

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HONG KONG MEMORY PROJECT

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The Hong Kong Memory Project (HKMP) was initiated by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government in 2006 in response to the call from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) Memory of the World Programme. While the Memory of the World Programme embodies the spirit that "the world's documentary heritage belongs to all, should be fully preserved and protected for all" to "safeguard against collective amnesia", the HKMP aims to "enlighten people" about their rich culture, thus "strengthening the sense of belonging and cohesiveness of the Hong Kong people and an appreciation in Hong Kong's historical and cultural heritage, enhancing cultural literacy which will be beneficial for Hong Kong to becoming an international cultural metropolis in the long term." (HKSAR 2007). The project was highlighted in the Chief Executive's Policy Address of 2006 as one of the new initiatives in the policy of heritage preservation (Hong Kong Legislative Council Papers 2006). In its formative years between 2006 and 2014, the project was funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust, designed and maintained by the Centre of Asian

Studies (the latter was in 2009 incorporated into the Hong Kong Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences), the University of Hong Kong, till it was handed over to the Central Library of the HKSAR Government for continuous development in December 2014.

The following essay offers a review of HKMP, an online depository (<http://www.hkmemory.hk>) for preserving and displaying cultural and historical materials about Hong Kong. The essay revisits some contents of the website, but its focus is largely on the methodology of the project. By "methodology", I mean for *what purposes* and *how* the project team creates contents on the online space, and *what contribution* the team has made to the creation of meanings, interpretations, understanding and sharing of culture and history in such an online space.

## Early Beginnings of The Project

Despite the government objective for promoting a sense of belonging and cohesiveness among Hong Kong people, HKMP was given the largest degree of freedom and independence. By the time

in late 2006 when the research team picked up the project, the immediate puzzling questions facing the team were *where* and *how to start*, or put it simply – how did the team understand the *notion* of “Hong Kong memory”?

Being different from the government or national archives and museums which build on prior endowment of existing archives or a pool of documentary heritage and artefacts, the project team had to build up its own resources from scratch. One possible way to build up a base was to develop thematic digital collections for the project. This thematic approach seemed to resonate with the notion of public/ collective memory. Examples such as the themes of public transport, food and cuisine, costume and fashion, political riots and movements and such-like fell within this imagination. If the locals were asked to freely associate with the term “Hong Kong memory”, they would come up with examples of shared experiences of an event of the past, common values held by the community or with some social phenomena, behaviours and customs of collective nature.<sup>1</sup> Their act of association in some ways testified to what Maurice Halbwachs had said “there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory” (Halbwachs 1992, 38). In the context of associating ideas with the term “Hong Kong memory”, people’s memories were not isolated personal memories nor separated from society, and thus, the memories they recalled served as a prism of a larger part of social framework. However, this approach was not preferred, for it assumed identified collective frameworks as a given prior and imposed a common understanding of the so-called “collective past” or “collective memory”.

Another way to develop the project could be via a traditional approach by telling a version of the history of Hong Kong. Seeing the history of Hong Kong as a given past, one of course would find abundant historical writings about its past, and there was no lack of available online contents about its culture and history. If the project was to be framed in this way, the research team would have to write its own version of Hong Kong history. From the research team’s point of view, neither the “collective themes” nor “a particular version of Hong Kong history” fed our appetite. The research team believed that there was a blurred link that bridged history, heritage, and individual memories. At that time, we did not understand what the missing link was. But perhaps because of this lack of knowledge, the research team preferred the project to be an Internet space that enables visitors and audience to explore the different meanings and diversity of Hong Kong’s culture and history, rather than to take a thematic framework for granted, and/ or to accept one version of a text-book-like history.

### **The Question “How”**

While the team considered thoroughly the nature and direction of the project, it also needed to address a practical issue about how the project could be started somewhere. Guided by the loosely defined notion of memory, we tended to accept a view that every bit of surviving record of the past served as material traces allowing audience to re-connect to the past, providing them with clues to imagination, contemplation and reconstruction of the meanings of history, culture, and heritage. But where did this materiality base come from? We knew that there were many

<sup>1</sup>The Project Team organised several workshops collecting people’s perceptions of the notion of “Hong Kong memory” and their user experiences of the Hong Kong Memory website. In one session, participants were prompted with a question asking them to freely associate the term “Hong Kong memory” with any phrases, ideas or past experiences in mind. The results were not unexpected. Most of their answers related to the ill-defined notion of “collective memory”, and its substance varied from remembering a heritage site, political event or some collective behaviours, customs and traditions of the past.

low-hanging fruits out there. There were scholars, experts, and amateur researchers in the field who had collected materials when they were doing research on a specific topic about Hong Kong. These materials may contain draft papers, research notes, archives in public or private sources, images, and audio-video records. All these materials could form the basis for the project; and by digitising and making them available online, they provided a new “entry point” for audience to reconstruct the meanings of history. The research team could also research some topics by themselves. In this way, we believed that the content would be enriched and accumulated.

### **Method and the Researcher-centred Approach**

In retrospect, we had to admit that choosing what topics, collections and exhibitions to be built on the Hong Kong Memory website was not without arbitrariness, though all the effort was grounded on solid research either by the research team or by commissioned experts in the field.<sup>2</sup> The government officials of course would like to know on what grounds a topic was picked. However, the selection could only be justified based on the reasoning that every piece of archival record was a surviving remnant of historical memory and knowledge. Therefore, it was more important for the team to define its role in digitising and uploading records on the website, and to decide the depth and quality one expects for our work.

These several aspects regarding how a heritage record should be formed invariably touched upon a methodological issue. Take the record items in the “Calendar Posters of Kwan Wai-nung”, a collection built in the early stage of the project, as an example to illustrate the issue. When people were exposed to an

image below (Kwong Sang Hong Ltd. Calendar Poster), they may be attracted by the style, feel, and look of the image. However, without knowing further “contextual information” about the poster, there was no way for us to know the artwork was created in 1933 by an artist, who was commissioned by a company to create an advertisement for promoting a cosmetics product. This example illustrated how important the contextual information was for our understanding of something that happened in the past.

Writing a caption and description for a historical image is of course a usual task for workers in the field of museum and archives. Yet, this act of contextualising a historical image is also a mentality and way of thinking that assumes the object being described carries the secret of historical meanings and messages; and the object is the material trace reflecting a snapshot of reality in the past. Thus conceived, the workers are not only the collectors of materials, but also “knowledge guardians” to discover and construct knowledge for the audience. The research team adopted such a way of thinking when dealing with most of the materials collected in the project. We felt that the team had a role to construct a material base for the audience to explore the historical context of a specific topic. For nearly all of the collections and exhibitions in the portal site, the research team spent a lot of effort in “defining” which topics were worth pursuing; “mapping” the scope of archival materials that should be covered; “designing” the contextual structure of the archives; “employing” perspectives or even narratives for guiding the structure and presentation of archives.

The audience who visit the Hong Kong Memory website today will see that the collections and exhibitions are arranged in

<sup>2</sup>The Hong Kong Memory portal contains several components – Collections, Exhibitions and Oral History Archive. For each section of the website, it comprises a wide range of topics in different coverage, scale, focus and concern. For an overview, see the Hong Kong Memory website <http://www.hkmemory.hk/index.html>



Calendar poster, “Kwong Sang Hong Ltd.”  
by Kwan Wai-nung, 1933.

Taken from Hong Kong Memory, <https://goo.gl/6vAHiq>.

well-defined internal order, with general or specific descriptions, categories and layers of information carefully designed for illustrating the context of a specific topic. This way of collection and exhibition building is the result of researcher-centred approach which, from the point of view of researchers, aims at contextualising the “meanings” and “significance” of the preserved materials, and also hopes that every piece of archival material serves as the base for building cultural and historical understanding.

### The Relational Approach

Since late 2009, the research team had employed oral history methods to build a few topics, such as people’s experiences in education during the 1940s to 1970s, or work experiences in manufacturing industries during the 1950s to the 1980s. The team finally built an Oral

History Archive, which displayed the audio tracks of interviewees and their remembrance of everyday life experiences in the past.

But the most rewarding result of the oral history practice was not so much the creation of new contents for the Hong Kong Memory website. What was important was the reflection on the notion of “memory”, and how it operated in people’s remembrance of the past. As we invited more people to take part in the oral history interviews, the more the team became aware of one thing: when people remembered their past experiences, the “memory record” contained several levels of meanings. First of all, it refers to an *objective reality* that the memory has described. For example, the memorised facts of living in squatter areas in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1970s, serve as a “description of objective past.” For the second meaning, the memory record carries a “*communicative function*”. It plays a role in communicating to others, not only to other people who have a similar or the same experience, but also to other groups who recall the memory for a different reason. Recalling the housing experiences of the 1950s to 1970s, people not living in squatter areas would remember their living conditions in private residential houses, where the houses were partitioned into different rooms, and each room accommodating a family. Life in squatter houses and that in private houses are of course two different types of dwelling experiences, but they share a collective past with each other under the same theme of housing history.

Memory is also *experiential*; people feel connected to the topic of housing not only because it contains valuable facts, information or knowledge, but because they have their own experiences of it. When they are invited to recall the past, they re-experience the past again, and in remembering the past, personal feelings, emotions, and subjective perceptions prevail. And fourthly, even though some people may not have a direct experience of the past housing, they can imagine the *connection* to

it. In particular, when the younger generation listen to the older generation who talk about their life in squatter houses, they may contrast the past living environment with their current living conditions.

The rich meanings of “memory record” thus reminds us that the “contextual information” built around a heritage record is a “reconstruction” by researchers. No matter how good the intention is (for constructing historical knowledge, for instance), it is inevitable that researchers assign values, judgement, meanings, and significance to the record. And such a way of putting researchers in the role of interpreting a heritage record marks a substantive difference from the act of remembrance by ordinary people who frame their past experiences in the understanding of their lives, society, and history. While the former is “researcher-centred”, as the way the HKMP team has done in dealing with the collection and exhibition materials, the latter is “relational”. It is relational in the sense that a record of the past is not only an objective reality; its meanings depend on the dialogue with and the subjectivity of the person who associates himself / herself to the record(s).

Being aware of this potential relationship between individuals and records of the past, the research team developed another approach to preserve and display the materials of the project. At least two exhibitions, *Remember Yau Ma Tei* and *Remember Nga Tsin Wai* in the website, tried to reconstruct the image of a local place and a village according to the perspectives of interviewees. The exhibitions tended to invoke the diverse meanings that interviewees had given to the place and village, rather than to impose researchers’ meanings and narratives on the places under study. The exhibitions would also carry the emotions,

feelings, and subjective perceptions of the interviewees. Rather than seeing these subjective or emotional experiences as the rubble that bar us from understanding the so-called objectivity of history, we honoured them in the exhibitions. Without the subjective or emotional re-enactment of the past, the preserved records did not speak for themselves and they would only be the “cold” records in remote distance from the people living in the present.

In retrospect, the HKMP team does not invent any new methods for the preservation of documentary heritage. The “research-centred approach” has long been practised in the fields of museum, archives, and academic community, while the uniqueness of “relational approach” is recognised in oral history practices. What the project has initiated under the supervision of an academic team is only a process of experiment, an unsatisfied desire to answer the questions “what” and “who”, as Pierre Nora and Paul Ricoeur have attempted to do. Nora tends to reject the overwhelming usage of the notion of “memory”, for it is evasive, “in permanent evolution”, “affective” and “magical”. “What we call memory today is therefore not memory but already history”, says Nora, and he urges us to return to history for the rescue of lost meanings (Nora 1989, 8-9, 24). Ricoeur, on the other hand, exposed the unsettled hermeneutic relationship between what is memorised (an object preserved and recalled) and who is memorising it. In view of these philosophical propositions, the project tried to introduce the notion of memory as an operating guide for our research, rather than to reject it simply because of its fluid nature or to deny it by equating its banality to nostalgia, collective emotion or social psychology in lieu of history.

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