

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

### Chairman's Annual report 2021

Fraternal greetings to the Society in Hong Kong.

I should start by saying that with his friends in Hong Kong, we mourn the loss of Mike Broom, who was the face of the RAS in Hong Kong for so long and was so welcoming to us when we visited. He will be deeply missed.

As of March 2021, 64 people were members of the Friends, up one on the same time last year.

For obvious reasons, we have not met physically since 14 March 2020 when Thomas Lai, a former Executive Manager at MTRC Ltd, gave us a fascinating talk about the MTR, its development and the ideas and the people who made it happen.

Like others no doubt, we held out hope that physical meetings would resume soon and were a bit slow to embrace the online alternative. We have done so however, and in fact once started, we not only gathered steam and increased the number of talks from the normal 5-6 per year, but also found a ready audience for them, at home and eager for intellectual stimulation and contact with friends. We have also benefited hugely from talks organised by the RAS in Hong Kong and Beijing. We thank you for allowing us to take part and have been very happy to reciprocate. These events are an important part of our lives now, and it has been a real pleasure to share events with you all.

For our first Zoom talk on 27 June we were delighted to welcome Jean O'Hara, who gave us a remarkable talk entitled *Through the Dragon's Gate: Memoirs of a Hong Kong Childhood*. Jean grew up in a tenement flat in Hong Kong in the 1960s, the daughter of an Anglo-Burmese librarian (later a senior civil servant) and his Chinese wife, but has risen to become one of the UK's most senior psychiatrists.

This was also the occasion to hold our AGM, at which the committee was reelected.

Here in brief is a list of our further events in the past year:

The ever popular David Bellis gave us another talk in his series *Photographs of Old Hong Kong and the Tales They Tell* on 8 August 2020. This was the first lecture from Hong Kong that the London group hosted, and we thank Ieuan Harding, the administrator at RASHK, for helping us to get to grips with the technology on that occasion. As ever, David's talk was very well received.

Colin Sheaf, Deputy Chairman of Bonhams, enlightened us on the subject of Chinese painting and painters in the 20th century on 19 September 2020, the day he had been due to be with us in person. Kirsty and I had the added pleasure of hosting Colin and his wife at our home as like many, he was new to the technology and wanted some help. Covid has produced some unexpected pleasures.

Les Bird, former Marine Police Commander in Hong Kong, spoke on aspects of his memoirs on 12 December, focusing on the dramatic period between 1979 and 1989 when the Marine Police were dealing with Vietnamese refugees who arrived by boat at Hong Kong's southern sea boundary, and were finding that their work was as much a humanitarian effort as one of policing.

Pat Hase, former chairman of the RASHK, gave us a fascinating talk based on his research into the story of two of Hong Kong's squatter areas on 16 January 2021. This had to be postponed from the previous Saturday because of technical problems and was still subject to some glitches because of the quality of the internet service where he lives, but Pat was as ever undaunted and generous with his time.

Lastly Frances Wood, former curator of Chinese collections at the British Library, gave us a wonderful talk on 6 February 2021 on *The Travels in China of Joseph Needham*, whom she knew at Cambridge. Needham had been sent to China in 1943 by the British Council, and she recounted how over the next three years he travelled thousands of miles across "Free China", gaining an understanding of the needs of the Chinese scientific research community and delivering supplies, under often appalling travelling conditions.

Some of the speakers who had been due to be with us last year have preferred not to move to Zoom and we very much hope to rearrange those talks when we can meet in person.

We look forward to another FRASHK lecture year full of interest. Assuming that things do start to return to normal, we will nevertheless reflect on the considerable opportunities that Zoom has opened up for us and may well opt for a mix of online and physical events, allowing us to approach speakers who would not be able to come to London in person, and to maintain links with friends from around the world.

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 Rosemary Lee complete the committee.

Paul Bolding, March 2021