

## **Friends of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch, London**

### **Chairman's Annual report 2024**

Fraternal greetings to the Society in Hong Kong.

The Friends in the UK have maintained a membership of around 70. Our activities in the past year have been in person but we have not ruled out further Zoom talks and enjoy joining those from Hong Kong. We continue to have talks approximately once every two months, plus occasional visits and trips.

We mainly use a beautiful panelled room in St Anne's Church, Soho for talks, which gives us a choice of Chinese restaurants nearby for the customary sociable lunch beforehand. We do still occasionally return to the RAS in Euston and will be there for our 2024 AGM on May 18th. We are very much looking forward to hearing from Prof Hugh Baker, who is due to be our speaker, looking back at decades of work in the field of traditional Chinese law.

We had our lunch to mark the Year of the Dragon at New Loon Fung in Soho on February 10th.

The highlight last year for a fortunate group of 15 of us was a trip to Edinburgh and Glasgow in May. We started with a guided tour of the National Museum of Scotland by an extremely enthusiastic (in a good way) guide. We also had private visits to the National Museums Collection Centre in Leith, and to Newhailes House just south of Edinburgh.

The Collections Centre is the main storage and conservation facility for Scotland's National Museums, and two of the curators had brought out material that they thought would be of particular interest to our group. From the Hong Kong collection, this included Governor David Wilson's flag from government house, autographed by his staff; a hand-painted panel recording the unveiling of the statue of Queen Victoria in Central in 1896 and her jubilee in 1897, and embroidered dresses made by a company specialising in Chinese opera costume. Some fine imperial Chinese textiles and ceramics were also laid out and we were able to discuss these with curators.



*Governor Wilson's flag*



*Friends members examine objects at Scotland's National Museums Collection Centre*

At a talk on the plant hunter George Forrest at the Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, we were allowed to inspect and handle much of their remarkable collection of his original written, painted and photographic material.

The archivist had been so generous in her efforts that we regretted not scheduling more time with her. This was the first time that she had done a presentation on Forrest, and it led on to your RASHK Zoom talk about Forrest's work. That evening, we were invited to the home of Junko Mackenzie, a friend of mine, to see her collection of Chinese propaganda posters.

One day was spent in Glasgow enjoying a curator-led visit to the Burrell Collection, and a self-guided visit to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum to see the Macintosh rooms, and the "Glasgow Boys" paintings.

Several excellent meals were arranged, and our final event was a fine tea at the Macintosh Tea Rooms in Glasgow.

We are very grateful to Kirsty Norman and Jill Trew for organising the visit.

For our AGM last year, Ian Lambot spoke to us on The Life of Kowloon Walled City, whose history he documented in a vast collection of photographs, and we were delighted to see some of them.

We heard from Philip Cracknell in August on "The Battle for Hong Kong and the Occupation", a topic on which he is of course the doyen.

Our eminent member Dr Frances Wood gave us a fascinating account in October entitled "Love, Libel, Literature, Loss" of the lives of Chen Yuan and Ling Shuhua which including a good deal of original research. Chen and Ling were a celebrated literary and academic couple in Peking in the 1920s and 30s and postwar London. Ling's affair with Julian Bell, nephew of Virginia Woolf and son of Vanessa Bell, at Wuhan in 1935 to 1937 was an unexpected twist.

Our talks also included a very enjoyable Zoom presentation by John Saeki on the topic of the last tigers in Hong Kong. This reprised his presentation to the Hong Kong group: we are always pleased to hear about speakers who have done live talks in Hong Kong, who might also speak to the Friends.

At the time of writing, we have just had an excellent visit to the Horniman Museum in south London, to be guided by curator Navjot Mangat through its exhibition entitled "茶, चाय, Tea". This included a good deal of the history and the link to the Opium Wars.

Extracts from Commissioner Lin Zexu's 林則徐 letter to Queen Victoria appear on the wall with the immortal line: "Has China ... ever yet sent forth a noxious article from its soil? Not to speak of our tea and rhubarb, things which your foreign countries could not exist a single day without ..."

The radicals of the Chinese character – grass, person, tree - were explained.

Afterward, we naturally repaired to a nearby café for tea and cake.

In our organisation, I am ably assisted by Florence Cantle, treasurer, Mary Painter, who produces our newsletter, and Eric Coskry, secretary. Kirsty Norman, David Gilkes and Jill Trew complete the committee. Eric, however, feels he has to step down and Mary has agreed to undertake the work of secretary. We thank him for his contribution over several years and thank Mary for also taking on the secretary's role.

As ever, Hong Kong members are very welcome at our events.

Paul Bolding, March 2024