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My experience working in the Hong Kong Public Records Office

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My experience working in the Hong Kong Public Records Office (PRO) has been overwhelmingly positive, opening doors to new materials and new insights on Hong Kong society and governance. I first worked at PRO as part of my doctoral research on squatter settlements in the early 1980s, in the rather incongruous setting of the Muarry Road Multi-Storey Carpark Building. Around 2004, I enjoyed the greatly improved facilities in Hong Kong Public Records Building in Kwun Tong, while taking advantage of the ample documentation relevant to my project attempting to reconstruct how squatter resettlement emerged in the 1950s and produced the remarkable public housing program that provides homes for nearly half the population.

One of the questions that arises about PRO concerns the utility of working there compared to the National Archives (TNA) in London. While I am unaware of any systematic comparison, my impression is that London has some advantages in regard to working on issues of high salience to the Colonial Office, but for those interested in questions related to “everyday life” in Hong Kong society and the more quotidian dimensions of bureaucratic administration, there are many resources in the PRO that were never copied to London. For anthropologists and social historians, then, Hong Kong is a key site, while for diplomatic historians, London would be indispensable. Ideally, of course, the researcher should if possible work in both locations for

thoroughness, but this is not always possible. In addition, the time period is an important consideration. The PRO's advantage in relation to topics related to everyday life, alas, disappears for the period before World War II because the records were essentially destroyed during the Japanese Occupation and we only possess what was sent to London (also available as microfilm copies in the PRO). The richness of Hong Kong's records as a window on the minor issues dealt with by government is only fully available for the postwar period.

My most recent archival work resulted in the publication of several articles and book chapters, but was particularly focused on writing *The Shekkipmei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rule in Hong Kong, 1950-1963* (Hong Kong University Press, 2006). I will discuss the research process for this book in order to illustrate some of the advantages of the PRO document collections for our knowledge of neglected or poorly understood dimensions of Hong Kong's past, and their implications for the present. I had always seen the beginnings of public housing as a key puzzle of Hong Kong's postwar development. How could a place that put such priority on laissez-faire and markets also be among the largest public housing providers in the world? In previous work I had concluded that the standard explanations in the literature didn't work for one reason or another. The only way to go beyond the conventional wisdom was to plunge into the archival records, and I was delighted to find adequate resources to reconstruct a complex set of dynamics and contexts, and the underlying bureaucratic mentality, that helped to explain how a continuing failure to resolve the "squatter problem" eventually generated the Squatter Resettlement Program.

The particular character of the files generated in the 1950s was a key factor in helping me to make sense of the puzzle. The standard file was compiled over time, and

consisted of documents attached to the right side of the file folder, while “minutes” annotated by those officials to whom the file circulated gradually accumulated. Sometimes they were in handwriting (creating considerable challenges, including deciding who had written what when the minutes were only initialled, sometimes using only the abbreviation for the person’s post, e.g. AS7 for Assistant Secretary 7), sometimes typed, particularly for longer commentaries. This system of annotated minutes, in which the officials with some kind of authority or interest in a particular question or controversy took turns to read and comment on new documents added to the file, is a resource of immense utility to anyone trying to understand not just what was done, but also how and why. The problem with studying government is that it can be extremely difficult to obtain accurate information about what is “really” going on as opposed to what should be going on according to the government’s own rules and procedures. When interviewing officials, the natural tendency is for them to describe their actions as simply enacting policies and rules. Government documents, similarly, are processed and usually have removed all of the contentious issues. The “elephant in the room” is ignored for what are usually very good reasons, but the problem for researchers is that often the most important issues are those that are not discussed at all. The kinds of files generated in Hong Kong in the 1950s were of great value in going beyond these limitations. Many of my most important insights were sparked by minutes where someone would note that “we can’t do that because ...” or “we can’t say that because ...” or otherwise disagreed about how to deal with some question or controversy. Essentially, the minute process allows access to the kinds of disputes that take place behind closed doors in making policy decisions, but generally disappear from the official minutes of meetings. Because they were produced in written form and generated back-and-forth commentary, they are perhaps the closest that a researcher will get to being the proverbial “fly on the wall”.

Beyond the specifics of the decisions and how they unfolded over time, the minutes also helped me to understand the culture or mentality of Hong Kong officials during that period, a set of ideas and values quite distinct from both my own and contemporary Hong Kong government culture. In making sense of the process that led to squatter resettlement and permanent multi-storey public housing, these insights into the official mind were critical in fleshing out how they could make the kinds of decisions that they did.

Another element of the files that was extremely valuable was on the right side of the folders. When official documents were being generated, often many different versions were drafted and discussed. Seeing early versions of the documents and policies provides important insights into what was disputed, and also into what could have been the policy if early drafts of particular sections had been adopted. In looking at the drafting process, the blandness of the final versions starts to take on a life and a vibrancy that was quite surprising to an anthropologist who was mostly rather sceptical about government documents and their apparent objective of putting all potential readers to sleep. I was rather startled to find myself following the debates over particular phrases and technical details with rapt attention. While the editing of government documents might have been assumed to be even more tedious than the final document itself, it often revealed the tensions, conflicts and challenges in a manner parallel to the minutes. And the minutes helped to explain what was at stake in the editorial process. These files undoubtedly help to put the blood back into what are deliberately bloodless phrases and bureaucratic formulae in most cases.

I anticipate being back at work in the PRO by 2013. At that time, the thirty year rule,

in which almost all government documents become accessible thirty years after their production, will catch up to the years in which I was conducting my ethnographic research on Hong Kong's squatter settlements and the clearance and resettlement processes. Once again, I am eagerly anticipating the promise of new insights into these dynamics. To be able to know what was being written by officials on issues that I was studying on the ground, to be able to access confidential documents that reveal insights into what was happening behind the scenes: that is the dream of any ethnographic researcher interested in governance and policy and their implementation on the ground. It requires a fair bit of patience to wait thirty years for the opportunity, but I would certainly insist that it is certainly better late than never.

Research at the Hong Kong Public Records Office

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The HKPRO has a wealth of Hong Kong government archive material available for the researcher. Many are in the form of contemporary government files which mostly, with some exceptions, date from after 1945. There is an excellent electronic search and retrieval system that allows the researcher to identify files likely to be of interest.

What researchers want to look at will, of course, depend upon their particular area of research. Contemporary government files are unlikely to be the first place researchers will wish to look. They would be more helpful if the researcher already had an understanding of the workings of government at that time. It would also help to know something of the main actors the Governors, the senior civil servants and leading unofficials of the day. These can all be gleaned from careful reading of published secondary works. Other archive sources are also useful. Some, such as Hong Kong Hansard, the verbatim account of the proceedings of the Legislative Council, are available either at the HKPRO or online at <http://www.legco.gov.hk/archive/english/archive.htm>. Others, such as Hong Kong government Annual Reports, are available at the HKPRO or in libraries.

Once the researcher has decided on a broad area of research, archived Hong Kong government files can help provide a wealth of background and fascinating detail. What

can you expect to find? You will want to look for Executive Council memoranda, internal minutes discussing policy proposals and telegrams and despatches between Hong Kong and London. These are likely to prove invaluable to an understanding of how and why government decisions were made.

But don't always expect to find neat explanations of how policy was formed. Often these don't exist. Take, for example, the origins of Hong Kong's public housing policy. You would find that the process to form the Housing Authority in 1954 was a long and sometimes tortuous one. Hong Kong government files would show you that in 1949 there were detailed discussions within government about what could or should be done to address Hong Kong's housing problem. A senior civil servant recommended that multi-storey flats should be built by a housing trust. This was not immediately acted upon but the files, however, do not tell you exactly why!

In 1950, a flurry of activity was initiated by the Governor, Grantham who seemed suddenly in a hurry to start work on policy to provide public housing. Shortly afterwards a despatch was received from London requiring him to set up a Housing Authority. Hong Kong government files won't tell you why this happened, but perusal of Colonial Office files might! Hong Kong government files can provide essential insights to the researcher but they might only tell you part of the story.

You might also find the unexpected. A file on the appointment of members to a Housing Committee in 1950, for example, (ref. no. : HKRS156-1-2528) sheds fascinating light on attitudes of civil servants, all male, towards having women members on the Committee. A 1952 file on "Government assistance towards housing of local officers" (ref. no. : HKRS156-1-11127) gives insight into a government's and the Executive

Council's rather sympathetic view on the need to provide assistance to local civil servants to build their own flats.

You can also find some useful data upon which policy decisions were based. For example, in researching the origins of the squatter resettlement policy, you will come across estimates of the numbers of squatters thought to exist in Hong Kong's urban area. These range from some 30,000 in 1948 (ref. no. : HKRS156-3-3) to over 300,000 by 1950 (ref. no. : HKRS163-1-779). You do, of course, have to judge for yourself how accurate a reflection these figures were of the actual situation on the ground!

Researching files at the HKPRO can become all engrossing! It is a fascinating experience to be able to read directly what was written at the time by the actors you are researching. You might find yourself on a fascinating trail which, you hope, will lead to some exciting discovery! You are, for a short moment, almost an observer of a moment long past! A visit to the Hong Kong Public Records Office is always to be highly anticipated...and will seldom disappoint!

Hong Kong Government Records Service and My Research on the Education History of Hong Kong (Translated from Chinese version)

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I first heard of the “Hong Kong Government Records Service” (GRS) some twenty years ago when I was working on a dissertation on Chinese school policies in postwar Hong Kong and Singapore as a fulfillment of the requirements for a doctorate degree from the Department of Education Policy Studies of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the US. In preparing the proposal, I found out to my great pleasure from the secondary literature about Hong Kong’s history that GRS possessed so rich a collection of archival materials on education, offering inspiring and helpful information to my fieldwork. Between 1994 to 1996, in the hope of gaining deeper insights into the political tug-of-war revolving around the Chinese schools, I plunged myself into a wide range of materials, including newspapers representing different political stances, documents published by Hong Kong Government (e.g. Education Department’s annual reports, reports on education policy, etc.), records of the Public Records Office in the UK (currently known as The National Archives), etc. I only started researching in archives half way through my fieldwork. GRS was then in Tuen Mun, a rather remote part in Hong Kong. I spent hours there mainly sorting through the piles of government internal records concerning education. These records proved to be remarkably conducive to my understanding of the education policy in postwar Hong Kong. I found out that:

1. these records gave insights into how the Colonial Administration evaluated and responded to various political forces at play in education – in the post-war years, a number of organizations with different political background were actively involved in education in Hong Kong as reported by the newspapers in 1950s and 1960s – I have read about these before going to GRS. As revealed by the records in the GRS collection (ref. no. : HKRS41-1-5034, HKRS41-1-7195, HKRS169-2-119, HKRS163-1-899, HKRS163-1-901, HKRS163-1-916 and HKRS163-1-923), the then Government, in response, collected a huge amount of intelligence to evaluate the local mass base of these forces and their influence in the education sector. The Government also assessed the impact of different policy options. The records kept by GRS allowed us to uncover the truth which impacted on the education policy at the time;
2. these records unveiled the varied viewpoints held by different stakeholders within the Colonial Government on education policy and the dissension among them –In postwar time, many Government institutions and departments, including Executive Council, Legislative Council, Financial Secretary, Education Department, Board of Education, Special Branch, Secretariat of Chinese Affairs and various ad hoc committees appointed by the Government, claimed to have a stake in education policy. These institutions and departments differed in view on many issues. Negotiation and compromise were necessary so that consensus could be reached and policy decision made. For example, in 1950, in face of a dire shortfall in education facilities resulting from an influx of population in Hong Kong, the Colonial Government appointed Mr N.G. Fisher, an education officer from Britain to review the funding on education. Mr. Fisher later in his report recommended the Government to provide 30,000 additional primary school places each year in the

next seven years and to introduce education tax to bring in more financial resources for education development. Yet, as revealed by the record in GRS (ref. no. : HKRS 163-1-1351), these two recommendations, though supported by the Board of Education and Director of Education, were rejected by Financial Secretary and Executive Council on the ground that the government was facing financial constraints and that “the newcomers from China may only be transient residents”. The records in GRS allowed us to track the discussion process within the Government. Without these information, we could only read the final outcome of the policy-making process from the newspapers and the official publications and the contention that preceded the consensus behind the curtains are nowhere to be found; and

3. these records recounted the exchanges between the Colonial Government and the London Administration in the making of education policy – the education policy of the Colony of Hong Kong was very much influenced by its sovereign country. Although London had already delegated power to the Colonial Government and had as far as possible refrained from stepping in any specific decisions made by its overseas territories, it still gave policy directives every now and then. For example, in 1930s, London advised its overseas territories to develop basic education in the local language rather than overemphasize on education in English language. And, after World War II, London urged its overseas territories to give priority to the development of primary education and put special emphasis on mass education. These directives had huge impact on the colonies (ref. no. : HKRS41-1-3326). In addition, Hong Kong Government had to secure the support of the authorities concerned in London before it could actually get certain education policies off the ground. For example, in 1950s, many Chinese secondary school

graduates turned to higher education institutes in Mainland China and Taiwan as the prospect for further education in the colony was dim. In light of the circumstance, the Colonial Administration intended to establish a university using Chinese as the medium of instruction. Yet, to ensure that the university would be recognised in the Commonwealth, the Government needed the green light from the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas, the office in charge of the higher education in British colony. All these details were set out neatly in the records in GRS (ref. no. : HKRS147-3-14, HKRS457-3-7 and HKRS457-3-21). The records in GRS also threw useful light to us on matters relating to schools with political background in postwar Hong Kong. At that time, to prevent causing London any diplomatic embarrassment, the Colonial Administration paid much attention to Britain's Chinese policy when dealing with these schools. Consultation must be made to the Foreign Office and the British Ambassador in Beijing every time before the Administration took action against these schools (ref. no. : HKS935-1-9). The Colonial Government must also take care to ensure that its education policy was in line with London's stance during the Cold War. In those years, London, on one hand, had to contain Beijing and Taiwan, but on the other, it had to prevent the US from expanding its influence in Hong Kong under the pretext of anti-communism. As such, it had to maintain constant communication with the Hong Kong Government to find out how best Britain could make use of certain organisations such as the British Council to enhance her cultural influence in Hong Kong (ref. no. : HKRS41-1-1017, HKRS41-1-1018 and HKRS457-3-13). The materials in GRS helped explain more about the collaboration between the Colonial Government and London and any differences arising between them during the process.

The information that I gathered during those days in GRS helped me complete my doctoral dissertation in 1999. Afterwards, I taught in Taiwan. Based on the research outcome, I wrote a book entitled *“Hegemonies Compared—State Formation and Chinese Schools Politics in Postwar Singapore and Hong Kong”* which was published in 2002 by the US publisher RoutledgeFalmer. The Chinese version of the book (《比較霸權：戰後新加坡及香港的華文學校政治》) was later published in 2008 by the Taiwan Socio Publishing Co. Ltd. In 2004, I entered the Academia Sinica as an academic research fellow. I went back to GRS several times since 2006 to look for materials for my other research projects. After 10 years of departure, I no longer go to a certain factory building in Tuen Mun where GRS used to be but instead to the newly-built Public Records Building in Tsui Ping Road, Kwun Tong. GRS had already been relocated with search room far more comfortable and spacious. The catalogue had also long been digitized. Gone were the days when one had to labor oneself to turn over the printed catalogue page by page.

The first research project that I worked on after I restarted my exploration in GRS was the “black market schools” in postwar Hong Kong. While conducting my doctoral research in mid-1990s, I noticed from the newspapers in 1950s and 1960s the presence of “black market schools” in Hong Kong. During those years, primary school places in the colony were very insufficient as the Government had no intention to promote mass education. Many parents resorted to send their children to illegal schools, i.e. schools not registered under Education Department, because private school fees were simply beyond their reach. The number of “black market schools” proliferated to more than a thousand at the end of 1950s with tens of thousands of student intakes. Some “black market schools” with political background became a particular concern for the Government. These “unlicensed schools” also provoked strong protest from those

legal private schools which found their interests under threat. Although “black market schools” was part and parcel of the education system during the time, no historian of education in Hong Kong had conducted any research on this topic. I do not want this part of Hong Kong’s education history passed unnoticed, so I gathered the relevant newspaper articles and reports during my doctoral research and prepared to conduct further research. In 2006, I found out from the records in GRS that the Registration Branch of Education Department had been keeping a watchful eye on these unlicensed schools since 1953. It encouraged the public to report the “black market schools”. It investigated the background of these illegal schools and was trying to clear them by a “carrot-and -stick” approach. The root of the problem was insufficient provision of education facilities on the part of the Government. Some colonial officials took a sympathetic stance on these schools and refused to cooperate with the Education Department in its action against the “black market schools”. We could see from the records the Colonial Government was caught in a dilemma (ref. no. : HKRS41-1-3878, HKRS163-1-2198, HKRS457-3-7 and HKRS935-1-9). After collating and analysing the data, I wrote two articles, namely “State Formation and Education: Black Market Schools in Postwar Hong Kong” (國家權力形構與教育：戰後香港黑市學校的歷史個案) and “Colonial State Entrapped—Unregistered Schools in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s” which were published in the *Journal of Sociology of Taiwan* (台灣社會學刊) (the 44th issue, pp. 197-154) in 2006 and in the *Journal of Historical Sociology* (Vol. 24, No. 3, pp. 1-24) in 2011 respectively.

In the past few years, I returned to GRS to conduct more researches on topics such as private schools in postwar Hong Kong and industrial education in Hong Kong, etc. GRS never ceases to surprise me. Its amazing holdings unearth many untold stories, challenge my preconceptions on education policy and inspire me to work on more

research topics. I look very much forward to releasing all my findings at GRS in the near future, bringing more fascinating details about the past of Hong Kong education to the readers.