GRS maintains over 1.5 million titles of archival records, including files, government publications, maps and plans, photographic materials, audio-visual materials, microforms and others covering the period from 1840s to the present. The main part of the archival records in our collection originated from over 100 different government policy bureaux/departments, and the rest of them were non-government records relating to the history and development of Hong Kong donated by public organisations, private institutions and individuals.

3. To tie in with the theme of this Conference, we will draw from our archival holdings to highlight those materials relating to the themes of foreign firms and Chinese trading firms, shipping companies, ancillary trade facilities, banks and insurance companies, manufacturing industries, etc. so as to illustrate and showcase our archival records on the trade relating to the Maritime Silk Routes.

Government Publications

4. The Central Preservation Library for Government Publications of GRS holds a collection of Government Gazettes, Blue Books, Hong Kong Sessional Papers, annual reports of government departments, various ordinances and regulations, Hong Kong Hansard, etc. dated from the 1840s. Among these holdings are some government publications in the 19th century which contained ordinances on regulating port and vessels, sailing schedules, statistics on Hong Kong's external trade with other places, etc. They are important reference materials for the study of shipping and entrepot trade in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong Government Gazette¹ (from 1841 to present)

5. The Hong Kong Government Gazette, which has been published since 1841, has been used by the government for announcing to the public information such as appointments, notices of departments, ordinances, bills of

¹ Hong Kong Government Gazette has been renamed as "The Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Gazette" since 1997.

ordinances, lists of organisations, draft bills, executive orders, public statements, notices or advertisements by companies, organisations or individuals. As far as the history of shipping and entrepot trade is concerned, the Gazettes contain freight information on sailing routes operated by steam navigation companies to and from ports along the coasts of regions such as Europe, the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia since the mid-19th century, government notifications on sailing letters for merchant vessels sailing between Britain and her colonies and the Mainland issued by the Superintendency of Trade in Hong Kong, as well as Annual Returns of British Trade at the ports of Foochow (now Fuzhou), Ningpo (now Ningbo), Amoy (now Xiamen), Shanghai and other places in the Mainland. These returns contain trade information such as names of vessels, cargo tonnage and levies, tax amounts of imports and exports, types of cargoes, quantities of imported and exported commodities, values of customs declaration, information on registration and ports of departure and arrival, as well as trade statistics on the import and export quantities of raw silk yarns, tea leaves and other precious goods.

6. The government also regulated port and vessels through legislation covering the scope ranging from harbour management and vessel registration in the early years, matters concerning passenger vessels from the Mainland, to the formulation of the Merchant Shipping Ordinance later on, to name just a few. Relevant ordinances and their amendments enacted in the 19th century, including the Merchant Shipping Act in 1854, the amendment to the Merchant Shipping Ordinance in 1884 as well as an ordinance on Harbour Regulations, were also published in the Gazettes.

Administrative Reports (1879-1939)

7. Administrative Reports have documented the detailed information of various government departments including public works, public utilities, economy, business, trade, religions and customs, district administration,

transport and communication, etc. Among them, the Harbour Master's Office (later known as the Marine Department) was responsible for overseeing matters on harbour management and vessel registration, and the handling and collection of trade statistics. Annual reports of the Harbour Master's Office contained information such as the number of vessels from other countries accessing various ports of Hong Kong in each year, types and tonnage of such vessels, their share of trade in Hong Kong, registration particulars of vessels, numbers of crews and passengers of the vessels, maritime security and adjudication, data on Chinese passenger vessels and passengers as well as charts showing trends of shipping over the years. These are vital historical materials for the study of shipping, ports and the development of entrepot trade in early Hong Kong.

Blue Books (1844-1940)

8. The Blue Book was a statistical publication published annually by the government covering the themes of public facilities, population, industries, agriculture, immigration, income and expenditure, trade. It also contains data on shipping and Hong Kong's trade with other places, including the nationality of registered vessels, the numbers of vessels from Britain and other countries travelling to and from the ports in Hong Kong in each year, including Aberdeen, Cheung Chau, Deep Bay, Hung Hom, Sai Kung, Sham Shui Po, Shau Kei Wan, Stanley, Tai O, Tai Po, the Victoria Harbour, etc., the displacement tonnage in light load condition and dead weight tonnage of these vessels, and the numbers of crews.

Government Records

Shipping Register (1855-1990)

9. Following the passage of an ordinance in 1855 to ensure proper management of shipping, all vessels in Hong Kong were required to be registered and their particulars be entered into a shipping register. The register transferred by the Marine Department contains documented information on the measurements, mechanical changes, place and year of construction, owners throughout the years, etc. of the vessels registered. Also included in the information are the renowned foreign firms, steamship companies and warehouses such as Taikoo Chinese Navigation Company Limited, Jardine, Matheson & Company, Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company Limited, Hongkong, Canton & Macao Steamboat Company Limited, etc.

Official Correspondence Relating to Land Matters from the Colonial Secretary's Office (1844-1969)

10. The official correspondence relating to land matters from the Colonial Secretary's Office transferred from the Registrar General's Department comprises a collection of land-related records of high research value. It contains information on applications for land acquisition or change of land use submitted by the Jardine, Matheson & Company, Butterfield and Swire, the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, etc. to the government for setting up offices or building warehouses, piers or dockyards in Hong Kong. Examples of such records include the Jardine, Matheson & Company's application in 1894 for sustaining its holding of Marine Lot No. 52 and Inland

Lot No. 469 for commercial use, and the Butterfield and Swire's application in the 1910s for using part of the Marine Lot No. 1 in Quarry Bay for extension of the ship-building berths, etc.

Records on Legal Documents on Staff, Supply of Goods and Services and Property (1841–1928)

11. Records of documentary proof such as legal contracts are of vital importance to the conduct of trading and commercial operations. The records relating to legal documents on staff, supply of goods and services and property transferred from the Registrar General's Department contain contractual documents that were involved in the fulfilment of contractual obligations by various categories of people in the government and different organisations of Hong Kong from the 19th century to the early 20th century. Among these include the first agreement signed in 1875 between the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dock Company Limited and the government of Hong Kong for the construction of a steam launch, in which the size and engineering specifications of the proposed steamship were specified; an agreement signed in 1897 between the Post Master General and the Hong Kong, Canton and Macao Steamboat Company Limited and the Taikoo Chinese Navigation Company Limited under the Butterfield and Swire for the conveyance of letterbags and correspondence, and an agreement in 1906 between the government of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company Limited regarding arrangements for the storage of sugar at the company's godown in Kowloon, specifying the conditions of the company's arrangements for the storage of sugar.

Records on Companies (1885-1995)

12. With the ongoing establishment and development of business companies in Hong Kong, the Companies Ordinance was enacted in 1865 to regulate the incorporation, operation and winding-up of companies. Records relating to company agencies transferred from the Registrar General's Department, the Government Secretariat and Companies Registry, such as those relating to overseas companies registered under the Companies Ordinance, those relating to companies registered under the Emergency Registration of China Companies Proclamation, those relating to the winding-up of companies, and those relating to insurance companies. These records comprise minutes of meeting, correspondence, telegrams, various kinds of reports, statistics, press-cuttings, advertisements, affidavits, copies of agreements, statements of account, articles of association, etc. of registered or wound-up companies, as well as foreign firms and their subsidiaries, shipping companies, banks, insurance companies, such as those relating to the Taikoo Chinese Navigation Company Limited, China Industrial Bank of Hong Kong Limited, the British and Foreign Marine Insurance Company Limited. Such information may facilitate understanding of the development and operation of foreign firms and their subsidiaries, shipping companies, banks and insurance companies in Hong Kong.

Port and Container Terminals

13. Hong Kong's commitment to port development dated back to as early as the mid-19th century, a period in which a lot of facilities such as typhoon shelters, mooring buoys for vessels and lighthouses were provided. As our economic and trade development gathered pace in the early 20th century, the

Port Development Sub-Committee was established in Hong Kong to examine and advise on how to improve port facilities and administration. However, because of warfare and other factors, most of the recommended measures on improving port facilities and administration were not implemented. It was not until late 1960s that the government endeavoured to improve port facilities, including renewing lighthouse equipment, providing additional mooring buoys for vessels, approving the construction of piers and the improvement of cargo terminal facilities by private corporations such as the Hong Kong and Kowloon Wharf and Godown Company Limited, and preparing for the construction of the Kwai Chung Container Terminals.² The records series transferred by the Government Secretariat includes records relating to Sir David J. Owen's proposal on port development and the Port Development Sub-Committee's report of its proposal on port development. The District Planning Records Series transferred by the Planning Department and the Civil Engineering and Development Department and the Administrative and Operational Records Series transferred by the Civil Engineering Office of the Public Works Department contain records relating to the development plan on Kwai Chung Container Terminals, including proposals and layout plans.

Manufacturing Industries

14. In the 19th century, Hong Kong's industrial corporations were founded largely by a number of foreign firms including Jardine, Matheson & Company and Butterfield and Swire engaging in silk production, brick manufacturing, sugar production, rope, matches, soap and flour making, and cotton spinning,

² From Marine Department's website "History of the Port of Hong Kong and Marine Department": https://www.mardep.gov.hk/theme/port_hk/en/index.html

among others. These industrial products facilitated trade exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland and its neighbouring regions in Asia. In the mid-20th century, Hong Kong shifted its focus of development to manufacturing industries such as textiles, electronics, watches and clocks. The records series on management committees relating to trade matters transferred by the Customs and Excise Department contains information on the import and export of various kinds of industrial products, whereas the Industrial Information and Services Records Series transferred by the Trade and Industry Department contains information on the development of various Hong Kong industries such as textiles, toys, electronics, watches, sugar production and construction. Figures on the import and export trade of Hong Kong are also included in the records series.

Photographs

15. GRS has maintained a collection of more than 10 000 photographs taken since the 1840s. Documenting the cityscapes of Hong Kong in different eras, these photographs touched on diverse themes such as politics, economy, society, education, people's livelihood and urban development, serving as valuable records of the physical changes and sociological development of the territory. Some of these photographs depicted the development of Hong Kong's port and trade since the mid-19th century, showing, among others, our early development along the coast of the Victoria Harbour, the outlook of the Harbour Master's Office, buildings of foreign firms and banks such as Jardine, Matheson & Company, Butterfield and Swire, Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation and Standard Chartered Bank, steamships built in the Taikoo Dockyard, and port facilities like typhoon shelters, piers and container

ports. These photographs recorded Hong Kong's development of ports, commerce and industries from different perspectives.

Audio-visual Materials

16. GRS holds a collection of some 3 000 titles of audio-visual materials under the themes of government policies, industrial and port development, social welfare, education, people's lives and traditional customs, etc. Produced in the period from 1950s to 1980s, these audio-visual materials provided a sketch on the prevailing social and economic development in Hong Kong. Among them, some films documented scenes of various types of maritime vehicles and port facilities such as lighthouses, dockyards and container ports in the territory, the development of industries and industrial areas, and the position of Hong Kong's external trade. They also showcased the transformation of Hong Kong from a fishing port into a commercial trading port and an industrial city.

Maps and Plans

17. Around 9 000 titles of maps and plans related to Hong Kong dated from the 19th century are in GRS' holdings and they have high reference value for the study of Hong Kong's urban development. Some of the maps in the holdings recorded the changes in the shoreline along the Victoria Harbour. For example, the maps showing the shorelines of Hong Kong Island and Kowloon in 1860 and 1892 reflected the changes along the harbour of Hong Kong and the stages of reclamation in different periods of time. In particular, the locations of piers, fairways, typhoon shelters, cargo uploading and offloading areas, mooring areas and buoys along the coast of the Victoria

Harbour etc, were marked on the harbour plans. Such information helps researchers to learn about the history of the development of the harbour in Hong Kong.

Promote the appreciation and use of documentary heritage

18. GRS has been making continuous efforts to digitise its holdings in order to make them more accessible by the public. With a user-friendly interface, more people can access our digitised holdings and appreciate more of our documentary heritage. As such, GRS developed an Educational Resources Portal in its website to encourage the public to use the archival records and facilitate their access to the records. GRS also produced a variety of online resources, e.g. online exhibitions, “Image of the Month”, “Recording Hong Kong”, digital photo albums under different themes as well as about 50 “Topical Guides”. Moreover, GRS has organised various visits, seminars, workshops, thematic film shows, exhibitions and other educational activities to facilitate the public to appreciate more of the documentary heritage and use the archival holdings as research and study materials.

Conclusion

19. This report is an overview of the main holdings of GRS on trade. In light of different research themes, we can look into and explore more records. We hope that this report, as an introduction of our holdings to the experts and scholars from other archives, can deepen their understanding of our holdings. Through exchange and co-operation at different levels, we can join hands in keeping and promoting records related to the Silk Routes.

Appendix I – Brief descriptions of records series relating to trade kept in GRS

No.	Reference no. (Hong Kong Record Series (HKRS))	Title of records	Years covered	Description
1.	HKRS41	Files relating to General Administration of the Colonial/ Government Secretariat	1946-1975	Transferred from the Government Secretariat, these records contain mainly information on the formulation and implementation of government policies by the Government Secretariat and various government departments, minutes of meeting on the day-to-day administration, official correspondence, reports, statistics, etc.
2.	HKRS54	Case Files relating to winding-up of	1947-1995	Transferred from the Registrar General's

		companies		Department, these records contain mainly minutes of meetings with wound-up companies and official correspondence with them, telegrams, reports, investigation reports, statistics, press-cuttings, advertisements and affidavits, etc.
3.	HKRS58	C.S.O. Files in the Land Office	1844-1969	Transferred from the Registrar General's Department, these records contain mainly official correspondence of the Colonial Secretary's Office relating to land matters.
4.	HKRS95	Files Relating to the Voluntary Liquidation of Companies	1891-1952	Transferred from the Registrar General's Department, these records contain mainly

				<p>official correspondence with companies that wound up voluntarily, copies of contracts, annual reports, audit reports, statements of account, statistics, articles of association, other reports, advertisements, notices of appointment of liquidators, etc.</p>
5.	HKRS111	<p>Records Relating to Companies Registered under the Emergency Registration of China Companies Proclamation</p>	1888-1946	<p>Transferred from the Registrar General's Department, these records contain mainly official correspondence with a number of companies incorporated under the Hong Kong Companies Ordinance, 1932 with offices set up in the Mainland subject to Mainland regulation,</p>

				business contracts, annual reports, statements of account, statistics, articles of association, lists of shareholders, etc.
6.	HKRS113	Voluntary Liquidation of Foreign Companies Files	1946-1969	Transferred from the Registrar General's Department, these records contain mainly official correspondence with foreign-funded companies that wound up voluntarily, copies of contracts, annual reports, audit reports, statements of account, statistics, articles of association, other reports, advertisements, notices of appointment of liquidators, etc.
7.	HKRS114	Voluntary Liquidation of Company	1885-1970	Transferred from the Registrar General's

		Agencies Files		Department, these records contain mainly official correspondence with companies that wound up voluntarily, copies of contracts, annual reports, audit reports, statements of account, statistics, articles of association, other reports, etc.
8.	HKRS149	Legal Documents Relating to Staff, Supply of Goods and Services, and Property	1841-1928	Transferred from the Registrar General's Department, these records contain mainly contractual documents involved in the execution of contracts and fulfilment of obligations by various categories of people.
9	HKRS589	Insurance Company Files	1946-1986	Transferred from the Government Secretariat, these

				records contain mainly information on company operation such as annual reports, statements of account, etc. submitted by insurance companies to the government.
10	HKRS828	Shipping Register	1855-1990	Transferred from the Marine Department, these records contain mainly information on the measurements, mechanical specifications, place and year of construction, owners of the vessel registered, among others.
11	HKRS1046	Minutes and Papers Relating to Boards/Committees On Trade Control	1981-1999	Transferred from the Customs and Excise Department, these records contain agenda and minutes of

				meetings and other documents of the Textiles Advisory Board, Trade Advisory Board, etc.
12	HKRS1056	Files Relating to Industrial Information and Services	1950-1998	Transferred from the Trade and Industry Department, these records contain information and relevant press cuttings relating to various industries of Hong Kong, such as textiles, toys, electronics, watches and clocks, sugar production, construction and others; the industrial competition between Hong Kong and other places; investment in Hong Kong from other places in the world, and trade statistics of Hong

				Kong.
13	HKRS1402	Files Relating To District Planning	1947-1984	Transferred from the Planning Department, these records contain mainly proposals, layout plans and others regarding different district development plans.
14	HKRS1406	Public Files and Documents of Overseas Companies Registered under Companies Ordinance	1964-1989	Transferred from the Company Registry, these records contain mainly information on company operation such as annual reports, statements of account, etc. submitted by registered foreign-funded companies to the government.
15	HKRS1689	Files Relating to Administration and Operation of the Civil	1964-1980	Transferred from the Civil Engineering and Development

		Engineering Office of Public Works Department		Department, these records contain information on various themes in the fields such as container port development, railway, reclamation, district development.
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