

香港歷史檔案介紹（二）

How Archives Are Arranged and Described in the Public Records Office of Hong Kong

Public Records Office, Hong Kong

An archives must have control over its holdings both for its own internal good management and so that the records will be available for use. The work by which the necessary degree of control is effected and recorded is known as arrangement and description. It is the heart of the archivist's work and potentially one of the most stimulating of archival activities.

What is Arrangement

Arrangement of historical records is defined as:

The process and results of organizing archives, records and manuscripts in accordance with accepted archival principles, particularly provenance, at as many as necessary of the following level: repository, records group or sub-group(s), records series, and file unit. (William Rofes, ed., "A Basic Glossary for Archivist, Manuscript Curators and Records Manager," *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974), p.418.)

The Principle of "Provenance"

Two fundamental principles have been adopted by archivists to guide arrangement work. They both are based on the assumption that the archivist should retain the natural order of the records.

The first principle is "provenance" or, as it is sometimes referred to using the French counterpart, *respect des fonds*. As the term "provenance" implies, this principle relates to the origin of records. It holds that records of a given creator should not be intermingled with those of other creators, or more simply, that records should be kept to the person, organization, office, or administrative entity that created them. We will illustrate this point later by referring to the PRO system.

At first consideration, provenance appears little more than common sense, but is actually a powerful guiding principle. For one thing, it rules out any desire to pull records within a group apart and reorganize them according to subject or other headings as in the method

practised by librarians.

Reliance on provenance assumes that records result from organized, purposeful activity, and that they are created organically and have a relationship to one another. It assumes that important information can be derived from examining the records in context of their creation and their relationship.

The Principle of "Original Order"

The second principle is that of "original order", which holds that records should be kept in the order in which they were created or that was imposed on them by the person, organization, or institution that created or assembled them.

Presumably the original order documents the sequential development of organic activity, reveals organizational approaches, shows administrative process, and in general documents relationship. Maintaining the original order allows the user to get at and use the information in the order it was created and in a sense to see the story unfold as the records are perused in order.

The original order principle assumes that the archivist is simply taking advantage of the originator's self-interested need to organize and maintain records in some logical order reflecting the progress of activity and facilitating retrieval. Individual documents "achieve status as records through linkage with the entity which created or maintained them as records." If the link is broken, the value and reliability of the records are diminished. (Sharon Thibodeau, "Archival Arrangement and Description," in James Bradsher, ed., *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, Chicago University Press, 1989, p.68).

What is Description

Description is the process of recording standardized information about the arrangement, contents

and formats of the records so that persons reading the descriptions will be able to determine whether or not the records are relevant to their research.

Arrangement and description are interdependent activities and are normally undertaken together.

How Archives are Arranged and Described in PRO

Records accepted for permanent retention in PRO will be accessioned by the Archives Administration Section where they are arranged according to the principles of “provenance” and “original order” discussed above and are described in such a way as to enable the easiest and most complete access to them.

Records transferred to PRO are first examined to distinguish the various records series into which they fall. Records series is defined as:

“a group of records items that has been brought together because they (a) arise from a specific activity or purpose, (b) are created and arranged in accordance with a particular classification system, and (c) maintained together as a unit because they share particular format.”

Each series is then allocated what is termed a Hong Kong Records Series Number (HKRS Number). Records series are often transferred to PRO in installments (each installment of the same series is identified by a different “Deposit Number”, assigned consecutively to each installment); but whenever they are received, and from whatever source, the records of any one series will always be allocated the same HKRS number. Thus, if the HKRS Number 59 is allocated to the first installment of Crown Rent Rolls received, all subsequent installments of Crown Rent Rolls will carry the same HKRS number 59, but with different Deposit Number, of course.

Once a number has been allotted to a records series, details of the series (including the series number, series title, date coverage and quantity of the records contained in the series) are recorded in an Inventory of Hong Kong Records Series.

The series entries in the Inventory are grouped under the department or agency which created or

transferred them.

The Inventory of Hong Kong Records Series is the primary guide to PRO’s current holdings. By reference to it, the researcher may note several HKRS which, from their titles, offices of origin, and date coverages, appear likely to contain materials relevant to his study.

His next step is to consult the accession documentation relating to the series selected by him for further investigation. This documentation consists, principally, of a Series Identification Sheet and a Records Transfer List.

The Series Identification Sheet (S.I. Sheet) contains particulars of the origin, chronological coverage, quantity, etc. of the material in the series, a general description of its subject matter, method of arrangement and control and notes on the history of the series before and after its transfer to PRO.

Where necessary the S.I. Sheet are supplemented by notes on the administrative history of the agency or agencies which created the series, or on the function which the series was designed to serve.

The Records Transfer List forms a supplement to the S.I. Sheet and consists of a list of the discreet items (files, dossiers, volumes, etc.) contained in the series, recording their individual titles, dates coverages and agency registration numbers (if any). The Lists are each identified by a Deposit Number and the items listed are serially numbered throughout.

Since the combination of the HKRS number and the Deposit and Serial numbers pertaining to any document is unique to it, this combination is all that is required for the retrieval of the item and for its citation in a written work.

Postscript

The Public Records Office is in the process of having its archives control system automated. By current progress, the whole retrieval, circulation, tracking and reporting system will be installed towards the end of July 1997.