

# ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY, HONG KONG BRANCH

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT – 2005/06

### *Introduction*

I would like to first of all welcome our guests this evening:

- Miss Agnes Lee, Senior Librarian and Ms Chimene Ho, Chief Librarian, both of the Hong Kong Central Library
- Ruth Benny – in charge of our website

Before I begin I would like to explain to you what we have prepared for you here tonight and what will be going on:

- As you arrived you will have seen on the screen a showing of Hedda Morrison's classic photographs of Hong Kong, taken in 1946 and 1947. These, of course, have been recently published by our member Ed Stokes.
- You will also have seen on the walls a display of some of the stunning photographs taken by our member Tony Hedley. These are of the RAS second trip to Bhutan and of Tony's own travels to Tibet, Laos and Angkor.
- Many of our members have published books recently, and a number of these are either on the table or circulating round the room. Recent (and some not-so-recent) publications by RAS members include:

- Anthony Lawrence – *The Fragrant Chinese*
- Arthur Hacker – *China Illustrated*
- Carl Smith – *Chinese Christians*
- Chris Coghlan – contributed to Gillian Bickley's *A Magistrate's Court in 19<sup>th</sup> Century HK*
- Christopher Munn – *Anglo-China*
- Dan Waters – *One Couple, Two Cultures*
- Sir David Akers-Jones – *Feeling the Stones*
- Ed Stokes – *Hedda Morrison's Hong Kong*
- Elizabeth Sinn – *Hong Kong: British Crown Colony Revisited*
- Fung Chi Ming – *Reluctant Heroes*
- Geoffrey Roper – also contributed to *A Magistrate's Court*
- Gillian Bickley – *A Magistrate's Court in 19<sup>th</sup> Century HK* and *The Golden Needle*
- Hugh Baker – *Hong Kong Imgaes: People and Animals* and *Teach Yourself Cantonese*
- James Hayes – *Friends and Teachers*
- Jason Wordie – *Streets: Exploring Hong Kong Island*
- May Holdsworth – *Foreign Devils*
- Nigel Collett – *The Butcher of Amritsar*
- Patricia Lim – *Discovering Hong Kong's Cultural Heritage*
- Peter Wesley-Smith – *Unequal Treaty*
- Randolph O'Hara – *The Homecoming*
- Simon Winchester – *Outposts*
- Solomon Bard – *Voices from the Past*
- Susanna Hoe and Derek Roebuck – *The Taking of Hong Kong*
- Tim Ko – *Ruins of War* (with Jason Wordie)
- Valery Garrett – *Heaven is High* and a number of others on her specialist area of Chinese costumes
- Verner Bickley – *Searching for Frederick*
- Robert Nield – *Counting House*

Congratulations to all of them, and apologies to any I have left out. It was not meant to be a complete list – just what I could find on my bookshelves!

- Also on display are some of our own publications:
  - *In the Heart of the Metropolis*
  - *Beyond the Metropolis*
  - *Hong Kong Going and Gone*
- Later this evening, RAS member Hugh Baker will deliver a speech to us entitled “Thinking the Undinkable.”

### *Membership*

No society has any purpose without a good solid membership, so it is this area that I would like to turn to first. Our total membership continues to be six-hundred-and-something, the same figure it has been for a number of years. This is at the same time both a good thing and a not-so-good thing. In the early days of the re-establishment of the Branch in Hong Kong, it had the reputation of being an exclusively expatriate domain, full of long-serving academics and government employees. It is a fact that the number of such people in Hong Kong continues to reduce each year, yet our membership remains the same. So that is a good thing – we are now attracting new members from very different walks of life, by no means exclusively expatriate, and people who are only here for a short term but determined to make the most of their stay.

The not-so-good thing is that we are unique amongst Hong Kong’s clubs and societies, but there are so many potential members who have never heard of us. Hong Kong’s history continues to hold a deep fascination for anybody who scratches its surface, but not enough of such people are finding us. We rely largely on word of mouth to promote ourselves. And I would like to give recognition here to Dr Dan Waters, who appears at more talks and radio shows than the rest of us put together. Dan is a one-man marketing machine, but he would appreciate help. If any member has any ideas on how we can boost our membership, I would be delighted to hear from them.

We have five categories of membership – Life, Single Annual, Joint Annual, Institutional and Student. About 30% of our members are Life Members, and about two-thirds are Annual Members. What might be surprising, however, is the number of members we have overseas. Over a quarter of our members are overseas, with the biggest category being Life Members. Another pleasant surprise is to note that about a quarter of our membership is Chinese.

### *Friends of the RAS HK Branch in Britain*

Whilst talking about members I would like to acknowledge the support we get from our branch-within-a-branch, the group of Friends in Britain. This group of about 75 former Hong Kong residents meets regularly and they have a very active programme of events. Members of this body include a number who are well known to many of us. The Chairman is our former president Mr David Gilkes. They always keep us updated on their doings – their annual report is tabled and is in front of you (Agenda

Item 3). You will see there that they have had a number of interesting talks and lectures, including one by Dan Waters. Particular thanks go to The Friends this year as, during 2005, they sent a very generous donation of £1,000 to our Ride Fund, of which more later.

### *Activities*

Many people join the RAS because of our organised activities programme. And luckily we have a very active Activities Committee that is responsible for setting each year our very varied programme of events. Until very recently this was chaired by Jason Wordie, and I would like to thank him very much for all his hard work. He had to step down owing to pressure of work, and he has been replaced by Geoffrey Emerson who very kindly stepped in for a seamless transition, continuing where Jason left off. I would also like to thank Vanda Cole for her contribution to this committee during most of the year; she too had to step down very recently.

Since the last Annual General Meeting we have had no fewer than 30 organised activities. These include 13 lectures at the City Hall. I would like to thank the staff of the City Hall for their help in providing this great venue to us free of charge.

A list of activities over the last twelve months is attached as an appendix.

I intend to formalise procedures for recording our activities, on CD for the lectures and in the form of photographs and videos for our visits. A start has been made by the Central Library to record some of our City Hall Lectures, but there have been some quality issues. I hope to report success in this area when I address you next year.

### *The Journal*

Still other people join us for our Journal. We continue to be very lucky and extremely rare amongst such societies, in Hong Kong and just about anywhere, in that we are able to produce an annual Journal containing such a good variety of material, from original and important pieces of primary research, to lighter yet nonetheless interesting pieces relating to our field of interest. For many years now the Journal has been guided through its various stages by our Hon Editor, Dr Peter Halliday. He has done an amazing job in collating the material and dealing with every stage of the Journal's production.

During the last twelve months, however, an Editorial Board has come into being to assist the Hon Editor in this enormous task. By employing modern technology and professional proof-readers we hope to improve considerably the technical quality of the Journal. We also hope to make it a lot cheaper to produce. Volume 44 will be with you in a couple of months or so, and I hope you will see the fruits of the Editorial Board's labours.

We continue to sell back issues of our Journal, both in Hong Kong and to overseas institutions, and we still have stock of every volume right back to Number One, from 1961. These are mostly kept at the Public Records Office and I would like to record my thanks to Bernard Hui and all the staff of the PRO for continuing to look after us.

### *Other Publications*

One area where I am sorry that I can not report much progress is that of other publications. Over the years we have published some very impressive books, and these continue to sell well – *In the Heart of the Metropolis*, *Beyond the Metropolis* and *Hong Kong Going and Gone*. I am determined that we have it within us to produce more books of a similar nature for the benefit of the Hong Kong public. I have recently established a working group to look into the massive task of updating RAS Fellow Dr Solomon Bard's milestone work *In Search of the Past*. I hope to report progress on this next time. We are also considering a special publication to mark our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2010/11 and a few ideas are being considered. There is a Publications Committee, and they are all patiently waiting for me to call a meeting.

### *Library*

A definite success story, however, is our library. Our Hon Librarian, Julia Chan, continues to do a first class job for us. Her report is tabled in front of you (Agenda Item 4) but she has allowed me to summarise it for you:

- 5792 volumes as at 1 March 2006, including 275 additions in the year
- Donations of new books are regularly listed in the Newsletter and on the website
- We received from Carl Smith his collection of 140,000 index cards, the record of his extensive research in Hong Kong and Macau. These were moved to the Central Library thanks to Agnes Lee and May Holdsworth
- Thanks to the major assistance of the University of Hong Kong Libraries, our Journals have been digitised and are now available for searching via Hong Kong Journals Online
- A full scan of all our Journals, also many thanks to HKU, will enable us more easily to produce the long-awaited Index
- The Central Library has spent much time and effort to produce a full printed catalogue of our book collection
- The Central Library is also recording for us our City Hall Lectures and they will be made available along with some 78 RTHK audio programmes on local history, dating from 1961 to 1987
- The usage of our library increased a lot compared to last year

### *The Shanghai Library*

Whilst on the subject of libraries, I would like to pass on some good news to you. RAS Member Geoffrey Bonsall recently visited Shanghai. Whilst there he had the honour to be the first RAS member since 1949 to actually see the books from the library of the North China Branch of the RAS – of which there are 20,000! Previous visits by Dan Waters and others had confirmed that the library had survived, but this is the first confirmed sighting.

### *A New Branch in Hangzhou?*

The North China Branch is, of course, no more. But I was contacted recently by a Judy Kolbas, now resident in Hangzhou. She is very keen to establish a branch of the

RAS there, and I have offered her all the assistance I can muster. An immediate offer came from Council Member Dr Betty Wei, whose forthcoming book is about Mr Ruan Yuan, the man who drained the famous West Lake and made it the beautiful thing that it still is today. If anybody is planning a visit to Hangzhou, please let me know and I will put you in touch with Judy.

### *Our Website*

I have already mentioned that our website continues to get better and better under the guidance of Ruth Benny. It is now attractive, user-friendly and increasingly visited by people from all over the world.

### *Volunteers*

Agenda Item 5 is to receive a report from the Volunteers. This is tabled before you and Bob Horsnell, the Commander-in-Chief of the Volunteers has authorised me to summarise it for you.

- The Volunteers were formed in 1992 to assist the Antiquities and Monuments Office with the recording of historical buildings in Hong Kong
- Membership is currently 27. Any RAS member can join. All that is needed is a broad interest in Hong Kong's built heritage
- Bob himself is a building surveyor, but he has in his team a civil engineer, a solicitor, an archaeological conservator, teachers, journalists, broadcasters and university undergraduates
- There is a bi-monthly newsletter covering the status of the various conservation projects that are going on, and some that should be going on but are not
- In the past year, the Volunteers have been surveying cemeteries, vetting AMO files, appearing on the radio and making field trips to places such as Tai Fu Tai, Nga Tsin Wai Village and the former Lyemun Barracks
- Further information can be found on the website

### *Finances*

Moving on to Agenda Item 6, the Hon Secretary will be asking you to ratify the appointment of a new auditor. Deloitte, had asked to increase their fee to a level that we could not afford. Very luckily for us, our Hon Secretary introduced me to Mr Tony Nedderman, who offered to perform this very necessary service for the same price that we had become accustomed to.

The accounts for the year ended 31 December 2005 are before you, and the Hon Treasurer has authorised me to give a quick whistle-stop tour of them:

- On page 2, the first impression you may get is that things are basically okay – and they are, I suppose. But look at the total subscription income – slightly down. And if we were to look at this figure for the last seven years (our rates were last increased in 1999) we can see that there has been zero growth in that time.

- If we were to look at the pattern of overhead expenses over the same period, we can see a different trend.
- The result for the year was satisfactory, but thanks largely to a one-off saving from rationalising the production of the Journal.
- We charge a reasonable fee for the activities that we organise, and the surplus made from them is a very necessary contributor to the cost of running our society.
- Page 3 shows our balance sheet, the main strength in which is our investment in Hongkong Bank shares. These continue to pay us more in dividends than if we had the money on deposit with them.
- Our large current liabilities figure should not alarm you. The negative amount is because we have to provide now for the cost of a Journal which will not be printed for another couple of years, by which time we have another year or two of subscription income under our belts.

### *The Ride Fund*

Almost the last item I would like to cover is The Sir Lindsay and Lady Ride Memorial Fund, Agenda Item 8. This fund came about through the initiative of my predecessor, Dr Patrick Hase, and through the fund-raising abilities of Mr Jason Wordie. Thanks to Jason having been able to secure an extremely generous donation of £30,000 from Lady Clague, widow of the late Sir Douglas Clague, Patrick's plan was put into operation.

The fund exists to finance the publication of originally researched works relating to Hong Kong studies that would otherwise not be commercially viable. The first of these, Fung Chi Ming's *Reluctant Heroes*, was published recently and is the first of a number of titles that are in various stages of completion. The Hong Kong Studies Series is in fact published jointly by the RAS and HK University Press, and we are greatly indebted to the Press's editor, Dr Colin Day, for his tremendous support, experience and guidance.

Forthcoming titles include works on life in the Stanley camps during the Japanese occupation; the very long-term residents of Hong Kong's cemeteries; traditional land law in the New Territories; and a number of personal memoirs.

You can see from the Ride Fund accounts before you that we are now well funded for a number of publications. You can expect many more to be coming out over the next few years.

### *The Council*

And finally, I would like to talk a little bit about your Council. I am indeed lucky to be surrounded by a body of most able, talented and enthusiastic people in the form of my fellow Council members.

Two Council members will not be standing for re-election at this meeting. They are Josephine Wong and Philip Stockton. I thank them both for their contribution and support during their time on Council.

On our various committees there is an increasing number of non-Council members who have come forward and shown that they are ready willing and able to play an active part in the running of this great society of which I am very proud to be a member. We are not a closed shop and we would welcome contributions and input from any of our members.

Finally, special thanks go to our Assistant Secretary, Jenny Day. She has been constantly behind all the activities and initiatives that I have referred to this evening, and none of them would have been possible without her patience, cheerfulness and sheer hard work. On behalf of the Council and all of us, thank you Jenny.

Robert Nield  
President  
28 April 2006

## Appendix – RAS Activities in 2005/06

2005

16 April	City Hall Lecture	Hong Kong's Heritage: Central Police Station Compound
29 April	City Hall Lecture	Stories from a Magistrate's Court in 19 <sup>th</sup> Century Hong Kong
13 May	City Hall Lecture	The Politics of Two Currencies
14 May	Museum Visit	China – Dawn of a Golden Age
20 May	Lecture	Bön: The Ancient Religion of Tibet
29 May	Lecture	Sir Catchick Paul Chater's Legacy to Hong Kong
4 June	Local Visit	University Hall and Bethanie
18 June	Local Visit	Hong Kong Film Archive
22 June	Seminar	Impressions of the East: The Art of George Chinnery
19 August	City Hall Lecture	Encountering George Chinnery and his use of Shorthand
26 August	City Hall Lecture	The Butcher of Amritsar's Chinese Roots
9 September	City Hall Lecture	Hedda Morrison's Hong Kong
16 September	City Hall Lecture	A Year of Living Dangerously
17 September	Local Visit	Hedda Morrison's Photographs
15 October	Local Visit	St John's Cathedral and St Paul's Church
22-29 October	Overseas Trip	Museum without Walls: The Nakasendo Highway
4 November	City Hall Lecture	Reaching out to the Bad Girls in Hong Kong Society
15 November	Local Visit	Kam Tin Da Jiu
18 November	City Hall Lecture	Chinese Canadians in the Second World War
25 November	Special Event	Quiz Night
2 December	City Hall Lecture	Carl Smith: A Celebration of his Work on Hong Kong and Macao
9 December	City Hall Lecture	Hong Kong Temples
10 December	Local Visit	Four Shau Kei Wan Temples
16 December	Lecture	Crisis in Command: BAAG in China 1942-45

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14 January	Local Visit	Hong Kong Maritime Museum
20 January	City Hall Lecture	One Couple, Two Cultures
24 February	City Hall Lecture	Liu Chi-wen: Revolutionary Leader
4 March	Local Visit	University of Hong Kong Library
11 March	Local Visit	Sheung Shiu Da Jiu
3-15 April	Overseas Trip	Study Tour of Yunnan and Tibet