

## **Then & now: off the record" by Jason Wordie**

"Last month, outgoing ombudsman Alan Lai Nin shed some light on the extent to which Hong Kong's archives are inadequate. According to an investigation initiated by Lai, not only are government departments failing to adhere to the few regulations that do exist, they are also preventing their records from being scrutinised by the public.

What is the value of maintaining an archive in the first place, people sometimes wonder. All those mounds of dusty old papers take up space that could be used for more constructive purposes and provide interest only to cranky misfits more interested in the past than the present. Or so the critics of archives allege.

This facile dismissal ignores what is, possibly, the single most important aspect of an archive, and one that is especially important in graft-plagued Hong Kong. Properly maintained, broad-based, publicly accessible archives offer a key protection for civil society against top-level venality. Accurately kept paper trails can conclusively link key individuals with past wrongdoing - and lead to prosecutions for corruption.

Private archives and corporate-funded "heritage projects" exist in Hong Kong. These have evolved from a variety of generally well-intended reasons, such as a wish to respond to greater levels of public awareness for, and appreciation of, the past. Enabling corporations to be seen to be "good corporate citizens" is also part of the overall motivation.

But like other functions originally established to serve broad public needs (water supplies and correctional services spring to mind), archive "privatisation" frequently harms, rather than helps, the overall public good. When records that, for transparency reasons, should be held in the public domain are kept private, ownership and control of the past is easier to achieve. If almost the only available record of a specific event or set of circumstances has been privatised (or destroyed), then it is easy to deny that the events even happened.

Proper records also guard against academic falsehood. If the pursuit of truth is the ultimate aim of higher study (as opposed to shinnying up greasy, ivory tower career poles) then its sources must be rigorously guarded. Without a variety of properly referenced, independently verifiable and cross-checkable sources - we're back to archives again - everything in history and contemporary life just becomes a standpoint, with each individual perspective of no more value or validity than any other.

Proper record keeping guards against spin and other vested-interest versions of past events. They also allow the public to ascertain the truth. This is especially important when dishonesty and venality in public life is widespread, as has been the case in Hong Kong. And when there is a reasonable suspicion that key information has been sequestered or destroyed, conspiracy theories flourish. Wholesale official destruction of public records in recent years has also hampered the work of the Independent Commission Against Corruption; if key material doesn't exist (any more), and certain paper trails have been destroyed for "record-keeping purposes", then putting together a properly documented case to either comprehensively prosecute those already charged or bring new cases against other top officials for whom a reasonable suspicion of misconduct in public office exists, then the interests of justice are not best served, to say the least.

In that sense, the deliberate recent destruction of records - and long-term stalling on proper archive legislation - can be reasonably seen as perverting or obstructing the course of justice. Perhaps this is another allegation to add to the eventual charge sheets of certain officials."