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Recommended Citation

Yan, Lu, "Lu Yan Associate Professor of History, COLA, travels to London" (2012). *Faculty Travel Reports*. 74.
https://scholars.unh.edu/international_travel/74

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Lu Yan

Associate Professor of History - College of Liberal Arts

Professor Lu Yan traveled to London and Oxford to continue her research plan for her book on social activism during late colonial rule in British Hong Kong.



Professor Lu Yan outside walls of Rhodes House

In the early summer of 2012, I spent two weeks in London and Oxford to collect materials for my book project on social activism and late colonial rule in British Hong Kong. The trip was the second half of a research plan abroad, which included three weeks in Hong Kong during the summer of 2011. Both trips were very rewarding—I was able to get both sides of the story and to have a feel of the places where the many individuals in my story had once lived and worked.

The Hong Kong trip in the summer of 2011 went as I anticipated and planned. I had been in Hong Kong a few times, and researched in the former British colony's Public Record Office, in the more radical Federation of Trade Unions (FTU)'s archive where I was the first outsider who allowed access, and in the Special Collection of the Main Library at the University of Hong Kong. This time in 2011, my focus was on local newspapers, most of which have been microfilmed and housed in the Special Collection of Hong Kong in the Main Library of HKU.

Being the center for research materials on Hong Kong, the Special Collection of Hong Kong in HKU holds nearly everything published and available about Hong Kong. It thus attracted scholars from around the world, particularly those of former British colonies and Europe. The university makes it easy for local residents as well as outside researchers to use its resources. I was very lucky to be able to book a room in the Graduate House in the university which stretched my funding to a three-week stay. Except the Sundays when the library was closed, my routine of these three weeks consisted of moving between the Graduate

House and the Library, and then to a student canteen nearby. I was able to survey the local newspapers for over a decade, from the late 1920s to the early 1940s, a period not covered by my previous research but very important for the book project overall.

In contrast to the Hong Kong trip, my research in London and Oxford was full of wonderful discoveries. Initially planned only for the National Archives in London, I added Oxford when I learned about the papers of a former Hong Kong Governor housed in Rhodes House there. Once arrived, I was delightfully surprised that there were a lot more personal papers by individuals who once held important positions in British Hong Kong. The archive at Rhodes House operates in the old fashioned manner—none of these papers is cited in their online catalog. I was guided by the librarian to the card drawers and learned ways to find my treasure. Although old-fashioned, the archive operates in a very efficient way. Files I requested usually were brought out in thirty-minutes or so. I had to leave with some regrets that I could not stay two days more to check all the files that I wished to examine.

The research at the National Archives in London was initially intended to fill the gap of some files that I found in Colonial Office and Foreign Office documents, unavailable in microfilmed form which I was able to examine in Hong Kong. Once again, research in the Archives turned out more than I expected. I discovered that not just more files have been recently declassified and made available, but the microfilming of these documents has been "random" and only constitutes 5-10% of the total, as I was told by a reference librarian. Fortunately, I was able to get a recent catalog, available only in the Archives, and recorded documents that I consider to be the most important for my book project.

I am grateful to the Center for International Education, whose Faculty International Development Grant is a major part of the funding that enabled these research trips. Although scholars now have better access to research materials, thanks to the new technology, on-site research still remains vital. The reward for going to places opened more possibilities than one can imagine by sitting in front a computer linked to internet. I certainly gained far greater access to source materials and discovered tangible traces of individual human beings who once played a big part in the making of British Empire in its last stage. In the past two semesters, I had been able to make three presentations at regional and (inter)national conferences on some of my research. And I am eagerly looking forward to the close-reading and writing-up of the materials I brought back through this summer.





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