



Public Records Office

The Public Records Office (PRO) of the Government Records Service is the central repository for the permanent archives of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government. Records are held at the Hong Kong Public Records Building, which is located at 13 Tsui Ping Road, Kwun Tong, Kowloon. The Building, opened for use in June 1997, is designed, constructed and equipped throughout according to international standards specified for the preservation of archival records. Care is also taken to create a warm, comfortable and friendly environment for users to consult the PRO archival materials which serve as the collective memory and prologue of Hong Kong and its people.

Major Functions: The Public Records Office basically performs the following functions: records appraisal and accessioning; and public programme and services.

Records Appraisal and Accessioning: Appraisal and selection of records are the initial functions of the archival process. Unless relevant material of enduring value is identified and preserved, there will not be any archival collection.

In undertaking this important responsibility, the PRO ensures that all government records are carefully examined, and records of historical and long-term research value are selected and transferred to the PRO for permanent retention in a systematic and continuing manner. The office makes the records in its custody and the information they contain available for use. To achieve this, the PRO conducts research into the context in which these records were generated and used; and prepares inventories, finding aids, guides and indexes to help users trace and identify the material they need.

Over the years, the PRO has developed and implemented consistent procedures in the appraisal, transfer, arrangement and description of archival records. Under the existing records management system in the civil service, government agencies may not destroy records without consulting the PRO and all decisions relating to records disposal are well-documented.

Public Programme and Services: To inform the wider public more about the PRO holdings and services, the office organises exhibitions, seminars, workshops, visits and other educational activities. Some of these are co-organised with universities, genealogical groups, museums and other archives.

This aspect of PRO's work is especially challenging and important because, unlike libraries and museums, visits to archives are not normally a feature of one's life or education.

The PRO Holdings: Owing to extensive loss and destruction of official records during the Japanese occupation, the bulk of the PRO holdings date from the resumption of British administration in 1945. There are,

however, several significant pre-war groups or series of records which survived and these are now in the PRO custody.

Land and Court Records: Among the most important of these, from a research point of view, are several series of records relating to land matters. They include rates collection books from 1858 to 1983, Crown rent rolls from 1843 to 1960, village rent rolls from 1856 to 1960, Crown lease registers from 1846 to 1975 and surrendered title deeds dating from the mid-1840s.

The PRO also holds the Colonial Secretary's Office correspondence relating to land matters covering the period 1866 to 1940, and bonds executed by various individuals for the performance of contracts and services from 1841 to 1928.

Wartime Records: Some records of the wartime Japanese administration of Hong Kong survived and now form part of the PRO holdings. These include Japanese title deeds and memorials, house registration books, house mortgage records and miscellaneous records relating to the organisation and administration of the House Registration Office. Important non-Japanese records of this period are provisional lists of British and foreign casualties, prisoners of war and internees compiled in the month following the surrender of British Forces to the Japanese, medical records of the internment camp in Stanley, various unpublished war diaries etc.

Colonial Despatches: The loss of records during the war has been redeemed to some extent by the acquisition of microfilm copies of CO129 (despatches between the Governors of Hong Kong and the Secretaries of State for the Colonies during 1841-1951) from the Public Record Office in the United Kingdom. A list of contents of this series is available for reference in the PRO.

Private Archives: Several private institutions have transferred their records to the PRO custody, the most significant of these, from a research point of view, being the archives of St. John's Cathedral and Minutes of Meeting (1861-1970) of the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce.

The manuscript collection includes the personal papers of various individuals, such as letters of Alexander Robert Johnston (Charles Elliot's deputy and administrator of Hong Kong during Elliot's absence in China), the diary of a Hong Kong police inspector written during his internment in Stanley camp, and the papers of Sir Cecil Clementi and Admiral Sir Cecil Harcourt.

Carl Smith Collection: The Carl Smith Collection comprises over 140 000 data cards which contain information on individuals, land matters and organisations,

etc. in Hong Kong, Macau and China's coastal cities. These cards are now digitised and re-indexed. Members of the public can access them through the PRO computer system.

Photographs: In addition to documentary material, the PRO maintains a collection of about 8 000 photographs dating from the 1860s. Most of them were taken in Hong Kong and they provide a valuable record of its physical and sociological development.

The May Collection comprises approximately 630 photographs taken between 1912 and 1919, the period of Sir Henry May's governorship of Hong Kong. The photographs were presented to the PRO by one of Sir Henry's daughters, Mrs Iris Johnston. The collection includes several large panoramas of the Victoria waterfront taken in the 19th and early 20th centuries and these show the changes that have occurred over the years as a result of reclamation and construction facing the harbour.

Audio-visual Collection: The collection holds nearly 400 titles of audio-visual material collected from different sources, including Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) and the Information Services Department. The covering years of the collection dated from the mid-1950 to 1980.

The collection touches on various aspects of social and economic development in Hong Kong. The more interesting subjects and events include Hong Kong Festival, Cheung Chau Bun Festival, Dragon Boat Races, and Agriculture Show. The Government's previous work on fighting corruption, disease prevention, cleaning Hong Kong, developing new towns and the building of multi-storey housing estates are documented. Apart from the documentaries, some popular television dramas produced by RTHK in 1970's, such as *Under The Lion Rock*, are also included.

Maps and Plans: The PRO maintains two separately catalogued map collections, namely, a Miscellaneous Collection of maps and plans from official and other sources, and a collection of standard sheets published by the Survey and Mapping Office of the Lands Department.

The former consists of approximately 4 700 maps covering Hong Kong Island, Kowloon and the New Territories and includes maps drawn by Lieutenant T.B. Collinson who conducted the first full survey of Hong Kong in 1845, and a map of Chinese origin drawn around the late 1860s showing the location of Chinese customs stations in the vicinity of Hong Kong and Kowloon. The latter consists of approximately 1 500 maps.

The collection also includes floor plans and elevations of some notable early Hong Kong buildings.

Central Preservation Library for Government Publications: The Central Preservation Library for

Government Publications was established in January 2001 through reorganising the Reference Library. The Library acquires preserves, selected valuable publications and printed material of the HKSAR Government and makes them available for use. The library also holds extensive collection of Hong Kong official publications from the 1840s to the present. These include an almost complete run of the Hong Kong Government Gazette, Blue Books, Sessional Papers, annual departmental reports for both the pre-war and post-war periods, ordinances, regulations and Hong Kong Hansard. The library holds numerous general reference works, many of which have been published as a result of research conducted in the PRO.

Perhaps the most valuable and certainly the most frequently used library reference source is the newspaper collection, consisting of 15 local English-language newspapers. Copies of one of Hong Kong's first newspapers, *the Friend of China*, are held as well as runs of *the China Mail*, *Hong Kong Daily Press*, *Hong Kong Telegraph*, *Hong Kong Weekly Press*, *Hong Kong Register*, *Hong Kong Observer*, *Hong Kong News* (the newspaper published by the Japanese during the occupation), and the *South China Morning Post*. With the exception of a few issues for the period leading up to the fall of Hong Kong in December 1941, holdings of the latter newspaper are complete from 1903 to 1977.

The library also keeps seven Chinese-language local newspapers: the *Hsun Huan Jih Pao*, the *Yau Sho Wai Po*, the *Kung Shang Jih Pao*, the *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, the *Wah Kiu Man Po*, the *Hwa Shiang Pao*, the *Hwa Shiang Pao (evening edition)*.

Several specialised press cuttings files are held, one example being selected items relating to public works for the period 1945 to 1974.

Services: The PRO serves people from all walks of life with a variety of interests and needs. It advises and provides information and material for genealogists, journalists, government officials, lawyers, teachers, students, and visitors engaged in activities such as producing films and newspapers articles, identifying claims, researching judicial and administrative issues, tracing family and organisation history, preparing school projects and writing term papers.

Visitors can call at the PRO search rooms on the first floor, Hong Kong Public Records Building. The PRO staff and computer system will assist them in finding out the material they need. Public requests for access to official records in the PRO are dealt with in accordance with the Public Records (Access) Rules, 1996. Reprographic and records certification services are also available. In addition, the PRO will conduct simple research for overseas inquirers.

Enquiries can be made on tel. 2195 7700, fax 2804 6413, or through e-mail at: proinfo@grs.gov.hk.