

The Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch

2000/2001 President's Report Presented at the 41st Annual General Meeting On Friday 16th March 2001

At the Hong Kong Club

Only those who take leisurely what the people
of the world are busy about
can be busy about what the people of the world
take leisurely.
Chang Ch'ao

Introduction

This is my fifth President's report. In addition to the first two-and-a-half months of 2001, it covers nine months of 2000 during which we celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the reconstitution of our Branch. The Royal Asiatic Society was founded in London in 1823 by that eminent Sanskrit scholar Henry Thomas Colebrooke. Its Royal Charter was granted the following year. Even in those early times Hong Kong was pretty quick off the mark. A Branch was formed here in 1847 but it lasted only 12 years. In my Report I shall look at some of the things we have achieved during 2000/2001 and make comparisons with earlier years.

Membership

As at March 12, 2001, total membership stood at 477. This comprised 391 local members and 86 overseas members. After the Council meeting on 26 January 2000, through to 13 March 2001, 100 new members were recruited. During the 1960s and '70s there were few organisations with similar aims to our own. Since then a number have been established. Today they included Asian studies centres in universities, friends of museum groups, various overseas branches of western institutions as well as other Hong Kong societies. While we have splendid relationships with our sister institutions some competition has naturally been generated. This is healthy. Nonetheless, in the 1960s the general view was (see volume I of RASHKB Journal) '... we do not go out into the highways and byways to recruit members....'

As a well qualified member of staff at the University of Hong Kong said to me during the past year, 'In the 1960s, it was not easy to join the RASHKB. It was quite exclusive. Meetings were usually held in the Hong Kong Club.' Since the Hand Over of Hong Kong, from Britain to China, we have had a recruitment

drive. This has paid off. It was necessary largely because of the appreciable drop in numbers with many members leaving the Territory.

With about 73 per cent of our members being aged between 40 and 60, we were pleased, during 2000/2001, to see a few of our younger members playing active parts. I have special pleasure in thanking Moody Tang, Josephine Wong and Crystal Tang for their assistance. Our Society needs more younger people taking part to leaven the membership.

Continuing, it gives me great pleasure to report that our long-serving Vice President, Dr Elizabeth Sinn, was awarded a Bronze Bauhinia Star in the Hong Kong SARs 2000 Honours' List for her work in the field of Heritage. We like to believe consideration was also given to her related work as a long time office bearer of our Branch where her contribution has been considerable: congratulations Elizabeth! I also have great pleasure in congratulating two of our members for 'pushing back the frontiers of knowledge'. They are Dr Sheilah Hamilton and Dr Peter Halliday our Honorary Editor. As mature students, both received their doctoral degrees from the University of Hong Kong. Very well done!

During the course of the year we were delighted to receive a letter from Dr Marjorie Topley who played a leading part in the re-establishment of our Branch in 1960. We have also kept in touch with Dr James Hayes and Mr David Gilkes. All three served as presidents. All three are now Honorary Members.

On a sadder note, we are sorry to record the passing, at 82, of Lord Murray MacLehose who held the distinctions of being not only the longest serving governor but also of one of Hong Kong's greatest achievers. He was our RASHKB Patron from 1971 to 1982 and, later, we were proud to bestow honorary membership upon him. In a letter to our Branch Lady MacLehose wrote: 'The many generous tributes to his life and work have greatly cheered me'. Another of our long time members to pass across was Sheila Sersale who served with the Hong Kong Housing Society in the pioneering days when public housing was getting into its stride. She is one of our many members who laid post-World War Two foundations for the Hong Kong we know today. We are also sorry to have to record the passing of long-time RAS member Patricia Loseby who claimed to be Hong Kong's first practising woman solicitor. We will remember them.

Membership drive and public relations

It is important for an old, established organisation like ours to stand up and be counted. With this aim in mind our membership drive coupled with public relations has, as I said before, continued. In addition to giving talks to various bodies the views of some of our members are not infrequently sought by the media. Certainly those of us who have been involved in this drive have achieved something. It is possible for numbers to continue to increase if we carry on

working at it and showing the flag. We now have our own web site, thanks to Moody Tang, on www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk. But there is no point in expansion for the sake of expansion. First, we have to decide what the optimum size of our Branch should be. Some members already complain that they cannot go on visits because they are frequently oversubscribed. Increasing numbers does of course bring increased administrative problems and we are grateful to Dr Peter Barker who, in conjunction with Mary Painter, has been responsible for upgrading our computer database.

Publications

Volume 38, a special Millennium and 40th Anniversary edition, came out hot off the press in December 2000. It is a splendid, 'bumper' issue with 412 pages and includes a good mix of scholarly articles besides Notes and Queries and book reviews. There are many original photographs, both colour and black and white. One of the strong points of our Society has always been the Journal which has been published ever since the RASHKB was reformed. If one needs to obtain obscure information about local history, customs or culture it is surprising how often one can find something pertaining to what you need in one of our journals. There is nothing else in Hong Kong really quite like them.

They contain a wealth of observations and well-researched material written by both RAS members and non-members who have frequently lived and worked close to their subjects for considerable periods. Such studies often contrast with those of other scholars who, because of lack of personal contact through no fault of their own, must distance themselves from their subjects and rely largely on secondary sources. We owe a special debt of gratitude to our present Honorary Editor, Dr Peter Halliday. Nevertheless we must not forget earlier editors such as Drs Patrick Hase, James Hayes, David Faure and their predecessors, who put in countless hours in honorary capacities. Do you possess any special knowledge or expertise? Do you have something important to say regarding Hong Kong's past? If so, we look forward to reading your contribution.

Over the past year selected papers and articles from our Journals have been digitised and placed on the Hong Kong University Libraries Homepage. The Home Page includes a search mechanism thus obviating the need for an index. We are grateful to the University for giving us the opportunity to co-operate with them on this meaningful project.

Our publications continue to attract attention and sell to scholars and discerning readers around the world. Over the past year a number of bodies have requested permission to quote from, or to display, photographs from our last book, *In the Heart of the Metropolis: Yaumatei and its People*. Such requests are normally granted provided due acknowledgement is given. Our bimonthly Newsletter continues to be read avidly. RAS member Robin Bridge wrote: 'My thanks to all those who have researched and compiled such an informative

Newsletter. Delighted to receive it e-mail, too.' While a few of us have fed in information over the past year the Newsletter was prepared, firstly, by Sarah Parnell and, for the second part of the year, by her successor, Mary Painter.

We again congratulate our members who have published in their own right over the past year. Because of numbers we are unable to name them individually. Other than in special cases we try to refrain from showing favouritism to individual authors. Nevertheless any member who publishes may, if he or she wishes, have their work mentioned in our Newsletter. Writing is, some contend, a form of therapy. One sometimes wonders how those who do not write manage to escape the madness, the melancholia and, yes, the panic which sometimes surrounds the human situation.

Activities

Another of the fields where our Branch has made significant contributions over many decades has obviously been with our lecture and visit programme. These may be described as the backbone of our Society. Over the past year these have consisted of lectures, averaging about one a month, mainly at and jointly with the Hong Kong City Hall. These sessions are open to the general public free of charge. This is a form of community service. At the Chi Lin Nunnery talk well over 90 people attended. Over the past year we have in addition mounted visits locally and two visits outside the Hong Kong SAR. All these had leaders -- sometimes more than one working as a team -- who had a thorough understanding of their subjects (see Appendices One and Two).

In some cases, because some of our members have good connections, it has also been possible to call upon the assistance of knowledgeable local people: for example in the case of Dr Ting who was able to invite people to assist with our visits to the China Mainland. Records show that, in the 1980s and the early 1990s for example, our visits outside Hong Kong were not well supported. Planned trips sometimes had to be cancelled. In the 1960s and '70s, it was not easy for various reasons (for government servants for example) to visit China. Over the past few years this situation has changed. More recently, on our tours outside Hong Kong it has not been possible, sometimes, to enroll everyone who wanted to join. It is interesting to mention here that our first overseas tour was to Thailand back in 1973.

Although full day or week-end seminars, especially during the 1960s and the early '70s, were a fairly regular feature of Branch activities, they have not played such an important part in recent years. This was partly why our conference, titled *Hong Kong: Forty Years of a Growing City*, held during our 40th anniversary year as a joint function with the Museum of History, was so welcome. It consisted largely of our own members as speakers, persons on whom we rely so much. They included the Reverend Carl T. Smith, Dr Patrick Hase and Mr Tim Ko. Tim's family has lived in Kowloon for five generations, since the 1850s. These three speakers are outstanding examples of members who have put, and

continue to put, so much into our Branch. The idea of holding this conference, which included two films, was proposed by Dr Elizabeth Sinn. We are grateful to her, too, both for chairing the organising committee and for acting as mistress of ceremonies. We are also grateful to the Centre of Asian Studies at the Hong Kong University for its assistance.

Few members can recall the activities during the early days of our Branch and the rapidly changing Colony in which it functioned. These need to be recorded. Such sources of information will not be around forever. A prime task of our Society has been, and must continue to be, the recording of Hong Kong's past before it disappears for all time. This should include both oral history as well as memories of Branch members. It may involve, for instance, working as a government servant in the New Territories when it was far more rural than it is today. It may be about Chinese puppets, bamboo scaffolding, women who apply Chinese-style facials with a long, cotton thread, or of other aspects of the rapidly fading local lifestyle.

In the summer a questionnaire concerning our activities was prepared, largely by Jason Wordie, and sent to all members. Although the return of 20 per cent was disappointing, it did provide a great deal of useful information. Although there were the inevitable caustic comments, the returns showed clearly by far the majority of our members are well satisfied with what we are doing. We have however taken careful note of suggestions and some have already been implemented.

Because of the large number of lecturers, tour leaders and others involved, it is not possible to name everyone who has contributed to the success of our activities. Many (although not all) are named in the appendices. To everyone concerned a very sincere thank you. We cannot leave it at that, however, and a special vote of thanks must go to our Honorary Activities Co-ordinator, Valery Garrett, together with her committee members. These consisted of the Reverend Carl T. Smith, Drs Michael Lau, Patrick Hase, Joseph Ting as well as May Holdsworth, Sarah Parnell, Peter Stuckey, Jason Wordie and Mary Painter. Others who gave a helping hand were past Council member Phillip Bruce and member Michael Broom. If anyone else would like to assist in any way please let us know. We have a large membership and we appreciate that it contains a considerable pool of talent, but we also appreciate some people like to be invited before they are prepared to step forward.

Projects and other activities

We do, as readers appreciate, undertake various projects and receive enquiries from around the world about local history and the like, where sometimes the specific answers do not appear as important as the quests to find them. During the year under review we received interesting information from old soldiers in Britain about searchlights used in pre-World War Two Hong Kong.

This information was passed on to Comendador Arthur Gomes of the Hong Kong Prisoners of War Association for publication in their Monthly Newsletter.

We also received an enquiry from Mr Kenneth Evans, in England, about his ancestors who lived both in China and in Hong Kong. One of these was Thomas Child Hayllar KC, Attorney General, who at one stage was embroiled in a dispute with Governor Pope-Hennessy. This has been well documented. For our efforts, Mr Evans made a small donation to our Branch. This appears to be the first time the RASHKB has been 'paid' for undertaking research. We also received an enquiry from a Dr Hansell in Bath, UK, who had bought a 19th century clock which had been made by Douglas Lapraik, in Hong Kong. Information was requested about the latter gentleman who started his working life as a clockmaker and died a shipping magnate. The information requested was duly supplied.

The RAS/AMO Volunteers

The working group of 20 plus RAS volunteers has continued to make a meaningful contribution to the conservation of heritage by assisting the Government Antiquities and Monuments Office. Most of the visits have taken place on Saturdays and this year they have included such places as villas in Kowloon Tong and excavations at Tai Fu Tai in San Tin. The more energetic members have then been called upon to undertake follow-up research, to write reports and make recommendations. We are grateful to all our steadfast volunteers and if anyone else would like to join them, especially those with a sound knowledge of local building or local history, they would be welcome. We also need more members who can read Chinese. As always a special thank you must go to Chartered Surveyors Bill Greaves and Bob Horsnell, both long time residents on whom our Volunteers depend for leadership. Historian Tim Ko has also helped in various ways. We are grateful to all concerned.

Friends of the RASHKB

Our group of 'Friends' in Britain, who held their first meeting in July 1998, consisting largely of RASHKB members who lived in Hong Kong for many years, have had another active year. Their activities are detailed in a separate report written by RASHKB Immediate Past-President, David Gilkes, who is now Chairman of the Friends in Britain. His report will shortly be presented by me at this AGM. Of course our Branch keeps in close contact with the Friends. Past President James Hayes wrote '[The standing of RASHKB] is mirrored by the success of the Friends in UK and is very gratifying.' The Friends deserve our congratulations on their achievements. The setting up of this overseas group has been one of the most important events that has happened in recent years. It allows our members who return to Britain to live, to maintain links with the Territory and our Hong Kong Branch.

In an effort to strengthen contacts among our overseas members who are not members of the 'Friends' we circulated a letter together with the 1999/2000

President's Report. In return we received replies from Messrs Roderick MacLean MBE and B C Fawcett who both now live in Britain. The latter is researching the Chinese Labour Corps that served with the Allies in France during World War One. It is good to hear from old friends.

RASHKB Library and finance

Both our Honorary Librarian, Julia Chan, and our Honorary Treasurer, Robert Nield, who have contributed so much to our Branch, have prepared their own reports. These they will present at this AGM. I wish to make it clear that we depend on the professional experience of Julia and Robert a great deal. We are grateful for their assistance over many years. We are also grateful to the staff at the City Hall, and the staff of PricewaterhouseCooper for their unfailing assistance and support. We are especially grateful to Mr Christian Stewart and to Ms Ada Loi, and of course to Robert for doing most of the work for our submission to the Inland Revenue Department for charitable institutional status.

Accommodation

Again we are grateful to our many good friends on whom we rely for accommodation. They include the Public Records Office, where our Journals and some of our archives are stored, the latter on permanent loan. We are also grateful to the City Hall where are lectures (which are run as joint functions with the City Hall) take place and again to PricewaterhouseCooper who kindly allow us to hold committee meetings on their premises. A heartfelt thank you to all concerned.

The Council

Other than those that have to be taken at AGMs, all important Branch decisions are made in Council to whom our membership has delegated the running of our Branch. The latter functions completely autonomously from our Headquarters in London and separately from other Branches in Asia. Over the past year the RASHKB Council has comprised two Vice Presidents, Drs Elizabeth Sinn and Michael Lau. Other members have included Robert Nield, Julia Chan, Valery Garrett, Bob Horsnell, Tim Ko and May Holdsworth. It has also included Drs Patrick Hase, Joseph Ting, Peter Barker, Peter Halliday and Janet Lee Scott. The Reverend Carl Smith, our Honorary Vice President, and Sarah Parnell as Assistant Secretary, and her successor, Mary Painter, have been co-opted, non-voting members. We are grateful to everyone who sat on the Council and gave of their time.

Acknowledgements

Having thanked Council and Activity Committee members, speakers and leaders of groups and various others persons, who have I failed to mention? Firstly we must thank RASHKB members, Angus Forsyth and John Budge, for

their valuable professional advice. Past Council member Geoffrey Roper still helps in various ways quietly behind the scenes as do some spouses of Council members. We value everyone's assistance. So many people and institutions have rendered help to us over the course of the year. It is quite possible that someone who deserves to be thanked has inadvertently slipped through the net. If there is such a person or institution who I have not thanked then my profound apologies. An extra word of thanks, nevertheless, must go to Sarah Parnell who served as Assistant Secretary for seven months of the past year although she has now stepped down. She is, nevertheless, continuing to play an energetic and active part in the work of our Branch. In her place we welcomed Mary Painter who quickly settled down in her new post.

Conclusions

How do you judge a society such as ours? We average about two functions a month. This is considerably more than most similar societies. We undertake research and publish scholarly works, including an annual Journal issued free of charge to all fully paid up members. Having read this Report you will know clearly what other benefits you can enjoy. We can be proud of what we achieve. We give value for money.

Rosemary Lee, past Hong Kong resident and a RAS 'Friend' in Britain wrote: 'The RAS is a truly remarkable organisation – so vital and with such a variety of activities'. James Hayes wrote from Down Under, '... the impression I have of the Society from afar, through newsletters and publications, is that it has never been better ... It is all due to the team and their sense of our Society's abiding worth.'

There have been and will continue to be, depending on the way our Branch develops, changes regarding the membership of our Council. For my own part the time has come. As an octogenarian and after four-and-a-half-years at the helm I must make room for my successor. While old age is not bad when you consider the option a younger President will no doubt bring in new ideas. It will be good for the health of the Branch to have a change. I'm sure I shall miss the duties which the post entails. Following many distinguished RASHKB Presidents, including both those who held office during the 12 years in the mid 19th century and those over the past 40 years, it has been a great honour for me to have served as your President.

Much of the work of the President is, of course, open-ended but you cannot make an omelette without breaking the odd egg. While it is good to have fire in one's belly inter-personnel skills are also important especially in a voluntary organisation like ours. Occasionally there has been a bit of flak. But as Winston Churchill wrote, it is exhilarating to be shot at without success. Many changes have taken place during my period of office, which spanned the Handover from Britain to China, entering the New Millennium and our RAS 40th Anniversary. Through the efforts of many the Branch, which is much more

complex now than it was when I took over, is strong and of good heart. May I thank you again for your unfailing support and friendship. I know you will show the same measure of support to our new President.

I conclude by quoting a translation of one of my favourite Chinese poems:

Dry vines, old trees, evening crows –
 Small bridge, flat bank, water flows –
 Old road, slim horse, west wind blows –
 And as the sun westward sets,
 Forlorn love, far away, no one knows!

A great Yuan dramatist

Dr Dan Waters ISO BBS

Appendix One

Activities – Talks

Date

2000

Friday 28 April: *Chinese Children's Books*, by Don Cohn

Friday 5 May: *Recollections of a District Officer in the NT in the 1950s*, by Denis Bray

Friday 16 June: *Pre-British Kowloon*, by Dr Patrick Hase

Friday 25 August; *Lantau Mountain Camp*; by Geoff Lovegrove

Friday 22 September: *The Architecture of the Chi Lin Nunnery at Diamond Hill*, by Professor Puay Peng Ho

Friday 27 October: *Awards to Britons in the Service of China*, by David Mahoney

Friday 10 November: *George Smith, Iconoclastic Bishop (1813-1871)*, by Dr Gillian Bickley and Dr Verner Bickley

Friday 24 November: *The Life of Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, Commissioner of Customs 1857-1938*, by Dr Cyril Cannon

Saturday 9 December: *Hong Kong: Forty Years of a Growing City*. One-day Conference jointly held with HK Museum of History to mark the Society's 40th Anniversary. Speakers: Reverend Carl Smith, Dr Patrick Hase and Tim Ko.

2001

Friday 9 February: *Salt Production in the New Territories*, by Dr Patrick Hase

Appendix Two

Activities – Visits

Date

2000

Saturday 8 April: *Private View—The ‘Mosseum’ of Sculpture*, led by Roger Moss, with lunch at Lok Yu Teahouse

April 1 to 4: *Foshan, Tinghu and Zhaoging*, led by Dr Joseph Ting

Saturday 27 May: *Museum of Coastal Defence*, at Lei Yue Mun, led by Dr Joseph Ting and Phillip Bruce

Saturday 24 June, *Bethanie Church Pokfulam*, led by Phillip Bruce

Saturday 23 September, *Chi Lin Nunnery*, led by Professor Puay Peng Ho

September 29 – October 6: *Central Vietnam*, led by Dr Patrick Hase

Saturday 18 November: *Police Museum at Wanchai Gap*, led by Curator Wong Nai Kwan

2001

Saturday 13 January: *Hong Kong Heritage Museum*, at Shatin, led by Valery Garrett and May Holdsworth

22 to 29 January: *Goa: Former Portuguese Enclave*, led by Dr Patrick Hase

Saturday 10 February: *Saltfields at Tai O*, led by Dr Patrick Hase

Saturday 3 March: *Buddhist Sculptures: New Discoveries at HK Museum of Art*, led by Rose Li Assistant Curator