

A LIGHT-BULB MOMENT

A few years ago I began a personal project researching the history of my Philippine family. During the course of their story my grandfather spent some time in Hong Kong with General Emilio Aguinaldo and his government-in-exile. I found rich sources of information in the Spanish archives in the Philippines. I was also able to trace the location of my grandparents home in Hong Kong and the birth of two uncles here through the archival records kept since the 19th century. It was most valuable to my research and personally gratifying .

While I was writing my manuscript I came across a brief article in the South China Morning Post, reporting that Hong Kong has no legislation to protect its documentary history. I read this with disbelief – Hong Kong, after all, is a well developed sophisticated city, with good access to information. Upon investigating the situation further I found that this was indeed true. Prior to 1997 archives were kept according to British guidelines but that there was no Hong Kong legislation. Today the Hong Kong Government Records Service is responsible for the selection and preservation of the government's records and valuable documents. Yet, there is no legislation to ensure this – there are merely “mandatory guidelines” which have no legal sanctions and do not have the force of law. The number of records submitted to the GRS has been declining, and most recently, during the move of the Government offices to the new premises, many have been destroyed. Much of our valuable and irreplaceable documentary heritage since 1997 may have been lost.

Hong Kong's most valuable legacy is that it is a society ruled by law. It is essential for future historians both local and international, and for Hong Kong citizens to know that their documentary heritage, which forms the bulk of our written cultural heritage and identity, are protected by law.

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November 4, 2011