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Interview with the Curator of the Po Leung Kuk Museum

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Introduction

Founded in 1878, the Po Leung Kuk (PLK) aimed at protecting basic welfare and social justice of children and women in Hong Kong. Having witnessed the history of Hong Kong's economic and sociocultural growths in the past centuries, PLK's functions and services have now been extended to education, child care, elderly care, and many other aspects of public services. The Po Leung Kuk Museum currently maintains a large number of archives and artifacts with high historical and cultural values. In the following interview, Rosana Leung, Curator of Po Leung Kuk Museum explains the historical background, importance and uniqueness of the PLK museum archives collection, as well as sharing with the readers her unique management experience in archival science in the museum context.

Could you please give a brief account of the history of the Po Leung Kuk (PLK)?

In mid-19th century, kidnapping and human trafficking of women and children was a rampant crime in Hong Kong. Women were frequently sold as domestic servants or prostitutes, and children were sold as adopted sons and girls. These victims would then be shipped to Southeast Asia or farther location. As the trend of human trafficking grew unstoppable, several Chinese merchants resided in Hong Kong from the county of Dongguan (東莞) petitioned to the Governor of Hong Kong, Sir John Pope Hennessey, requesting the adoption of anti-kidnapping policy in November 1878. The motive behind these Dongguan merchants was that many of the victims of kidnapping cases were from their hometown, thus the merchants were eager to protect the welfare of their own
people. After negotiations with the Government and the Colonial Office, Po Leung Kuk\(^1\) was established in Hong Kong as a charitable organisation dedicated to anti-kidnapping work and provision of shelter to victims of kidnappers.

Throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, the PLK’s mission evolved from assisting the kidnapped into a full-fledged charity which now provide a wide spectrum of services, from social, educational, recreational, cultural to medical.

**When was the PLK Museum Archives established?**

The history of Po Leung Kuk Museum can be traced back to 1979. Encouraged by Dr. Elizabeth SIN Yuk Yee, the Kuk began to organise an archive for systematic storage and compilation of documents and information. In 1984, the Po Leung Kuk Archives was formally established and received scholars from the US and China. In 1998, PLK Archives was expanded and opened to the public. In 2002, the Archives was once again expanded and was renamed as Po Leung Kuk Museum. Since then, it has been providing thematic exhibitions to promote public understanding in our history and services.

**What were the original aims and purposes for establishing the PLK Archives?**

The Po Leung Kuk Museum is responsible for the acquisition, conservation and research of historical documents and artifacts related to Po Leung Kuk. As a museum, it also provides general and thematic exhibitions of the Kuk’s history in order to foster a better appreciation of the Kuk’s development and relationship with the history of Hong Kong.

**What is the current size, format, contents and nature of the PLK Archives?**

The Po Leung Kuk Museum houses a great variety of documents and collections, ranging from records, ledgers, statements and director meeting minutes to plaques, awards, trophies, certificates and other historically significant items related to the Kuk’s history. Currently, the Museum aims to enrich its wealthy collection in order to provide a holistic perspective of the Kuk’s history in all historical periods.

**How is the PLK Archives collection related to the history of Hong Kong?**

Po Leung Kuk is a renowned charity in Hong Kong and enjoys a history that has spanned nearly the entire colonial period of Hong Kong. Committed to the suppression of

\(^1\) Po Leung Kuk – Homepage. Available at: http://www.poleungkuk.org.hk/en/
kidnappers and care of the kidnapped, Po Leung Kuk has accumulated a huge amount of data regarding migrant pattern, human trafficking, the mui tsai (妹仔)\(^2\) issue and connections between prominent Chinese leaders and the colonial government. These data may reflect the intertwined relationship between the Kuk and the Hong Kong society, as many of the Kuk’s services, such as nurseries and elderly homes and centres, were created to respond social demands of the time. Such records are precious in learning the social history of Hong Kong, and scholars may take full advantage of our well-organised, rich collections for their related research in Hong Kong history.

For the general public, the Museum frequently organises thematic exhibitions inspired and referenced from its archives to provide unique and interesting experience in learning the history of Hong Kong’s development from a small port city into a modern metropolis. Multiple workshops, and seminars were also held each year to promote appreciation in conservation of cultural heritage.

**What kind of skills and knowledge are needed for managing the PLK Archives?**

Of all knowledge and skills, we first of all valued most importantly the employee’s interest in the history of Po Leung Kuk. PLK’s history, compared to other general history in Hong Kong, is a narrow topic. In order to be motivated into learning, digging into, and researching our huge archives, the staff must possess a serious interest, and solid familiarity in the history of Hong Kong in order to contribute to our conservation and preservation effort. While our Museum is not as large as government-funded museums, the Museum remains competitive through its unique collections, and contributes a crucial element in the whole picture of Hong Kong’s history.

**What are the major challenges currently faced by the PLK Archives Manager and staff?**

Unrealised by the majority of the public, the PLK was and still is an enormous player in shaping the social history of Hong Kong. Thus, it has been accumulating a great amount of documents and records that are invaluable in learning the past of Hong Kong. For our management, it is always a challenging task to introduce an indefinite amount of our history to the public with a definite amount of manpower and time. Such difficulty is not only a problem for small museums but also for large museums across the world, and

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\(^2\) *mui tsai (妹仔)* "little sister" in Cantonese: a South China practice whereby young girls would be acquired by a family to work for them and later married off.
our Museum shall continue to overcome such issues through experience, and creativity in order to connect more visitors across the globe.

**Who are the majority users of the PLK Archives?**

The Museum has been open to the public since 1998, and has received more than 123,200 visitors (by August 2015). Many of the visitors came from local organisations and institutes, such as primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, universities, elderly care centers and other social units commonly found in Hong Kong. Guests such as corporate representatives, government officials and foreign dignitaries are also frequent sights in the Museum. On the other hand, the Museum has been providing information access to scholars across the world since 1984, such as those from Australia, Japan, Singapore and the United States.

**What kind of reference questions do you usually receive at the PLK Archives?**

As the development of Po Leung Kuk is closely related to the social history of Hong Kong and the history of Chinese migrant workers, scholars frequently accessed information related to the history and records of admitted women and children from the late 19th century to the interwar period. Many scholars wrote their articles and books on the lives of *mui tsai*, ordinary women and migrants with reference to Kuk records. Some researchers also chose to access our archives in order to analyse the relationship between wealthy and prominent Chinese merchants and the colonial government between late 19th century and early 20th century, mostly due to the fact that Po Leung Kuk directors enjoyed great prestige and social respect in the aforementioned period. In addition, the general public is greatly interested in the Kuk’s adoption services and the operation of homes for children, while they remain curious about the overall history of the Kuk.