

Panel Presentation by Senator Vivienne Poy

Sleuth: Telling of Hong Kong History Panel

York University

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Thank you, Susan, for asking me to speak on a very important topic - that of life writing in the context of writing Hong Kong history.

Hong Kong has attained the prominence that it has in the world because it has profited from the best of the East and the West - the British Common Law and the use of the English language, together with the hard working and entrepreneurial Chinese spirit. After the return of Sovereignty to China in 1997, this remains an advantage Hong Kong has over other major Chinese coastal cities.

I call my talk today “sleuth” because, from my experience, a good researcher is a sleuth, who has to be very thorough in searching for and analyzing information, as well as understanding why things happened the way they did, or why interviewees say certain things in a certain way, and whether they are credible or have other agendas.

Research material, therefore, cannot be obtained only from history books, biographies, autobiographies and memoirs. They should also come from diaries, personal letters, and if possible, personal interviews. In many cases, life-writing can give us an insight into the social, economic and political situations of the day.

My remarks today will mainly be focused on Hong Kong history from up to the 1990s. This is not only because that’s my period of research, both for my biographical writing and for my PhD dissertation, but also, since the return of sovereignty to China on July 1, 1997, history will be presented differently. As we know, history is written by the victor.

Despite all the successes the British colonial government claimed, Hong Kong would not have been viable as a colony if it had not been for the Chinese population – from providing coolie labour to being the largest group of taxpayers in the colony. For that reason, the Chinese were welcome to go back and forth between China and Hong Kong without restrictions until the border was closed after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. Subsequently, refugees flooded into Hong Kong from Mainland China.

When the refugee industrialists moved from China to Hong Kong, Hong Kong became a manufacturing centre. Just the increase in the population alone helped to boost the value of the land in the colony. The change in the demographics brought prosperity, which made it possible for the colonial government to send an enormous amount of wealth back to Britain.

There are many books on Hong Kong written in English, but they are mostly about the successes of the British colonizers. In order to give wider exposure to the history of Hong Kong, it is necessary to have more books written in English about the majority Chinese population. Many of them have interesting stories to tell that go back generations. The recent publication of *The Dragon and the Crown* about the life of Stanley Kwan is certainly an important addition.

One of the reasons I embarked on writing my family history in the early 1990s was because there was very little that was positive, written in English, about the Chinese population in Hong Kong, compared to that of the achievements of the British. When I read some of the Hong Kong history books written in English, I found obvious inconsistencies and inaccuracies.

An example is one of the books written by a professor of History on post 2nd World War Hong Kong. I checked the Appendix of the list of names of all those who had contributed to the rebuilding of post war Hong Kong, and I found my father's name missing, and I know he had played a very significant role.

I was there and I knew that my father was the Rice Controller of Hong Kong, (in Chinese, it's Food Controller) appointed by the Governor. He had the responsibility of making sure that there was enough nutritious basic food for the post war population, such as rice, beans, sugar etc. Due to the fact that there was a UN limit on the amount of staple foods entering Hong

Kong, my father had to improvise and used his overseas connections in order to arrange to have enough imported, at a reasonable price – such as rice from Thailand.

I will tell you a cute story. One day, I was teased at school, by a very naughty boy, who said that my Dad was the “shit controller.” I related that incident to my father that evening, and he said, “Ask him what he eats!”

I was able to find numerous newspaper articles on this topic, which reported how my father played this important role, during the post-war period of food rationing in Hong Kong. These articles helped to strengthen my story.

This is a very good example of the importance of life-writing, because, if I had not been researching into my father’s life, I wouldn’t have even bothered to look into the newspapers of the day.

When I wrote my family biography, I was helping, in my small way, in adding the building blocks to the Chinese side of Hong Kong history. The historical details helped to show the important dynamics between the British colonial government and the industrious Chinese people, which had transformed Hong Kong from a series of rocky islands into one of the most important financial centres in the world.

I must say, writing my family history was a lot of work because I was so particular about the accuracy of the research, but it was also a lot of fun. I contacted friends of my father’s all over the world to arrange interviews with them. In the case when that was not possible, I asked questions by letters, faxes and phone calls. By reaching out this way, I had amazing results.

I believe oral history is indispensable when it comes to life-writing. I depend a lot on this form of research. Interviewing is an art. As a researcher, it helps to be a good listener and enjoy talking to people.

In researching family history, it is important to speak to as many family members and friends of the family as possible. In the more intimate family stories, being a member of the family helps. In my case, I have always listened to what went on around me, and I noticed reactions of people to events.

I will give an example of my interview with an old friend of my father's to show the importance of interviews in research. I was fortunate to track him down in Guangzhou in the early 1990s, and even though he was in his eighties, he was very alert and helpful in telling me the events during his term as the Director of the New China News Agency in Hong Kong in the 1960s.

Anyone who lived in Hong Kong in the 1950s and 60s would know about water rationing, particularly during the summer months. During his term, the most traumatic thing that happened in Hong Kong was severe water shortage during one particular summer, to the extent that water was only available for a few hours each week. Even though there was the communist government in China, it was decided that the only way to save Hong Kong was to secure water from there on a permanent basis. There was a lot of coverage on this issue in the press at the time, but they didn't jive with the information I had.

This "Uncle Leung" told me about what happened that particular summer in Hong Kong, and how negotiations proceeded between Hong Kong and China. Since there was no diplomatic relations between Britain and China, Hong Kong citizens had to take on the role of negotiators with the Chinese government, and my father was actively involved in these negotiations.

The only way that Hong Kong could continue as a suitable place to live would be to divert water from the East River in south China to the reservoirs of Hong Kong. Zhou Enlai, and the Governor of Guangdong province, were instrumental in making the diversion of water happen on the China side. On behalf of Hong Kong, it was my father and another Chinese gentleman.

However, the Hong Kong press gave the impression that the colonial government had successfully "negotiated" with China. "Uncle Leung" warned me about the false press coverage.

When the pipe-lines were completed, my parents were told by the colonial government not to go to Guangdong for the inauguration ceremony to start the water flowing to Hong Kong. The other Chinese gentleman didn't attend, but my parents did.

This story showed the great value of personal interviews. And this incident also explained why my father subsequently resigned from the Executive Council of the Hong Kong government.

Official documents or press coverage are often doctored or suppressed. This brings to mind interviews I had for my PhD dissertation on the immigration of Chinese women from south China and Hong Kong into Canada. Officially, events were supposed to happen in a certain way, but the truth could be very different. Chinese immigrants were very creative in getting into Canada.

My interviews were done in B.C. and Ontario. Prof. Emeritus David Lai from the U. of Victoria was worried that those who were going to be interviewed by me in Victoria, some of whom came to Canada during the period of restricted immigration, would be reluctant to speak freely because I am a senator. Fortunately, everyone treated me like a “village cousin”, and they spoke to me without reservations. My connection to them was that my ancestors came from the same area of south China as they did, and in this way, they felt close to me. I can even understand some of their village dialects. All interviews were done in Cantonese. Some would say to me “and you would understand, this was the way things really happened.....” Some even brought me snacks!

From my own experience, anecdotes of the characters written in history are very important in holding the attention of the readers, besides making the narrative interesting. A very good example is Margaret McMillan’s *Paris 1919*. It’s a huge book, but it is also one that is difficult to put down once you start reading it.

Anecdotes of historical figures come from biographies and autobiographies, or quotes from magazines and newspapers of the day, and some are from word of mouth. Some are accurate and others, not. But, they do make for interesting reading.

From my own experience, biographies can vary in accuracy, depending on the researchers. Autobiographies can be revealing in certain details, but they can also be very one-sided. However, it is not difficult if the reader has an understanding of the credibility of the authors, and facts are checked and double-checked. That’s why it helps to be a sleuth!

The transformation of the Hong Kong of yesteryear to its present day position as an international financial centre can be traced back to the post 2nd World War period. In my biography of my father and the times in which he lived, the readers can find out about Hong Kong's transition from one of fear of communist China, to participating in joint ventures, and to making large investments in China. From 1949 to the beginning of the 1980s, very few dared to travel from Hong Kong to China. Nowadays, Hong Kong people have special ID cards that give them easy access to China. Due to lower prices of residential housing, some live in China and work in Hong Kong.

Looking at the number of universities that exist in Hong Kong today, this generation would never dream that, once upon a time, there was only one university in Hong Kong, and the language of instruction was limited to English only.

Readers of my family story would learn a great deal about the origin of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which enabled students from the Chinese middle schools to go to university in Hong Kong. Again, I was able to obtain valuable information from interviews with the former Vice Chancellor of the Chinese University who worked closely with my father, as well as the person who kept the minutes of the meetings of the buildings committee of the Chinese University, of which my father was the chairman. I found out that it was my father who went to England to persuade the British authorities to allow the granting of degrees by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Once a second university was in place in Hong Kong, establishing a third and a fourth, and so on, became much easier.

I not only learnt a great deal about the transformation of Hong Kong when I wrote about my ancestors, I also realized how easily my father made friends with people from every race and culture. It was through these friendships that he was able to work to help others and serve Hong Kong society. This ability symbolizes the success of Hong Kong today— which is a gathering place of transnationals.

Hong Kong continues to thrive despite the doomsayers in the western press. I am always surprised when anyone says to me that Hong Kong is no longer important as a financial centre since sovereignty was returned to China. We all know that, to some, ignorance is bliss!

Whenever I visit Hong Kong, and that is quite frequently, I am always amazed by its energy and its transnational citizens, and its belief that anything is possible. It is probably one of the few places in the world where constructions are often completed early.

My love of history comes from my love of stories – real stories about real people. Personally, I find everyone’s life interesting. The majority of people are shy or too reserved to tell their stories, because they don’t believe it’s important, or they believe that it’s just simply not interesting enough. That’s when the sleuth in me comes in handy. I continue to question, research and write. At the moment, it’s on the Poys of Australia. I will continue to collect fascinating stories, which will be shared one day with all those who are interested.