

A photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a white t-shirt and a dark jacket, standing in a library aisle. He is surrounded by tall bookshelves filled with books. The aisle is carpeted and the lighting is warm. The man is looking directly at the camera.

# Once and Still Hong Kong's Memory Keeper

Simon Chu: Hong Kong needs better laws to protect its files

by Christine Fung

**“Records are created and stored not for mere history recording. Most of all, it upholds social justice - accountability for our government.”**

Professional archivist Simon Chu Fook-keung, is fighting for a better preservation system for government records, something that is essential for the maintenance of social justice and government accountability.

Retiring from the government in 2007 as the Director of the Government Records Service, which is responsible for overseeing the management of government records, Mr Chu, said he was quite reluctant to revisit his former workplace, the Hong Kong Public Records Building in Kwun Tong. He felt unwelcome.

“I haven’t been a popular figure among the government now and then,” said the 61-year-old archivist, who had worked in the department for over 24 years.

“I was one of the vocal minorities who criticised the internal administration of the department while I was still a government official. And now, not being an official anymore, I voice my concerns over the government’s legal framework actively and openly,” he said.

“That is why some of the people misunderstood me as being insubordinate after leaving the government. Actually, I was a rebellious individual all along, only privately at first,” he chuckled.

As the Secretary General of both the International Council on Archives East Asian Regional Branch (EASTICA) and UNESCO Memory of the World Program Asia/Pacific Regional Committee (MOWCAP), Mr Chu has been exposed to the fact that Hong Kong lacks a systematic set of rules for government records management and public inspection of such records.

“Hong Kong needs an archives law to make it a legal obligation for every bureaux and organisations to create and manage all daily records properly.”

Mr Chu gave examples of problems resulting from poor government record keeping. One involved the diseased coral tree that crushed a young woman to death at Stanley market in August last year. After the incident, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) admitted in the Coroner’s Court that the relevant tree inspection records have gone missing.

Mr Chu criticised the poor handling of tree records by the LCSD. “The loss resulted in delays in further investigations,” he said. “If the inspection records of the collapsed tree had been properly created and managed by the LCSD, then it would be obvious who should or should not be liable in the case.”

He also condemned the government for not having a proper system to make sure records are properly handled within bureaux and organisations, quoting the case of the destruction of phone-tapping records by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in 2007.

While ICAC’s phone tapping might not have been fully legal, surveillance commissioner Justice Woo Kwok-hing could not perform a complete investigation on the action’s legality because the records had been destroyed.

Mr Chu said properly kept records can prevent chaos, “Records are created and stored not for mere history recording. Most of all, it upholds social justice and accountability for our government.”

Despite his grievances over the record-keeping system in Hong Kong, referring himself as “a rebellious

individual” in the government, Mr Chu still works to his best of his ability to preserve records.

Mr Chu joined the government after completing a summer job as an archivist when he first came back from Canada, where he had spent his teenage years.

“It happened all of a sudden,” Mr Chu recalled. “When I first came back to Hong Kong from Calgary, I saw the advertisement for a summer job as an archivist by chance. I was already a keen history student and thought working as an archivist would be fun.”

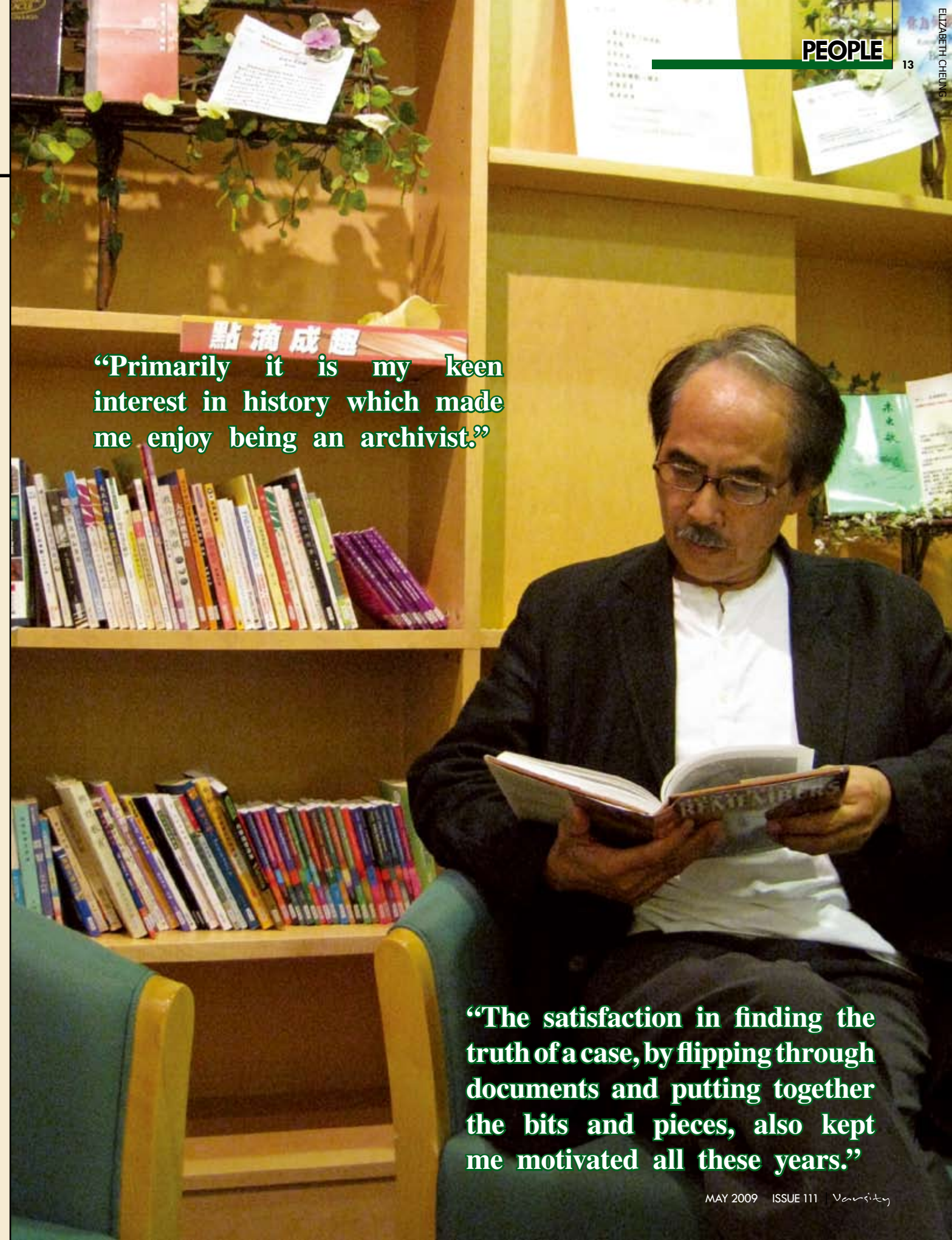
“Primarily it is my keen interest in history which made me enjoy being an archivist. The satisfaction in finding the truth of a case, by flipping through documents and putting together the bits and pieces, also kept me motivated all these years,” he said.

This may explain why watching detective movies and reading are Mr Chu’s favourite hobbies.

The fundamental role of a professional archivist is to examine government and public records with due care to ensure that those with historical value will be transferred and preserved in special repositories.

The most difficult task that Mr Chu had to perform was records appraisal - the process to decide what to preserve permanently and what to destroy.

“On a certain level it is risky to dispose records, and we are talking about forever. Though we had never mistakenly discarded records that are still useful, it really takes months to evaluate certain files, because there is a possible danger of creating a history gap in Hong Kong if records are not properly appraised before disposal,” he said.



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So far the Public Records Office has stored documents from as early as 1842 - the beginning of Hong Kong's modern history when the British won the Opium Wars and colonised Hong Kong. However, during the Japanese occupation period in World War Two, Hong Kong's records from 1842 to 1941 were lost.

In face of this huge gap in history, the Hong Kong government purchased the set of original documents from the British government to fill in the blanks. Mr Chu has helped to create and receive the set of documents which contained the correspondence between Britain and Hong Kong at that time (named Colonial Office 129).

Once a “memory keeper” of Hong Kong, Mr Chu has learnt to apply his record-keeping skills to his own documents at home.

“I file my essays and research material very systematically in my study, just like how I dealt with official documents. I know where it's best to store physical documents (such as tapes, CDs, paper) so they can be kept safe without being oxidised or damaged,” he said. “The Public Records Office has an air conditioning system round the clock to keep its humidity within the 40 to 60-degree range and the temperature around 18 degrees Celsius,” Mr Chu said.

Recently, Mr Chu has found a new way of keeping his own collective memory alive. He started blogging since the end of last year.

“It is also one of my ways to promote and raise awareness about record-keeping. I express thoughts on my blog when I watch a movie or attend a conference. I also share my views on recent news when I see how proper record-keeping can prevent chaos. Well yes, most of my blogging are also to foster the need of an archives law,” he laughed.

When asked about his plans for the near future, Mr Chu said he has yet no intention to sit back and enjoy a relaxing retirement life, though he has been away from his government post for two years.

Being an adjunct associate professor at the Department of History, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and a course coordinator at the School of Professional and Continuing Education of the University of Hong Kong (HKU SPACE), he has started imparting his knowledge of archives to the younger generation.

“In a nutshell, I very much hope that the government will finally realise the importance of having an archives law to improve the quality of record management in Hong Kong as a whole,” he reiterated. 