THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY
(HONG KONG BRANCH):
THE FACES, THE STORIES AND THE MEMORIES

Eve Lam

The hall in the Hong Kong Museum of History is dark. The room seats about 200, but it's not even half full. Those in attendance are mostly gweilos and gweipos, and with his silver-blonde hair and fair skin that looks a bit flushed under the spotlight, the man giving the opening remarks on stage is indeed a gweilo. But this foreigner knows more about the place than most born and bred Hong Kongers.

His name is Dan Waters — he's president of the Royal Asiatic Society (Hong Kong Branch) — and he's giving the opening address at the Society's 40th anniversary conference, "Hong Kong: Forty Years of a Growing City."

"If I had been born in the computer age, the chances are I would be reading this address from a portable 'electric brain,' as a computer is termed in Cantonese," Waters said. "But several of us taking part in this conference were born many years earlier. Indeed some of us have lived in Hong Kong for longer than the 40-year period (1960 to 2000) which we are reviewing here today..."

The conference is free for all RAS members. They are a dedicated lot who have come in early on a Saturday morning to listen to these scholars and celebrate the accomplishments of the society to which they proudly belong.

A glance around the hall and everyone is concentrating their attention on Waters — the longest active member of the Society.

"...An RAS member who lived in Hong Kong for approaching 30 years wrote a couple of years or so ago from his home in England: 'No, I do not miss the present-day Hong Kong one little bit. But I do miss the Hong Kong of the 1950s and '60s.' To what degree does nostalgia creep in? Let us take a wander down memory lane. What was the Colony really like when our Branch was re-constituted in 1960?..."
Seated in the front row are the other guest speakers for the day: Dr. Patrick Hase, a member of the conference organising committee and RAS Council member, who will talk about Shatin and its development from a village to a city; Reverend Carl Smith, the honorary vice-president, who will talk about his 40 years of research in Hong Kong, and Mr. Tim Ko, an organising committee member and Council member, who has prepared a slide presentation about living in Hong Kong from 1960 to 1980. Also listening attentively is Dr. Elizabeth Sinn, vice-president of the RAS, convenor of the conference and mistress of ceremonies for the day.

I sit near the front to get better video of the proceedings, but it’s dark in the hall and other than Dr. Waters, I realise I won’t be able to capture any of the audience’s faces. I direct my camera in their direction anyway, just in case, or maybe just to let them know they’d be wise not to doze off.

This was in December 2000, when the one-day conference was presented jointly with the Hong Kong Museum of History. Waters has since stepped down from the presidency he held for four and a half years, during which Hong Kong was handed back to the motherland.

An old hand’s reflection...

I met Waters for the first time a month before the conference at his home on Conduit Road. He greeted me at the door and he was just as I had imagined from our telephone conversations. He is a tall man with a strong presence. He has perfect posture and his movements are quick. Waters holds the 800m and 1500m local running records in the over 70 category. He has a full head of hair although the colour has changed from when he was a young man; the only other hint of his advanced years is that he’s a bit hard of hearing.

He takes me to the study and has had his maid prepare a glass of orange drink for me. I haven’t had orange drink from powder — something like Tang — since early childhood.

What do I want to know? he asks. What do I want to know? I ask myself. I really want to find out if the Royal Asiatic Society is as snobby as it sounds, maybe. But no, I don’t ask that...
Dr. Waters arrived in Hong Kong in 1954, at the age of 34, not so young but not so old.

"I can remember there used to be parades in the street over in Chatham Road of troops marching, the army marching and there were British types around with bowler hats and furled umbrellas and things like that. And it was then really very colonial and very British. Funnily enough, I never realised it would change so much...I mean I thought things would be like that forever."

He sailed to Hong Kong on a ship and the journey took 31 days. He came to work for the colonial service and right from the beginning, he had come to stay. Waters sold his builders business back in England to take on a permanent job teaching for the now Hong Kong Polytechnic. Waters met his wife, a local Hong Kong Chinese, in the territory. In his book "Faces of Hong Kong: An Old Hand's Reflection," Waters talks about how his father-in-law never approved of their relationship. His father-in-law died in 1959, and Waters and his wife married in 1960.

His mother-in-law and sisters-in-law welcomed Waters to the family. But it was a time when interracial marriages were not tolerated by many. At work, things were less than comfortable, at times.

"It's got much better," said Waters. "I married on the Queen's birthday in 1960. We were married in the morning and we went to the Governor's garden party at government house in the afternoon. But, oh yes, there was without a doubt a certain amount of racism and there was a certain amount of ostracism in the institution where I worked. I felt it myself. Now of course, it's very common for mixed marriages."

Waters joined the RAS in 1964 but hadn't heard of the society before then. He was invited to join the RAS Council in 1990 and became president in 1996, just before the handover. Since the handover, the RAS is one of the few organisations to have kept the Royal in the name.

"No one has bothered us. We carry on the same way. We make sure our roots are planted here."

Waters very naturally falls into Cantonese when he speaks. Every once in a while, his statements end with hai m hai (isn't that right)?
have to admit I can hardly understand Waters’ Cantonese most of the time. His tones are not perfect and for myself I have difficulty understanding second language Cantonese speakers. I’m sure that Waters is more fluent and accurate than I am.

“It was difficult [to learn Cantonese] as an older person. If you learn it as a child, it’s easy... I still know my tones are not good by any means. As a rule, I can get away with what I want to say because of the context.”

Waters reads, but does not write Chinese characters very well. As we talk about learning the characters, Waters jumps up from his recliner and stands with legs apart to mimic the character for the word person (yan), then outstretches his arm for the word big (tai), and adds another mark in the middle for the word sky or heaven (tien). He is fascinated with the way Chinese characters are built.

In an article on Chinese and Western humour, Waters wrote: “How can you expect the Chinese who cannot, usually, stand the smell of cheese, be able to understand the complex English. But you can argue too, how can the British, who cannot enjoy a succulent chicken’s foot for breakfast, understand the Chinese?”

It’s true that not everyone can appreciate a chicken’s foot. I played the role of a typical overseas Chinese or juck sing, for many years. I had been too squeamish and maybe snobbish, to have anything to do with chicken feet. Only recently have I tasted them, and honestly, really enjoyed the clear white variety, with garlic dip.

The Hong Kong Branch of the RAS has published 38 volumes of its journal, which focuses on local customs, culture and history. Volume 38, a special Millennium and 40th Anniversary Edition entitled “T’ai Sui, The God of Time,” came out in December 2000. The 39th is expected out mid-year while the 40th is due by the end of the year.

“If someone wants information about a temple in Kwun Tong or a temple in Tuen Mun, as a rule, you can find something about it in our journals. They are quite unique in their own way and there’s nothing really quite like them,” said Waters.
Until recently the journals have been housed in the RAS collection in the City Hall Library. They are part of the 4,000 volumes of publications — including very rare books — on Asian studies, bought by or donated to the Society. Members can borrow the books and the public is invited to use them for reference. The collection now sits in the new Central Library in Causeway Bay, which opened in May 2001.

Waters has published extensively in the journal and contributed to other publications by the RAS, including a book on Yaumatei.

"I had been interested in local history all my life. When I was a child in England, when my father or some others talked about local history, my ears used to prick up straight away and I used to listen. And as a rule, I can remember it all."

Waters has done best financially with a series of textbooks for learning technical English but one publication that may be most impressive, is a paper for his Ph.D., which he got at the age of 65 from Loughborough University in the United Kingdom.

"I wanted a challenge and it was a challenge, and I overcame the challenge. I can remember a young Chinese friend of mine saying... when you get to the age of 30 you can’t study, you can’t concentrate... Well, I mean I could show him that’s rubbish. I can concentrate, I can still concentrate."

Beyond the Metropolis...

The first speaker at the 40th anniversary conference is Dr. Patrick Hase. He would become Society president in three months.

Hase is a stocky man, with wavy brown hair. A bit of grey around the temples hints at his age. His talk is on Shatin in the New Territories and the early development of the new town.

Historical slides flash on screen from way before the new town was established, and more slides chronicling the development of the area follow, one by one. There’s a lot of interesting history being shared but the dimmed lights and such an early hour has put a number of the audience into a dream state...
“My car is white so wave at me when you see me, I’ll be there in seven minutes,” said Hase as he gave me directions to wait at the McDonald’s in Tai Wo KCR station for our interview. It has taken me almost an hour to get here. I’m in the New Territories.

He is dressed in a loosely fitting top with colourful embroidery around the edges, and his hair is shorter and seems to have gone a bit lighter than when I last saw him a few months ago. He is friendly and I’m feeling relaxed despite having been a bit nervous in anticipation of our meeting. I fear my questions will not be good enough, or intelligent enough for him.

Hase’s home is just as I had imagined it: east meets west, and serene. I am served English tea in a Chinese mug and we are using bronze coasters with Chinese characters on them.

When I go back to Toronto, my friends often say I sound a bit British, and sometimes they say they don’t know what I sound like. But Hase’s English accent hasn’t been corrupted by his learning Cantonese.

“Cantonese is difficult because of two things. The first is, it’s not written,” said Hase. “Now if you’re learning mandarin, you can learn to read it and learn to speak it and the two help each other...The second problem is the tonal structure, which is very complicated, infinitely more complicated than it is in mandarin and that’s very difficult for foreigners...”

“So, when I’m speaking Cantonese, my tones are not bad but if I get angry, if I lose my temper, then my tones start to change.”

Hard to believe that Hase arrived in the colony not knowing a word of the language. The government wasn’t looking for people who knew the language, just for people who wanted a job.

Hase was born in the United Kingdom and got his Ph.D. from Cambridge in an aspect of 7th Century English History. Hase was unable to get a job teaching and opted for a job with the government as an Administrative Officer with his first posting as Administrative Assistant in the Urban Services Department. He arrived in the territory in 1972
and started to work on what he loved - studying local history.

"By nature I'm a local historian," said Hase. "It's just nearly impossible to do it here — for the 7th century English history — so I started looking at local history."

Hase briefly removed his glasses and seemed to look different from the way he had the last 30 years, with glasses. Because of those spectacles, I was able to stumble upon the academic in the 1984 edition of "Who's Who in Hong Kong." In it is a picture of Hase with a bit thicker hair, but essentially looking very much the same.

"I have no idea how I got in there," said Hase who was at the time one of many civil servants listed. "I guess they just wanted all civil servants of a certain rank to be included."

Hase was listed as principal assistant secretary to home affairs and his boss Dr. James Hayes, also was listed in the book. It was through Dr. Hayes — a past president and previous editor of the RAS Journal — that Hase got involved with the Society. Hase joined the RAS in 1980; he became a member of its Council in 1981 and served as honorary editor. But Hase said he was not a very good editor. When he took over, they had fallen behind by a year and a half, and later on, that was extended to three years.

"I was a good editor in doing the editing when I could get myself to do it, but I hated the work so the journals got horribly, horribly delayed...Eventually I did it, and I did it well."

He edited seven journals and two books for the RAS. Hase has himself published over 30 articles on life in the New Territories, customs, Fung Shui and pure history. Hase's next article, on Ngau Tse Wan Village, will be published in Vol. 39 of the journal.

Most of Hase's subjects were born between 1910 and 1920; those people that still remember how the New Territories was before major changes wrought by increased settlement between 1915 and 1925. But in another 10 years Hase likely will not have any sources left for his research.
“I'm really the end, the last generation of people who can reach through because the elders are still there, but they are getting very rare now. They are getting fewer.”

Dealing with the elders is difficult in many ways. There are areas that cannot be addressed, such as women’s issues, and often the older generation will fall into their own native dialects, such as Wai Do, Yuen Long Wah or Hakka.

Hase started telling me a joke about the differences in the dialects and how a sentence in Cantonese can be made to sound completely different, and not very pleasant, in another dialect. I didn’t get it, but I enjoyed listening to the historian tell it.

Hase worked for many years in Shatin as district officer, which made getting interviews with the elders a lot easier. When Hase retired from the civil service, he was deputy director of the Urban Services Department. He is currently running his own consultancy firm and most recently testified in the capacity of Fung Shui specialist in the Spur Line case — the controversy over the building of a railway through Long Valley, a bird haven that supports more than 200 species.

Hase took over the RAS presidency in March and has agreed to serve for three to four years.

“We are a middle-aged gweilo society, but I'd like to see us a little bit less,” said Hase. “We’re always going to be a middle-aged gweilo society but I’d like to have a lot, a much higher percentage of young Chinese members even if it was always to remain a minority. But how to do this? We’ve been thinking for 20 years and not been able to come up with any solution.”

Membership as of March 12, 2001 stood at 477, which includes 391 local and 86 overseas members. A hundred new members had been recruited between the end of January 2000 to March 13, 2001.

Instead of trying to recruit from the public, the society hopes to get new members with the potential to best serve the society. These include graduate students in anthropology, archaeology, history and sociology.
"Because then you might get members who are not only members but really useful members, people who might come on to the Council, who could assist the Society," said Hase. "These are the people we need most."

The other big project for Hase would be to get the RAS set up as a charity so that they can start offering scholarships to people with certain criteria, to assist them with academic work.

"Once we are a charity it becomes easier to ask for donations and it makes it easier to do things like set up a scholarship fund," said Hase.

Over the last 40 years, the RAS has accumulated more than $600,000. Hase’s goal is to get a million dollars for the fund — about $300,000 from the RAS reserves, and the rest through sponsorship from some of the big Hongs (major local companies).

"If we can get [the scholarship fund] done during my time as president, I shall be very pleased."

Red China blues...

It’s tea time after Hase’s talk at the seminar. The cookies and coffee hit the spot, but it is still too early for a Saturday...

"Report on Hong Kong," a film from 1960, starts rolling. It’s hosted by William Holden, co-star of the famous film, “The World of Suzie Wong,” and follows three subjects — a family relocated after the Shek Kip Mei fire, an expatriate and a local businessman — for a day. It recorded the family’s struggles, the expatriate’s expectations and the businessman’s politics.

In the closing stand-up, Holden comments on the amazing things that can be accomplished when people have the will and determination to survive and prosper. Holden stands on the peak with a view to the border and asks what else is possible with the population that is just beyond the borders in “Red China”...

The RAS in fact dates back to 1847 with its China branch. It began
with Sir John Davis, the Governor of Hong Kong, as its president and remained active for 12 years, but ceased to exist in 1859. The Hong Kong branch was re-established under the active patronage of another governor, Sir Robert Black, in 1959.

Since the handover, the society no longer has a patron. When the present Chief Executive of the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa was asked to serve in that role, he politely declined.

An American in Hong Kong...

The conference participants are back from the lunch break and the 82-year-old Reverend Carl Smith is helped to the stage by Elizabeth Sinn. Smith's talk is titled "Forty Years of Research on Hong Kong." The lights are dimmed and heads begin to nod off again...

"You get out at exit A and on your right you'll see this big set of steps leading up to the skies...don't take them," said Smith as he was giving directions to his home in Mei Foo Sun Chuen. As soon as he said that it reminded me of an episode of the popular TV series M*A*S*H when the doctors had to dispose of a bomb. It went something like, "cut the red wire"...the doctor cuts it..."after cutting the blue wire"...explosion!!!

The reverend's instructions are spot on and I arrive without any trouble. The block is 19 and he's on the 11th Floor, flat D, but his flat is labelled 19D...go figure. Smith greets me and has to unlock the gate with a key. Not very safe, I think, for a man of his age. What if there's a fire? How is he going to get out?

The apartment is smaller than I had expected and it is filled wall to wall with file cabinets and card files — all of Smith's research work over the last 40 years. The cards were put on microfilm and housed in the Public Records Office as the Carl Smith collection. Smith has recently agreed to leave the cards themselves to the Library of Congress in the United States.

"The Asian division of the Library of Congress, right before the handover, came to Hong Kong with the purpose of getting documents
because they had this American idea that once the handover is made, that everything would be a total mess in Hong Kong,” said Smith. “Nothing left, you know. An entirely mistaken idea.”

Smith decided to go with the Library of Congress because it has the financial backing from the US government — his cards will be taken care of — and because the library is accessible to all.

For 13 years, before settling in Hong Kong, Smith was pastor at a U.S. church he established. At 42, he came to the territory in 1960 to teach for the Church of Christ in China.

Smith taught through a translator at first, and then his students began speaking English to him, so he never got a real grasp of the Cantonese dialect.

But the Reverend reads and writes characters and has used these skills in his work. Smith has written many articles over the last 40 years and has published two books.

Smith considers his article on “The Emergence of Chinese Elites in Hong Kong” his most significant work because it appears in bibliographies most often.

“People are always polite and they say nice things...if we’re going to look at early Hong Kong we’re going to have to go and look at the article.”

Smith’s book “Chinese Christians: Elites, Middlemen and the Church in Hong Kong” was published in 1985 and coincided with the 25th anniversary of the re-establishment of the RAS Hong Kong branch.

James Hayes said in the foreword that it was a time to look ahead to the handover and to the Society’s continued contribution to the study of Hong Kong culture and history.

The Society held a one-day seminar that year to talk about the ’97 issue. Opinions were divided on keeping the Royal in the name and Smith was one of the ones opposed.
"The public image [of the Society], first of all there's the name Royal. I was a true American," said Smith. "I was an advocate for dropping the Royal in recent years but most of the others didn't agree with me, so that's all right. And the other is that yes, we are, we do have a lot of western people because we're English-speaking and our programme, I'm talking for myself now...is to help people appreciate and understand Asia."

Smith asks me what I think of the "Royal" and I tell him that it is a bit off-putting because it can be perceived that the RAS is a rather exclusive and maybe even stuffy organisation.

"This is personal, one thing I did not like about the RAS is they met, when I first joined, at the Hong Kong Club. At that time, there weren't too many Chinese members at the Hong Kong Club and I thought, I really don't like this, that we're meeting at a place that had a history, up until then, of being the centre for the western big people, and it wasn't a place that some Chinese would feel very comfortable going into."

Talks are now held — once a month, on average — at City Hall and anyone can walk in and listen. The RAS also holds visits to local and overseas historical sites about once a month.

Smith had been vice-president from 1976 until 1997, but because he knew he would not want to take up the presidency in the future, but wanted to continue to be active on the Council, he took up his current title, honorary vice-president. Smith's first article for the journal appeared in Vol. 11, 1971.

"I would say my present contribution is as the oldest serving Council member, and the person that has been on the Council the longest time, that I would present some historical continuity...I can say well, we did that in such and such a year, and this and that."

Smith is a very entertaining interviewee. The American comes up with the funniest things. He is easy to talk to and very helpful, and wonderful at volunteering information.

"The British just think we Americans are rather crude, outspoken,
and too friendly, and the Americans think the British are stuffy and class conscious," said Smith, chuckling. "But I don't think there was any conflict [before]... Some of the members would say, 'Oh, Smith is at it again, but that's Smith...' (chuckles). I don't make a big point out of it, but I do speak my mind and say what I think.

"A member made a statement at the AGM - I won't go into detail 'cause that will go into personalities - anyway, saying the society is sort of fading away and ten years from now there would be only a few old people sitting here at the meeting... and I said (using an old man's voice), 'Yes, and I'm going to be one of them.'"

Smith bursts into laughter. He's more endearing than ever.

"I don't think that's true. When a society is no longer fulfilling a function, well, societies die as they have in many parts of Asia, so we need to keep abreast of changes, we need to keep looking at our programs."

In the Heart of the Metropolis...

Earlier, a group of us made the trek to lunch for dim sum. Tim Ko sat next to me talking a bit about himself, but more about the food. He is fluent in English, but slightly accented, and is very much at home among mostly native English speakers. Today, however, he is a bit nervous because he has to give a slide presentation soon and lunch is taking an awfully long time. He begins wondering if he'll have enough time to prepare. Finally, he leaves, before dessert — red bean soup...

For his slide presentation, Tim Ko has changed into a beige shirt and rust coloured tie. His "Living in Hong Kong, 1960-1980" focuses on the city's diverse housing estates and features more than 100 photos, including some that have never been publicly shown before. The crowd seems to appreciate them.

Ko is a semi-professional photographer who has been snapping Hong Kong history for the past 20 years. He "accidentally" discovered many of his presentation slides while doing research at the Housing Authority office.
The agency had asked him to help with its 45th anniversary publication. He agreed, and asked the agency if it possessed photos of its first resettlement blocks. He wanted them for the publication. Someone said no. Later, at the agency’s office, he was researching in a back room and came across more than 20,000 negatives dating to 1962.

“These would be the most important visual record about public housing, not only in Hong Kong but the world, because public housing would not be developed on the same scale [anywhere else] as in Hong Kong,” said Ko.

When Ko offered to catalogue the entire collection, he met with disappointment. He ended up printing about 3,000 of the photos and labelling them, but is concerned that the rest of the 20-odd thousand others may just be discarded and lost forever.

“I was very disappointed because these would be very important in the future for researchers and their own use,” said Ko. “I think these people are very short-sighted. I don’t think any other department would be much better. Even the Government Information Service has its photo library, but I was told by a staff member that a lot of [photos] have been discarded in the past 10 years, because the less they possess, the less they will need to do.”

Ko moves to the edge of his chair; he seems agitated by the current situation. We are at the City University in Kowloon Tong, sitting facing each other on one of the open floors of the school. It’s early on a Saturday morning, but Ko is wide-awake. No late nights for the 37-year-old, except in the dark room.

Ko says he has a collection of more than 100,000 photos — most he’s taken — but also including many contact sheets that haven’t been sorted out. Among his collection are some that appear in the RAS publication on Yaumatei.

The Hong Kong native has published many books, including one co-authored in English on Hong Kong battlefields, but Ko prefers to write in Chinese. His first book, more photos than text, was a history book on Hong Kong for secondary students.
"I would like to do more for students...In our time at school, even in the university, no one really cared about Hong Kong history and at secondary school, we never had a chance to study Hong Kong history, so no one knew about what happened in Hong Kong."

Ko has also published a battlefield guide and a bilingual publication for the Country Parks Authority. His next book, a resource guide for teachers and students on Kowloon City, should be out in May. Ko has not published in the RAS Journal, and has no plans to.

"Not as many people are writing in Chinese," said Ko. "There are a lot of many very good scholars writing very good things like Patrick Hase, James Hayes, but all these, they only write in English."

Ko is a fifth-generation Hong Konger. He is Hakka and his ancestors were stonecutters. He has traced his family back to the 1850's, before the British came. Ko studied Japanese at the Hong Kong Polytechnic and worked for the HKTA (Hong Kong Tourist Association, now the Tourism Board) for six years before quitting to do more of what he does today — record Hong Kong history, including what life was like in the early resettlement blocks.

"It's quite unimaginable for young people now, the communal toilets, communal bathrooms, no tap water in a small flat," said Ko. "You remember I emphasised during the talk, 24 square feet for each adult, a 100-square foot room would take at least four adults or six, if there are children. You could imagine how the situation could be. All the male members would need to sleep in the public corridor.

"I always dream of, even till now, I dream of life in the housing Mocks. I don't know why, many times a year, even till now, because actually I spent 22 years there...[They] could not be regarded as fond Memories because we lived on the top floor and there were a lot of problems then with the ceiling leaking."

The 37-year-old has supported himself for the last 10 years through freelance jobs — acting as co-ordinator and translator for the visiting Japanese media — book royalties, and other odd projects.

Ko has been a member of the RAS since 1990 and on the Council
since 1997. But getting Ko to first join, and then to be on the Council, was not easy.

"I never heard about [the RAS] of course, not until I started working at the HKTA. They have the whole set of the journal in the library. So I started reading and it was really an eye-opener for me. Particularly reading those articles written by James Hayes...I never read anything like that before in my life.

"Even though I'm so interested in history and I knew about this organisation, I think...it's not an organisation for people with a background like mine."

But Ko met Philip Bruce, a Council member, during a freelance job, and decided to join. In 1997, he was asked to serve on the Council.

"At that time my first thought was it was totally beyond my wildest thoughts because of my background...I had nothing to do with academics. I don't have any degree in history, anthropology or whatever, and at that age, I'm not that young, but because all the other Council members are much more senior in whatever aspect, I was quite surprised when they invited me.

"This is Dr. Hase, Dr. Sinn, Dr. Waters...and who am I?"

Although he answers with sincerity that he doesn't know what he's contributed as a Council member, he has given several talks. Ko believes that one reason he was asked to serve on the Council was to help with the recruitment of younger Chinese members.

Seventy-three percent of the members of the RAS are aged between 40 and 60, but over the last year the society has stepped up its effort to recruit new members, especially young Chinese members.

Ko said he has tried to recruit some young Chinese friends but because the RAS is an English-speaking society, Ko says from personal experience, it can be intimidating for people who are second language speakers.

"It's too difficult to speak in English, I think, for many people."
Even me, I said after working for several years, I would have difficulties in speaking English. Now it’s better, in these two years, but really in the early 90’s when I first joined, I had difficulties.”

In the mood for history...

Appearing on and off stage throughout the day is an elegant woman in her 50’s, dressed in a green, form-fitting, side-buttoned cheong-sam. She is the only woman to speak on stage. She is Dr. Elizabeth Sinn.

One of the talking points of the film, “In the Mood for Love”—Tony Leung won a Cannes best actor award — was actually the costumes made for Maggie Cheung. Cheong-sams in all different patterns and when worn by Maggie, they looked absolutely beautiful. I decided after seeing the film that I would start wearing them, it will be my signature look...

I am a couple of minutes early for my appointment and wait in the hallway of the Centre of Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong. It’s about 10 minutes before I am asked in. Not surprising that the deputy director would be a busy person.

Sinn is sporting a lovely purple cheong-sam with a floral pattern and with a violet cardigan over top. Sinn sits behind her desk and invites me to sit across from her. It’s a small office but has the benefit of a peaceful window view. Sinn looks so classically Chinese, I wonder if it’s to make her fit her roles as Deputy Director of the Centre and vice-president of the RAS more convincing, or to unintentionally perpetuate a cliche.

“I have learnt a lot about Chinese culture and Hong Kong history from the RAS over the years,” said Sinn. “It’s very different from reading books. Certainly the RAS provides a very different angle for looking at local culture than most Chinese people in Hong Kong have. For me, it’s always exciting when I can see things from a new perspective, when there are more options. Of course, I have also made many friends through the RAS, not only the Council members but also ordinary members. They are a self-selected group of people who are genuinely interested in finding out about things.”
Sinn has written extensively on the history of modern China and Hong Kong, in both English and Chinese, and was awarded a Bronze Bauhinia Star in the SAR's 2000 Honours' List for her work in the field of heritage. She has edited many books and with Dr. Hase was co-editor of the RAS publication to mark the 35th anniversary of Hong Kong branch, "Beyond the Metropolis: Villages in Hong Kong." She is proud of her introduction to the book.

"It's hard to remember which of my articles I enjoyed writing most. I guess I rather enjoyed writing 'Kowloon Walled City.' [But] '1884 riots' was much too serious, and if I were to be writing it again today, I would take a very different approach — a more relaxed approach. The 'Study of Local History' is very informative, but I don't think it's particularly exciting! In the long run, I think the last one will probably have the greatest impact."

Sinn joined the Council in 1982, and is currently serving as vice-president and has been for the last 10 years.

"I was invited to join the Council — I don't remember by whom, but it is most likely to have been James [Hayes]. I joined because I thought the RAS did interesting things. Before I joined the Council, I had attended some of the lectures and seminars and also read the journal. I felt I was learning a lot from it."

According to Hase, Sinn was the number one choice for the presidency two years ago, when Waters first wanted to retire, and again this year.

"I'm still very doubtful as to whether I was the best choice [for president]. Elizabeth Sinn would have been the best choice. We asked Elizabeth to be president, but she said no," said Hase.

"My ambition in life is to be a really good historian and write a few great books," said Sinn. "And I wouldn't be able to do that if I tried to do too many things. A good president really needs to invest a lot of time in the job — like Dr. Waters. I respect him so much because he really gives it his all. Since I know I won't be able to spare the time, it's best that I don't take up the presidency."
In Hase’s opinion, it would be great to have Sinn as president — the first Chinese president — and perhaps help in attracting more Chinese members.

"I am not sure if a Chinese president would attract more Chinese members. In any case, for me, it doesn’t make that much difference whether our members are Chinese or not," said Sinn. "We have four Chinese on the Council. It’s hard to find Chinese to serve on the Council. In Hong Kong, getting people to do things that don’t pay is very difficult. It takes a lot of dedication."

The RAS is now on-line — www.royalasiaticsociety.org.hk — thanks to one of the new young Chinese recruits, Moody Tang, a student in applied Chinese studies — majoring in Chinese for mass media — at the City University of Hong Kong. You can read about the history of the RAS, get information on upcoming events and read the latest President’s Report on-line. Discussions are in place about putting the journals on-line.

In the next few months, selected articles will be published on-line as part of a joint project with the University of Hong Kong Libraries. A list of all the volumes of the Journal and their contents will also be available.

Unlike Smith and Hase, Sinn does not feel there is any problem with having the Royal in the name. It is part of the tradition. Sinn says the Royal doesn’t mean an allegiance to the crown, as the Hong Kong branch is independent of the mother society in England.

"We are not a snobbish society, so people don’t have to join ‘to be seen’ as members. The intellectual curiosity of members is a great attraction for me. Some of the Council members have become best friends.

"Dan Waters is really more of a Hong Kong person than lots of local people. I think this is where the word ‘expatriate’ gets ambiguous. The average RAS member knows more about Hong Kong than other Hong Kong people."

I reflect on this for a moment, and realise I have to agree. Much to
my own embarrassment, these expatriates interviewed in this story know more about the language and culture than the writer, a Hong Kong-born, Canadian-raised Chinese...

Throughout the 40th anniversary conference, Sinn popped on and off stage, before and after speakers did their bits, and said many wonderful things about them. In Reverend Smith's case, she threw her arms around the learned, gentle senior citizen and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Sinn was equally emotional when it came to Dr. Waters. She displayed the same affection, a strong squeeze of his hand and a light peck on the cheek. The lady in the green cheong-sam would certainly make a good first Chinese president.

T'ai Sui, The God of Time...

As part of its anniversary celebration, the RAS published a special journal that included many new articles about Hong Kong culture and history. It was entitled, "T'ai Sui, The God of Time," and copies of it would be sent to every member, a couple of weeks after the conference.

The conference itself ended with a special ceremony. Dr. Waters was asked to the stage and Sinn presented the president with a gift. Waters unwrapped the box to find a traditional Chinese birthday present — a 24-carat gold peach set in a clear plastic box and wrapped with a red ribbon.

The president was noticeably delighted by the thoughtfulness of the vice-president — it was very obviously Sinn's idea — and his RAS colleagues. He thanked Sinn with a big hug and, speaking in a slightly choked voice, thanked the audience. A scan of the room made it evident that the warm feelings that day were mutual.

Holding back tears, Waters, who would step down as president in a few months, clutched the gift and waved it high in the air like a hard-won trophy. The gift was in recognition of his friendship and his service — and also his birthday. He turned 80 just over a week ago, thanks to T'ai Sui, the God of time.
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