

The Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

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Introduction

Established in 1996, the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences (HKMMS) occupies a building formerly known as the Bacteriological Institute. Situated in the area of the original site of the 1894 Plague Outbreak at Tai Ping Shan, the institute was the very first purpose-built medical and public health laboratory in Hong Kong. It was opened in 1906 and declared a public monument in 1990. Later, the Hong Kong College of Pathologists, recognizing the importance of public awareness for local history, petitioned for use of the Bacteriological Institute as a non-government museum for preserving local heritage. It is now operated by a non-profit organization, the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society.

The HKMMS's mission is to provide a stimulating environment for public education on health and medical sciences, past, present and future. This Museum is devoted to collecting and preserving historically significant records for a variety of research, teaching and publication purposes. Over the years, the Museum has played a leading role in the development of education on Hong Kong's medical heritage.

In the following interview, Dr. Faith Ho, Chair of the Education and Research Committee of the HKMMS Society and Mr. Condon Lee, Curatorial Assistant of the Museum discuss the goals and missions of the HKMMS, as well as its challenges in establishing the archives collection for the Museum.

The following interview with Prof. Faith Ho and Mr. Condon Lee was conducted at the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences on 18th March, 2013.

Patrick Lo (PL): Could we begin this interview by first introducing yourself and your roles at the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences (HKMMS)¹ and its archives collection?

Faith Ho (FH): My name is Faith Ho, and I am Chairman of the Education and Research Committee of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society.² This is Mr. Condon Lee, he is one of our staff members, and is currently serving as the Curatorial Assistant of the HKMMS.

The HKMMS Society started, and now operates the HKMMS. The Museum was officially opened in 1996, and has since been open to the general public in Hong Kong. We are an independent museum run by a non-profit and non-government organization, which is the HKMMS Society. We depend almost entirely on donations and sponsorships for our work. In comparison to the other public museums in Hong Kong, we are relatively a small museum organization, but we are unique in terms of our museum collections and services.

The HKMMS was set up with 2 main themes — Heritage and Health. You can see we are in a heritage building which was built in 1905. The building itself has more than 100 years of history. The Museum building is now declared a historical monument. Originally, the Museum building was used as a bacteriological institute, built as a response to the plague that first broke out in Hong Kong in 1894. At the turn of the 20th century, plague was still recurring year after year, with devastating effects on the economy, and the Governor of Hong Kong, therefore, petitioned the British Colonial Government to send a medical expert to Hong Kong to help control the plague. But the expert, William Hunter said, *“There is no way I can help you unless you have a laboratory in Hong Kong that I can work in.”* At that time, in the whole of Hong Kong, there was not a single medical laboratory. So the Governor of Hong Kong promised him that a medical building would be purposely built for him for his medical research. The medical expert, William Hunter, came to Hong Kong in 1902 and supervised the building of this medical laboratory.

¹ Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hkmms.org.hk/>

² Hong Kong Museum Medical Sciences Society - Homepage. Available at : <http://www.hkmms.org.hk/English/hkmmss.htm>

Of course, this type of old building soon could not provide all the medical services that Hong Kong needed as the local population increased drastically. Later, in the 1960s and 70s, gradually all of its functions and facilities were relocated to new places. This 'original' building was then used for various other functions. In 1990, the building was declared a public monument and is currently serving as a medical museum which has been open to the general public in Hong Kong since 1996. It is the only medical museum in Hong Kong.

Through this Museum, we want to provide an experience for our visitors, via which they could learn about heritage and health. We have exhibitions to let people learn about the historical developments of Hong Kong, in the context of medicine and public health. Besides that, we want to let people know how to stay healthy, and what is happening *now* in terms of public health and medicine, and not just what happened in the past. All these are an important part of our Museum's mission. However, for our archival collections, they are more focused on the historical aspects of medicine and public health.

With reference to the archives collection, we have a rich collection of documents related to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome). Although it happened only 10 years ago, the SARS outbreak was no doubt a major event and unexpected shock to the Hong Kong society as a whole. It was truly modern Hong Kong's first encounter with such a major disaster. Fortunately, our local medical scientists working in collaboration with an international team of researchers in 13 different laboratories around the world, managed to discover the cause of SARS, and it was no doubt a tremendous achievement. During the SARS crisis, medical laboratories in Hong Kong were working for 24 hours straight. I think we should be proud of what they have done for Hong Kong. SARS was a major threat to public health in Hong Kong with repercussions spreading to all aspects of life and the economy – and for the SARS theme, we will be collecting a lot of oral interviews and other documents from the various groups of medical and non-medical personnel. They will indeed be an important part of our Museum's archives collection.

PL: What are the differences between the records about SARS kept at the HKMMS and the ones kept at the Hong Kong Hospital Authority (HKHA)³ or at the other local

³ Hong Kong Hospital Authority – Homepage. Available at: http://www.ha.org.hk/visitor/ha_index.asp

public hospitals?

FH: I am sure that the HKHA and the other local hospitals also have many records on SARS. But because we are a public museum, our records would probably be more comprehensive and accessible to the general public than those kept at the HKHA or maybe at the Department of Health Hong Kong.⁴ For example, for our SARS Oral History Archive project, our interviews will cover a wide spectrum of medical and health as well as non-medical & health personnel. For the people who wish to consult our SARS records, starting from mid-2015, they could apply and state the purpose of their study as well as join our Society and become an associate member of the HKMMS. They don't have to pay much [fees] to be a member.

PL: Could you give me an example of such archives records that are made accessible for the public?

FH: Plague and SARS – these are the 2 themes that are the most comprehensive among our archives collection. Also, there are other records featuring our historic locality, the Tai Ping Shan district, and the stories and history of our local hospitals in Hong Kong during the early years, e.g., the Tung Wah Hospital⁵ and the Nethersole Hospital⁶, etc.

PL: Am I to understand that this Museum's archives is meant to serve as a centralized one-stop centre or repository for people who are looking for archival records on the developments of medical history of Hong Kong?

FH: This is one of the many purposes! We also need to use the materials ourselves in the course of our work in preparing exhibitions and other educational activities. Not all the materials consist of original documents, some are copies of the original, but they do serve to bring together for study a body of relevant materials in one place. In order to make our records more accessible, we are now developing an online cataloguing system to facilitate record filing and retrieval.

PL: You have mentioned that your Society saw the need to provide educational

⁴ Department of Health of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.dh.gov.hk/eindex.html>

⁵ Tung Wah Group of Hospitals – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.tungwah.org.hk/?content=369>

⁶ Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital – Homepage. Available at: http://www3.ha.org.hk/AHNN/index_e.asp

programmes; -- who are your target audience? And who are the vast majority of the Museum users?

FH: Our Museum's educational programmes are mostly opened to the general public, but we also run tailor-made programmes for special groups like medical students. The majority of our visitors are secondary- and primary-school students. Our Museum staff Condon is one of the team members who provide guided tours for local school groups. In addition, we also provide special seminars and teaching materials to local school teachers for various educational purposes. Furthermore, we also have a large number of elderly people and local community groups come to visit our Museum on regular basis, as well as visitors from overseas.

PL: Based on my understanding, there is also a Department of Health in Hong Kong. Since both of you are providing health-education-related services and activities, could you please tell me what the main differences are?

FH: The Department of Health provides health education services to the public, but unlike us, is not involved in medical history or archival collections. Nobody else is providing archival records and educational activities on medical history integrated into health education. We are the only institution in Hong Kong serving this purpose. In fact, the Head of Central Health Education Unit⁷ under the Department of Health is a member of our Museum's Education and Research Committee. We think that it is a very important part of the work of a medical museum to have a central repository to keep, to collect and to preserve the documents related to the history of health and medicine in our region, as well as the medical developments in Hong Kong.

PL: As the Chair of the HKMMS Education & Research Committee, could you tell me what are your main duties and responsibilities?

FH: Under the Board of Directors, we have 4 different committees within this Museum organization, and they are namely: the Management Committee, the Finance Committee, the Publicity & Public Relations Committee and the Education & Research Committee. I am in charge of the Committee which deals with education and research which includes initiating and undergoing research projects and advising our staff on the management of

⁷ Central Health Education Unit – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.chcu.gov.hk/eng/index.asp>

our collections.

In fact, I am a retired professor of pathology, and I have been involved in this Museum Project since the very beginning. It has been very interesting to see how the whole Museum has developed and evolved over the past years. The whole Museum was set up by us volunteers. All of the committee members are in fact volunteers.

PL: To Condon -- As the Curatorial Assistant, what are your main duties and responsibilities?

Condon Lee (CL): My core duty is to help appraise and to identify which of the artifacts or records are worth adding to our Museum collection. Once we have decided which artifacts or records are to be added to our collection, I am also responsible for cataloguing them and ensuring their proper storage.

Besides, I am responsible for providing guided tours to the local public groups, including students from different local schools and universities. Our main goal is to promote awareness about the history of medical developments amongst the general public in Hong Kong.

I was a history major and [am] now in training as a museum curator. My predecessor who helped start and develop this archive had taken one of the archive courses at the University of Hong Kong.⁸ In addition to my archival duties, I also assist in giving guided tours and talks to the local school groups, as well as preparing displays and exhibitions for the Museum. In fact, as we are a small museum, most of our Museum's staff members are expected to be multi-tasking.

PL: As your Museum's archive collection is gradually expanding, how do you decide which items are suitable to be added to the collection and which are not?

FH: Since we are relatively new, in order to build our basic collection, we have been trying to collect as much as possible, and we are only now starting to document our acquisition policy. In fact, we do not just collect the original materials. For example, we are looking at a report of the Plague Outbreak that took place in Hong Kong in 1894, we may not have

⁸ The University of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.hku.hk/>

the original document, but at least we have a copy of that report. Besides, we have a copy of the diary of the doctor who was in charge of the medical team that was responsible for controlling the 1894 plague outbreak in Hong Kong. I have seen the original diary, but the donor only gave us a copy. This document and microfilm is part of our archives collection and as far as I know is not available anywhere else. But of course, we do have the originals of other historical documents, e.g., we have the original graduation certificates of prominent doctors and other originals of rare patient records and lecture notes.

PL: In addition to the printed documents and 2-dimensional objects, since you are a Museum, do you also collect other 3-dimensional artifacts? If yes, can you give me examples of such 3-dimensional artifacts in your Museum collection?

CL: Most of the 3-dimensional artifacts we collect at this Museum are medical equipment. Such old medical equipment provides much information about the history of medicine and some are actual Hong Kong discoveries. Furthermore, we collect photographs and video-recordings for archival purposes. There is this saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Our museum also produced a video on the plague of 1894 and a video documenting the discovery of the cause of SARS in Hong Kong, by filming in the actual laboratories where the work was done.

PL: What kind of people would come to use your medical archive collection? What kind of services have you been providing at or via your Museum?

FH: Our resources are limited and we are still developing our archives and cannot be considered a big organized archival institution. A large number of our research or reference enquiries, both local and international, have been related to the history of plague in Hong Kong. In fact, we are expecting a visitor from [the University of] Cambridge next month - he wants to look at our plague archives because he is doing a particular research in that area. And people frequently ask if we have certain photos, especially those related to the plague outbreaks in Hong Kong for their publications. We have also received people asking about [medical-related] certificates. Most of our reference enquiries were requests for accessing our archives collection for research purposes. Earlier, we had a professor from the Department of History, Lingnan

University⁹, writing a book who was interested in a certificate in our collection awarded during the time of the Japanese occupation. And Dr. Tim Ko from the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society¹⁰ also asked about availability of a photograph to use in the *Dictionary of Hong Kong Biography* which he was helping with. We also had a Ph.D. student from the CUHK¹¹ asking to view the materials we hold on the first hospital providing Western medicine to Chinese in Hong Kong, i.e., the Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital.

PL: Do you have any strategic plans for developing your archives collection and the Museum for the next 2 to 5 years?

FH: For our collections, our plan is to organize them better, as well as finish the cataloguing which would take at least 2 years. It will be easier to search and access them in future, and we are still documenting our procedures and developing our archives. Then we may consider putting some of our collection items on the Internet to increase the audience and the number of people who can benefit from our collections. So far, we have collected about 2,000 artifacts and documents, 1,000 volumes of books, and over 1,000 historical photographs. For the cataloguing of the printed books, we want to leave them to the very last, because books [monographs] are relatively easy to access by searching their titles. However, if we should continue to receive more and more new items in the future, we might not be able to meet our target timeframe. We hope to have our entire archives collection ready for our users and a catalogue list for public access by 2015.

PL: With reference to your archives collection, how far back does it go? Or maybe you could give me some highlights of your collection?

FH: There are a number of highlights. In addition to the archive records on the 1894 plague outbreak and on SARS, we also have a lot of records on the Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital starting from 1887.¹² Furthermore, we have collections on

⁹ Lingnan University – Homepage. Available at <http://www.ln.edu.hk/>

¹⁰ Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk/>

¹¹ CUHK – The Chinese University of Hong Kong – Homepage. Available at: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/english/index.html>

¹² Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital – Homepage. Available at:

important medical personnel and research materials connected with our exhibitions and previous activities, like the development of midwifery in Hong Kong. The reason we had an exhibition on midwifery was because we wanted to reflect how the development in midwifery services impacted the changing attitudes amongst the local Chinese people towards Western medicine in the last century.

PL: Do you have any rare books that are of high cultural, historical or research values in your archives collection?

FH: We don't have too many rare books. Most of the books found in our collection are related to medicine, including Chinese medicine. But we have about 50 book titles that are of high value. For example, there is a book written in the 1920's by the first professor in pathology at the University of Hong Kong, Prof. C.Y. Wang; he was the very first Chinese professor in Hong Kong. The book is out-of-print now. And luckily, we still have a copy of this title, which was kindly donated to our Museum by his son. Another example is the original bound copy of notes hand-written by a student (who became a well-known doctor in Hong Kong), taken of lectures given by the first full-time Professor of Medicine in Hong Kong, Professor John Anderson, also in the 1920's. We also have a few old Chinese medicine books.

PL: What part of your job do you find most gratifying?

FH: I am a volunteer at this Museum. When people show appreciation for what I have done for them and for the Museum, I am happy. It is truly a gratifying experience when I know that I could give back to the society even after I have retired.

CL: Being able to work for this Museum is indeed a very rewarding experience. What I am doing here is related to the history and heritage of Hong Kong. By preserving these medical records and artifacts, it does not only enable us to understand our past, it also tells us what is going on at present and is likely to happen in the near future.

FH: People always talk about intangible cultural heritage - in fact, the medical history of Hong Kong is very much tied with the whole social history of Hong Kong. And for Hong Kong people, they would probably like to know what makes Hong Kong different from

any other places. For example, comparative studies between traditional Chinese medicine and Western medicine have always been hot topic amongst the medical professionals and the common people, and this is one of the major themes of this museum. For instance, in the past, the Chinese people in Hong Kong were skeptical and had no confidence in Western medicine. It took many years for Western medicine to be accepted by the majority of the Hong Kong public, but now traditional Chinese medicine is witnessing a resurgence. And currently, there have been a lot of talks on the integration of Western and Chinese medicine, and whether this can be achieved. All these are related to our cultural heritage. In fact, we are currently preparing an exhibition which will open in June 2013 on the comparison between traditional Chinese and Western medicine in the use of herbs.

Photo 1.

Dr Alice Sibree was appointed by the London Missionary Society in 1903 and arrived at Hong Kong a year later. She was in charge of the first maternity hospital for Chinese: Alice Memorial Maternity Hospital opened in 1904. The photo shows Dr. Sibree with student midwives and graduates.

Source: Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences's Collections, from Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Charity Foundation.



Photo 2.

The photograph showing Temporary Plague Hospital in Kennedy Town with patients lying on the floor.

Source: Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences collection, donated by Mrs. Ashburner.



