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Theme: Toward a New Era of Archives: Challenges and Possibilities

**Report from the Government Records Service,
the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of
the People's Republic of China**

**Leveraging Challenges of the Digital Age for Better Archival Future:
Highlights of the Government Records Service's Work and Initiatives**

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Introduction

In the 21st century, technology is evolving at an unprecedented pace, driving faster changes and progress in our society. Particularly, digital technology has gone into every tiny facet of our lives. Under this circumstances, it is indispensable for a government to move with time, and explore novel ways for providing public services and interacting with the citizen. The transition is a mixture of risks and problem-solving, challenges and opportunities.

2. Similarly, an archival institution has to face intensifying challenges brought about by accelerating evolution of technology. If suitably responded and leveraged, these challenges could pave the way to positive transformation of archival services which could contribute to enhancement of governance and a better quality of life for the people.

3. The Government Records Service (“GRS”) of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (“the Government”) is no exception in being affected by the waves of technological evolution in the digital age. This report will briefly review the challenges we have identified and highlight our major initiatives in response to these challenges. We hold the view that digital technology is like a double-edged sword. While it brings us considerable challenges on preservation of

documentary heritage, if carefully managed and suitably leveraged, the challenges could be transformed into favourable tools and resources which contribute to better archival future.

Challenges

Increasing use of electronic and online platforms for government business

4. Same as the global trend, with a view to developing Hong Kong into a smart city, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR Government has announced in the Policy Address 2022 to build a smart government by way of turning government services online and providing a one-stop digital services portal. In other words, the Government will gradually change to use digital means to deliver public services. Internally, conducting communication, business transaction and information/data sharing within the Government by digital means has also become a norm. An explosive growth of digital information/data and records in different formats can be foreseen. Electronic records present complex challenges for long-term preservation. These challenges include technology obsolescence, media fragility and possible physical damage to hardware and storage media which pose major risks of difficulties in maintaining the continued authenticity, integrity, reliability and usability of electronic records over time.

Changing user demands and expectations

5. The rapid development of information technology in the past two decades has greatly re-shaped the habit of information searching by the general public. As powered by internet search engines, people nowadays can obtain abundant required information within seconds. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, due to critical public health concerns and social distancing measures to different extent worldwide, many organisations allowed their employees to “work from home” and governments had to further rely on online platforms to maintain the public services. As intensified by the above mentioned impacts of the pandemic, it is inevitable that demand for online public service and remote access to information is heightened. This trend is manifested in the public’s views collected in GRS’ user surveys, where the common suggestions include provision of more user-friendly online catalogue and digitalised services, and acceleration of digitisation of archival holdings as well as online browsing of and access to

archival holdings, etc. These suggestions could well illustrate the changing user demands and expectations we have to address right now and in the years ahead.

Needs for new archival skills and knowledge

6. Archivist is a profession in the management of records of enduring value. Core skills and knowledge of archivists include appraisal, acquisition, arrangement, accessioning, description, preservation and provision of access to records with enduring value, as well as management of an archival institution, programme and/or repository. Principles of provenance and original order are cornerstone principles of professional archivists in managing records with a view to maintaining the context, authenticity and integrity of the records. Nevertheless, with the paradigm shift under the digital age, archivists could not evade the queries about the continuing validity of archival skills and knowledge. How we should re-orient and revitalise our archival skills and knowledge have been widely discussed in the past by different archival scholars and practitioners. Practically, for GRS, with more and more records in born-digital form as created by all sorts of information systems in government agencies and increasing number of users accustomed with online searching, and most importantly the occurrence of ever-evolving global information ecology and new way of government-citizen interaction, the new skillsets and knowledge for GRS' Archivist grade officers as well as other professionals have never been so needed and imminent.

Highlights of GRS' Work and Initiatives

(a) New Archives Centre

7. Since our current purpose-built archival premises, namely, Hong Kong Public Records Building, which was opened in 1997 has reached the limit of its capacity, we have commenced the project to construct a new Archives Centre ("AC") inside a sizeable stone cavern in June 2023 with a view to meeting the storage needs in the next 30 years upon inauguration. The most distinctive feature of the project is to build the archives repositories inside the mountain body at the development site which provides stable and secure storage environment, thereby providing the best storage conditions for the archives and saving energy (and hence operating cost) in maintaining the

required environmental conditions. The project will also apply innovative technologies to expedite the construction process (e.g. the Modular Integrated Construction) as well as other automated systems (such as the Automated Storage and Retrieval System (“AS/RS”)) to optimise the efficiency in storing and retrieving of archives. We are now refining the detailed design and hardware arrangements of AS/RS to suit our future operational requirements. The new AC, including a portal building outside the stone cavern serving as GRS’ offices, are expected to inaugurate in 2029. As the new AC project was introduced in details in the Territory Report of the 16th General Conference of EASTICA & Seminar, here we aim to highlight the project which also showcases our effort in applying innovation and technology for provision of our future new home of the central archives of the Government.

(b) Electronic Records Management and Long-term Preservation of Electronic Records

Electronic Recordkeeping System

8. With a view to improving the governance and building a smart government, the Government has committed to roll out the electronic recordkeeping system (“ERKS”) to all government bureaux/departments (“B/Ds”) by end-2025. As compared with a paper-based recordkeeping system, ERKS could enable users to perform multiple records management activities like records’ capture, classification, access and disposal in a consistent and controlled way to facilitate daily operation as well as help reduce the risk of unauthorised destruction or inadvertent loss of records. It will be built on the Government’s private cloud platform within government data centres, with all records centrally managed and fully encrypted in a secure and controlled environment. Building on the experience gained from B/Ds under the earlier pilot programme, a new central ERKS has been developed. GRS, in collaboration with Digital Policy Office (“DPO”) of the Innovation, Technology and Industry Bureau of the Government, are actively assisting all B/Ds in implementing ERKS in a phased and orderly manner, assisting B/Ds in forming their project teams and preparing for system implementation, as well as closely monitoring their implementation progress and providing B/Ds with prompt advice as appropriate.

Guidance for government B/Ds on managing records on social media platform

9. GRS has continuously reviewed and updated existing guidance while developing and issuing new guidelines on records management to address various new requirements within or beyond the Government. In the digital era, B/Ds increasingly use social media to deliver messages and communicate with the public. Recognizing this trend among government officials and B/Ds, GRS has further developed guidance on managing social media records. The guidance aims to help B/Ds adopting best practices in managing social media records, ensuring these records are properly handled in accordance with prevailing records management principles and mandatory requirements. In particular, same as the other records, B/Ds should develop business rules and disposal schedules for social media records to ensure proper and systematic creation, collection and disposal of social media records.

Long-term preservation of electronic records

10. To oversee the service-wide implementation of long-term preservation of electronic records (“LPER”) in the Government subsequent to the completion of the Consultancy Study on LPER in 2021, GRS established a Task Force in 2023 drawing members from different teams and professions within GRS, and recruiting DPO to join the Task Force to provide expert technical advice on information technology. The Task Force is underpinned by three focus groups which focus on technology enhancement, change management and training in GRS and B/Ds respectively. We kick-started the work in early 2024.

11. To set out the guiding principles and directions for managing and preserving the archival electronic holdings through a comprehensive and structured preservation strategy, the Task Force will accord priority to develop a digital preservation strategy and on this basis to further develop various guidelines and training materials for LPER across various government B/Ds. Meanwhile, bearing in mind the two key milestones mentioned above in the coming couple of years, i.e., rolling out of ERKS in all B/Ds in 2025 and commissioning of new AC in 2029, the Task Force has initially worked out a high-level implementation plan of LPER and prioritised the coming work. Among others, the Task Force is embarking on a new project to develop the export protocols of electronic records from the

full implementation of the Central ERKS with a staging platform for the transfer of electronic records to GRS for appraisal, technical validation and accessioning of these records with archival values and finally ingestion into the digital repository all in one go. The project will also explore future system integration with the digital repository for long-term preservation and access by the public and B/Ds, which is currently in the process of defining the project scope and estimating the project costs.

(c) Diversified Platforms and Means for Archives Discovery

12. GRS is fully aware that the digital age has prompted the public's rising demand and expectation on our services. Meanwhile, the rapid development of information technology has also opened up new opportunities for GRS to achieve this goal through cyberspace. To cater for the needs of different users, we have made great effort to diversify the ways we provide our services. Besides proactively exploring new online platform to extend our reach to the existing and new user groups, we keep enhancing our conventional onsite platform by, for example, rendering a hybrid service platform. We believe that the diversified service platforms could enhance our users' experience in discovery, understanding and use of our extensive collections which contribute to the public's better appreciation of valuable local documentary heritage.

Online Platforms

♦ *Enhancement of online catalogue @PRO*

13. GRS' online catalogue, namely, @PRO, supports the archives administration and library management through intranet modules, and facilitates the provision of reference services for users through internet functions. Ever since launching in 2018, GRS has continuously been enhancing @PRO. To better preserve our archival holdings and make them more accessible to the community to cater for the diverse needs of users, we have been uploading more digital collections to @PRO at a quicker pace. The digital collections include digitised holdings produced by our in-house mass digitisation project launched since 2018 and born-digital materials acquired from B/Ds. As at the end of September 2024, around 0.97 million digital images are available for users viewing through @PRO. Meanwhile, GRS will enhance @PRO by integrating it with the Inventory Management System to be developed for the management of archival holdings in the New AC. This will also be one of the projects to be overseen by the LPER Task

Force.

♦ *GRS' website and the Public Records Office Facebook page*

14. Public engagement is essential to increase public understanding and support for GRS. By actively making our extensive holdings more accessible and promoting our activities, we foster a greater appreciation for the value of archival documentary. In addition to @PRO, GRS' website is another major online platform providing access to digitised holdings (in particular for frequently accessed holdings). The website provides over 60 Topical Guides which help guiding users on searching our holdings. Moreover, the website presents online thematic exhibitions featuring various holdings. Since 2022, a 360-degree virtual tour has also been introduced for self-paced exploration of the annual thematic exhibition. To engage more users through social media, Public Records Office ("PRO") of GRS has launched Facebook Page since 2020. The page shares stories from our holdings, showcases behind-the-scene of our works, and promotes new public programmes, reaching a diverse audience and fostering wider community connection and interaction. Both the online resources and PRO Facebook page have been well-received. The website has reached over 30 million visits in 2023 whereas the PRO Facebook page has attracted over 17 000 "Followers" as at September 2024.

Onsite and hybrid platforms

♦ *Professional seminar and training for teachers and tailor-made school visit activities*

15. By leveraging digital platforms and social media, GRS continues to expand its reach and engage with the public, highlighting the importance of public records in preserving collective memory. Over the past decade, GRS has organized a variety of public programmes to facilitate the public's discovery, understanding, appreciation, and use of our extensive collections and services. These programmes include on-site and online group visits, seminars, and thematic exhibitions, each designed to engage different segments of the community and promote archival awareness. Moreover, GRS has closely partnered with the Education Bureau to promote GRS' holdings as teaching resources via onsite and online training for secondary school teachers, and a numerous tailor-made professional training courses. From December 2023 to May 2024, a series of hybrid seminars led by local researchers and scholars linked with GRS thematic exhibition "Yesterday's Vacation in HK" were held. These seminars not only allowed participants to explore archival holdings but also deepened their understanding of Hong Kong's tourism development. They were well-received with over 100

history teachers of secondary school attending each session. Meanwhile, GRS proactively collaborates with kindergartens, primary schools, and secondary schools to organise both onsite and online group visits and seminars. We also offer customised school visits with tailor-made content to meet various educational needs. This initiative enables GRS to reach a broader audience and strengthen connections with young and potential users.

♦ *Public engagement programmes*

16. GRS has been actively engages the public through its annual thematic exhibitions. Since 2019, we have adopted the people-centred approach as core element in the planning of subsequent thematic exhibitions. We have launched a programme to invite members of the community to contribute their collections to enrich the exhibition content. For on-site visitors, we also provided exhibition-themed features, such as a photogenic backdrop near the entrance for social media “check-ins”, and distributed various publicity materials, including props and leaflets, to enhance the visitor experience. For future roving exhibitions, we will focus on increasing interaction and deepening the public’s connection with our documentary heritage.

17. All the above mentioned public engagement programmes bridge the gap between our work and the needs of the community, fostering a well-informed and supportive environment. They ensure that the preservation of our collective memory is recognised as a shared responsibility, supported by a community that values the role of public records in documenting and preserving our collective memory for future generations.

(d) Training and Professional Development: Getting Ready for the Digital Era

18. GRS recognises the value and importance of ongoing training and professional development for its staff, particularly facing the challenge of paradigm shift under digital age. GRS’ workforce is comprised of officers from Archivist grade, Executive Officer grade, Curator grade and Analyst/Programmer grade, apart from other supporting staff. The traditional division of responsibilities is giving way to more collaboration. The teamwork and synergy among the various professions and grades in GRS is a key factor for its smooth operation and transition under digital age. LPER Task Force mentioned above enlists the support from different professions

and grades of GRS. It is an example demonstrating GRS' commitment to fostering an interdisciplinary and collaborative environment in tackling the challenge of digital preservation. Meanwhile, it is crucial to continually build up and enhance the capabilities and competencies of GRS' different professions and grades in managing the multiplying growth of digital information/records which have ever been experienced.

GRS' training and professional development strategy

19. To support our teams in keeping pace with the professional sector, GRS has developed a comprehensive training and professional development strategy for the Archivist grade officers which focuses on three key areas, namely, (1) core archival and records management knowledge; (2) digital capacity; and (3) interdisciplinary knowledge and collaboration. Our approach includes participating in educational programs and workshops that cover both fundamental concepts, new trends and best practice in the field. Besides, we strive to foster an environment of interdisciplinary collaboration and broaden our teams' working experience and knowledge base by participating in cross-disciplinary projects and initiatives. We also intend to promote innovation and enhance problem-solving capabilities through diverse perspectives.

20. To better equip ourselves in meeting the challenges ahead, we will continue to inject necessary resources in training and professional development such that our staff could possess both subject-specific skills, such as selection and appraisal, digital preservation technologies, copyright legislation, and metadata standards as well as generic professional/project skills, including risk management, audit and certification, and communication.

Implementation

21. Following the training and professional development strategy, different teams of GRS have engaged in various training opportunities, including in-person and online courses, webinars and workshop, etc. The training sessions are conducted by esteemed professional institutions or the Civil Service College of the Government with focus on the topics including archives and records management, digital preservation, innovation and technology, risk and disaster management, ethics, compliance, governance and management.

22. Recognising the importance of collaboration in the digital era, GRS also seeks to build professional relationships within the archives and records management sector and related fields. Various professional visits have been arranged. For examples, our officers attended the International Council on Archives Congress in Abu Dhabi, and visited the National Library and Archives of Quebec, the McGill University Collection Centre, the Canadian Centre for Architecture and Shenzhen Library of the Mainland China in 2023/24. We also received visits from the Relics and Heritage Office of Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, and the Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Archives and Guangzhou Archives of the Mainland China in 2023/24. These visits served to deepen our professional knowledge and strengthen ties with our global partners and fellow professionals.

Conclusion

23. Right from 10 years' ago, having envisaged the rapid growing of innovation and technology, particularly digital technology, we re-examined GRS' role and re-positioned ourselves under a new vision, to be the leading, most insightful and resourceful public archives in Hong Kong that excels in preserving and promoting the documentary heritage of our city in the digital age. Our mission¹ is also inseparable from harnessing technology and addressing the challenges of digital age.

24. Indeed, the rapid evolving digital technology brings numerous challenges to archives institutions including GRS. As highlighted in this report, we embrace these challenges and have been tackling these challenges in different ways. The new AC being constructed aims to provide the brand new architecture and facilities for preserving the Government's ever growing records with enduring value in the coming decades. We have been rolling out ERKS to strengthen B/Ds' capacities in managing electronic records upfront and ironing out plans for developing suitable policy/strategy and

¹ Our mission is:

- To build comprehensive and diversified archival collections;
- To provide user-friendly and convenient access to the archival collections;
- To build a digital archive with modern technologies;
- To promote good records management practices among government bureaux and departments and public organisations;
- To provide advanced facilities for storage, preservation and retrieval services;
- To promote awareness, appreciation and proper use of documentary heritage in our community; and
- To foster a closer partnership with other archives.

guidelines as well as new system for managing digital archives. We have been enhancing the platforms and means for archives discovery to meet the changing user demands and expectations under the digital age. Last but not least, through training and professional development, we strive to equip the workforce with updated core skills and knowledge as well as new competencies required for addressing the challenges of digital age. With the foundation laid in the past decade, GRS will continue to leverage the challenges of new technology and work towards excellence in preservation of documentary heritage in the digital age and a better archival future in Hong Kong.