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Internship in the Antiquities and Monuments Office

With the summer internship opportunities provided by the Department of Anthropology, I had a chance to work in the Antiquities and Monuments Office this summer. It was a one-month full-time internship and I was assigned to the team of Monument Records under the Education and Publicity Unit. My main duties were to assist in compiling and updating research files, and to help in the stocktaking of collections in the Reference Library at the Hong Kong Heritage Discovery Centre.

During the internship, I dealt with the information and references used in the assessment of historic buildings, which included newspaper articles, books, academic journals, floor plans, architectural surveys and official records. This experience enhanced my understanding in the complicated process of each heritage impact assessment conducted by AMO. I was also asked to perform some special tasks, for instance, to do a brief research on the practices of other countries in setting up the plaques that introduce heritages. It was a great opportunity for me to know more about other nations' works and progresses on heritage conservation.

I still remember that I asked one of my colleagues why a building could be listed as a "heritage" while others could not, what the criteria was and who had the right to decide. She answered me that there were teams in AMO that would gather related information and do surveys on the buildings; these research findings together with the advices given by the Antiquities Advisory Board had an important role to play in the decision-making process. Though the public are free to nominate any buildings with historical and cultural significance, it seems that they have little participation in making the final decision. This leads to several interesting questions – do the assessment results reflect the values of general public? Or they just represent the values of elite class or in an extended sense, the western cultural values?

I also had a dialogue with the curator in the unit, and his words were very inspiring to me. He told me that a single judgement made by them came with huge responsibility, because if they said that an object had important archaeological values, it would become an official answer and the public would be convinced. He emphasized that everything was just constructed; there was no right or wrong judgement. This reminded me of the concept of "Authorized Heritage Discourse" – a

hegemonic discourse in which expert ideas of “heritage” are validated and naturalized. The officials’ knowledge in the field gives them power, and in return their power legitimizes their knowledge.

This internship experience did not only give me a brief idea about the governmental work in preserving local cultural heritage, it also led me to reflect about the discourse of heritage. Most importantly, I found this internship experience useful in helping me to understand and to relate to the anthropological theories that I learnt in different courses.