

華南研究文獻叢刊（第一輯）

「許舒博士所藏土地及商業文書」總序

許舒 (James Hayes)

Historians of the present day are generally agreed that there is a need to understand society from the 'grass-roots', whether it be urban or rural, and that this must be done both through direct observation (wherever possible) or by the close scrutiny of documents produced within that society.

In Hong Kong, we have been able to contribute towards this kind of research in two ways. The first is well-known. The New Territories have for many years given scholars an opportunity for fieldwork, and village studies; and varying in availability, documentation of different kinds may also be found, to support and amplify fieldwork.

The second contribution is much less appreciated. Because urban Hong Kong was a city of migrants, most of them from different parts of Guangdong, historical materials relating to the province turn up from time to time in the city's second hand and curio market. These originally belonged to deceased businessmen who made good in Hong Kong but also maintained links to their home areas, using their profits to invest in property or businesses there, on their own or their parent lineage's behalf.

Along with account books, bills of exchange, remittance papers, minute books and other business materials, there can often be found personal and family papers such as horoscopes, marriage documents, books on geomancy, and fortune telling, papers about ancestors' graves, family trusts, and legal problems, and other matters. There are also land deeds of sale, purchase and mortgage showing family investments and other transactions concerning shops, houses, fields, and other landed property. Genealogies, religious materials, manuals for writing letters and popular and classical literature are also included.

One can say, therefore, with some truth, that the work and interests of businessmen strongly reflected the political and social culture of China of their day.¹ But, as with documents relating to the village, it is rare for a large collection of business papers to be preserved intact. Where one such is preserved – and fortunately this happens from time to time – the papers in question can shed light on practices in the commercial sector, helping us to understand the structure and management practices of the Chinese family firm, and the Chinese business world.

Urban and rural collections may constitute the whole or a portion of the holdings of a village lineage, family, or business firm at a given time, or they may comprise a set of documents that have been bundled together because they have occupied some place of special importance. In regard to land deeds, the value of the collection is enhanced by the inclusion of papers recording successive transactions in the same properties through the customary practice of handing on earlier deeds to the new owners.

As in archaeology, where a find would lose most of its significance were it to be looked at without any knowledge of the context in which it was discovered, a document found within such a collection should be examined in relation to the other documents, and also to whatever else is known about its owners. What we want is not only the information to be obtained from single documents – such as how land was mortgaged, bought or sold, the complexities of multiple ownership, and sometimes also tenancy arrangements – but the history of the family or the institution that owned them, leading (if we are fortunate in finding related information) to a fuller knowledge of the socio-

political and economic situation in and of its home area. In regard to business papers, inter-connections are clearly of crucial importance to comprehension of the range and detail of commercial activities.

Needless to say, collecting is a wholly unpredictable business! One never knows what one may find. Also, it is next to impossible to know what may be hidden inside the bundles of papers, in the limited time available for scanning at the dealer's shop or stall. But takes good fortune to come across the larger collections, and in the way these papers are made available for sale, more often than not, we know nothing about their owners. Indeed, we cannot be sure we have got all the documents that belong to any one collection.²

Despite likely gaps or missing materials, there has yet been enough to encourage Professor Takeshi Hamashita of the University of Tokyo, and more recently Professor Chi-Cheung Choi and his colleagues at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, to promote research into individual collections and to publish and circulate their content. Furthermore, additional documents, resulting from continued collecting in Hong Kong over the past ten years, have now been deposited by me with Professor Choi. These, too, will be made available for research purposes, possibly leading to other publications. It is hoped that when other scholars know of these collections, they may contribute by conducting detailed enquiries in the localities that they bear on, and perhaps find and make known other, related papers which may come to their attention.

Eventually, we shall be going beyond the deeds, the places and the families concerned to understand local history and commercial enterprise. And when we have more of that, perhaps we shall understand the development of Chinese society a little more, in all its marvellous richness and diversity.

In this ongoing task, I have been no more than a provider, spurred on by the interest and excite-

ment of the chase. It has been immensely gratifying to know that my collecting is being followed up with such dedication and enthusiasm. I wish here to record my appreciation of the work that has been done to date, and to congratulate all those concerned with the research and production of the successive volumes of this ongoing series.

JAMES HAYES
Sydney / Hong Kong,
February 2002.

¹ See my article "Collecting Business Papers of Chinese Enterprises in Hong Kong" at Alan Birch, Y.C. Jao and Elizabeth Sinn (eds) *Research Materials for Hong Kong Studies* (Hong Kong, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1984), pp.51-52.

² Given the methods by which it is recovered from old houses by street collectors and taken to second hand curio dealers, it is rare for large collections to be preserved intact. Scrap collectors and dealers were part of the business community even in Hong Kong's earlier years. For reasons that are still obscure they were for long known as "Marine hawkers" and "Marine stores". Today's collectors are usually older men and women, poorly educated or even illiterate, who make a meager living by hunting around for saleable material of all kinds... The scrap collectors have their own methods. Where papers are concerned and their commercial value is uncertain, the scrap collectors do not immediately take all the papers available, but take a batch at a time, returning only if they have sold certain items. Sometimes several collectors buy from the same source. In any case they usually distribute saleable items among shops and stalls, knowing that one has a market for this item and the other for something else. These methods of acquisition and disposal, and the very limited space available for storage and holding available to any of these collectors and dealers, ensure muddle and loss (taken from the article cited in Note 1 above).