

ROYAL ASIATIC  
SOCIETY

HONG KONG BRANCH



Briefing Note to members of LegCo's Panel for the Agenda Item: Code on Access  
to Information and Management of Public Records.

**"The Intrinsic Value of Preserving and Managing Government and other  
Documents and Data of Public Interest"**

The author of the present note, Professor Alain Le Pichon, is writing on behalf of the Royal Asiatic Society, (Hong Kong Branch) [RASHK] in his capacity as Vice-President, and as History professor in the English Department of the University of Paris-Sorbonne until his retirement from that institution in September 2009.

The RASHK :

- dates back over 150 years to the beginning of Hong Kong as an international place.
- It is today the principal English-speaking Historical and Cultural Societies in Hong Kong. Its membership numbers around 700.
- It organizes site visits to places of historical interest in Hong Kong and in the Region, as well as an average of two talks every month by writers, historians, and speakers sharing their knowledge and research with members.
- It is unique among the few History Societies in Hong Kong in that it publishes a substantial annual *Journal* of articles on local history, and it also sponsors local historians whose research it helps publish.

- One of the RASHK past Vice-Presidents, the Rev. Carl Smith (who died a couple of years ago) was an outstanding Hong Kong Scholar. His world famous compilation of index cards of Hong Kong families and people is now kept in the Archives of the Public Record Office. [PRO].
- The RASHK has had on-going relationship with the PRO and its recently retired Head, Mr Simon Chiu as well as with Mr Bernard Hui. The PRO keeps copies of the RASHK's Journal as well as archives the minutes of its Council meetings.
- Over the years, The RASHK has also developed relationships with the Antiquities and Monuments Office [AMO] as well as with the Antiquities Advisory Board [ABB], but it has no link with the Hong Kong Government as such.

### Alain Le Pichon

Returning to Academe in 1997 after many years as a banker, Alain Le Pichon developed familiarity with archival sources in his work as a researcher and a historian. Namely:

- He is one of the people in Hong Kong who is most familiar with the early section of the vast Jardine Matheson Archive, donated by the company to the University of Cambridge. This resulted in the British Academy commissioning him for the publication of *China Trade and Empire*, published by Oxford University Press. This is a presentation and a compilation of the letters written by the founders of the hong which many people have talked about, but few have actually read.
- Many of his articles (often written in French for French Academic journals – and hopefully some day available in English) are based on research conducted at the University of Hong Kong, using copies of 19<sup>th</sup> century official government documents kept in the University Library. The quality and abundance of records from Victorian England – as indeed from most European countries official sources – is quite remarkable.
- More recently, the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts [HKAPA] commissioned him to write the history of the Béthanie – the HKAPA second campus, restored with the help of Government grants. The book, *Béthanie and Nazareth, French Secrets from a British Colony*, is based on research conducted in Paris in the rich Archives of the French Society of Foreign Missions dating back to its foundation 350 years ago.

## General points

- All great institutions, and all great countries – at least at their time of greatness (China the first among them) - keep and have kept outstanding records of the daily decisions, and of the important conversations of members of government and on matters of State. This is a sign of good management, and of the importance they attach to the future judgment of posterity.
- In the last fifty years or so, there has been an extraordinary development in the culture of commercial and mercantile companies. In order to ascertain their identity, many among them have felt the need to search their records and commission historians to write their own history. (There are many examples of this in Hong Kong).
- History and facts are different. Facts – when they can be ascertained through the confrontation of different existing records – tell us simply what happened. The human mind, however, is never satisfied with knowing just what happened. It seeks to ascribe meaning to facts. This is what historians do. History interprets – i.e. gives meaning - to facts. At any one time, some historians are better than other. The better historian is the one who takes into account all available relevant data before interpreting them.
- In time of important societal changes, it is common for historical facts to be ascribed new meaning. History books for schools get re-written, in order to help shape a new kind of identity and a new kind of society.
- The daily records a society and a government keep are very much like a car. The car can be kept in perfect condition, and this of course requires a lot of effort and attention and management. Or it can be left to its own devices, and it will eventual break down.
- Future historians, depending on their honesty, ideology, independence, etc... can drive the car to various destinations, but if the engine has been kept in perfect running condition, it will serve the people best.
- In Hong Kong (from my experience) one of the worst disaster for records and archives – private if not public – coincided with World War II. Most papers were burnt to light fires.
- What is sometimes termed “The Dark Ages” in Europe started with the breakdown of an effective administration and the failure to keep proper records. The late Roman state disintegrated, and we had to wait for the Irish and the rebirth of monastries and of learning.

- The problems of record keeping today – both private and official – are made even more pressing and complex than they ever were because of our living in the digital age.

### Our Conclusion

- As a prudent person keeps several years of his or her important records at hand (tax returns, bank statements, etc...), well-managed companies do the same in a more thorough and sophisticated way, and world class government have a duty to behave in an exemplary way in this respect.

- It is the sincere wish of the RASHK that the Hong Kong SAR keeps all its official records for posterity, to be disclosed at appropriate times – as in most modern countries - and that it develops a set of rules agreed by all, binding on the government, its officers, and agents, clearly setting out the rules and guidelines for official Archives.

- As a cultural and scholarly interest group which publishes many valuable books on Hong Kong and South East Asia history, the RASHK represent some of the more motivated local scholars who research and write our history. Without access to the public records of the Hong Kong SAR much of our work will be at risk of losing a great deal of its credibility, and of its educational and scholarly value.

- This is the basis of the RASHK's interest in archival legislation for the Hong Kong SAR. Access to the PRO does not do the students of Hong Kong History much good if the Government's records are not deposited there on a regular basis, nor accessible to researchers and the public after the appropriate period of elapsed time, depending on their sensitivity.

- The current lack of archival legislation means that our current history is being lost for the very reason that it is not being documented. The situation is similar to what would happen in a family context if, for a number of years, no one took nor kept pictures of the kids growing up and the young ones reaching adulthood, etc... This would leave an unwelcomed gap in the family record.

- In general terms, therefore, the RASHK would recommend that archival legislation be enacted with a view to ensuring that:

- Minutes and records of all official meetings and conversations and/or correspondence – in long hand or by

email, and in any of the official languages of the Hong Kong SAR - of all senior government personnel and senior civil servants in their official capacity, be kept daily as a matter of course, - as it is in many countries - and in a form which can be viewed by future generations.

- Reasonable provision be made, agreeable to Government and Legislature, such that such records be classified according to their sensitivity, the more sensitive remaining classified for the longest period - usually thirty years - and the least sensitive being made available within the much shorter period of only a few years.

- An appropriate body of independent, responsible citizens, be appointed to review the enactment of the law from a practical point of view at periodic intervals.

- An appropriate sum be budgeted annually to enable the law take effect in practice and to remunerate the body of government servants/ Department responsible for applying the provisions of the law.

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Hong Kong, 13 May 2010.

by Alain Le Pichon.

RAS HK V.P.

