

[The Royal Asiatic Society]

# History, with class

Ric Stockfis on the first year of operation for the revived China branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.



2008 RAS Soiree at the Astor House Hotel

Photo by Jan Sietke

The lights in the reading room are low, the surrounding shelves stacked high with books, the titles temporarily obscured by shadows. By the window, a visiting professor busies himself setting up his equipment, while the guests – authors, historians, hobbyist sinophiles – exchange pleasantries over glasses of wine and mince pies. This is mid-December, after all. It's a scene that might well have been familiar to the founding members of the North China branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS), way back in the late 1850s. But not everything is at it once was.

The group meeting here are now known as the North Asia branch of the RAS, and their revival of the Society, more than 150 years later, is still in its infancy. Talk, as it would always have been at this time of year, is still of Christmas, and of trips back home, but that's definitely Shane MacGowan you can hear singing in the background. And this isn't a dusty library, or even a glamorous Bund-side ballroom; we're upstairs at Figaro Coffee, just a short walk from the modern-day shine of Xintiandi. The talk is the latest in the Society's series of Studio events – occasional, informal, post-work gatherings, that are part of a very conscious effort to make the Society accessible to the public – something it rather fatally failed to do last time around.

The professor by the window is Dr. Liu Wei – Director of Long Island University's China Centre, Associate Professor in History and Politics at Zhejiang University, and an Honorary Vice President of the RAS. He's here to present a short documentary he made for CCTV about the pivotal role played by a one-time sing-song girl, nicknamed Golden Lily, during the Eight Nation Occupation of Beijing at the time of the Boxer Rebellion. The film was never aired on television. Like many of the topics covered at these Studio get-togethers, it's very much a live issue – on hearing that Dr. Liu was to marry an

American lady, his friend jokingly congratulated him on getting revenge for the Occupation. But the presentation isn't so much a lecture – more a casual talk amongst friends. The film runs for 30 minutes, but Dr. Liu takes questions for a full hour afterwards. This, it seems, is typical of the Studio format: experts in their field talking about their own eclectic interests and obsessions, with none of the fanfare that one might expect of such an event. Dr Liu can even be heard at the end of the evening asking for a lift home.

The remit for the Studio events is broader than for the Society's lectures proper. Sometimes it might be a seminar, other times a film screening. The series began last March with a talk by Nenad Djordjevic, currently the city's Serbian Consul, on the history of social clubs in Shanghai, and was followed by a presentation on beekeeping in China, Korea, and Japan – “One of the very best events we've had”, according to Peter Hibbard, President of the Society, and author of several books on Western heritage in China. “Introducing the studio events has been a great success,” he says. “We're taking on many of the challenges that the Society faced in the past – and making events more attractive for the general public is a key one.”

It's no wonder that Hibbard is the driving force behind the revived Society. His desire to elevate understanding of, and appreciation for Shanghai and China fits neatly with the Society's aim to “provide a forum for the development and expression of interests and expertise from within the local community, and from around the globe, to inspire and to enrich life in Asia's most dynamic metropolis”. The sentiment is one Hibbard's predecessors at the Society would surely have shared, and there's a neat irony in the fact that those very people are now the subject of study. The Society itself has an “extraordinary history,” Hibbard explains. The next item on the Society's agenda

rather proves his point. In March, there will be a talk by Cyril Cannon about his new biography of Charles Henry Brewitt-Taylor, who worked in China from 1880 to 1920, was the first translator of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a China Customs Commissioner, first Director of the Customs College in Beijing, and the Shanghai District Postmaster. He was also a member of the North China Branch of the RAS for 53 years. Other topics on the slate include a lecture on the British legacy in Weihaiwei (now Weihai), as a prelude to a Society field trip there in May. And one of the most popular of last year's speakers, Pixie Gray (whose grandparents emigrated to China in the late 19th century, and who was herself born in Shanghai in 1936), may also be returning. The Society's Annual Soiree, which kicked off in 1938 with the showing of a "motion picture" and a lecture on the people of the Philippines, has also been reinstated. In November, 100 people turned out in the former ballroom of the Astor House Hotel for a night of drinking and dancing. There is, then, a very real sense of continuity between the Society old and new – equal parts nostalgia and rigorous contemporary study. "We're not resurrecting it; we're simply reconvening something that already exists," Hibbard points out.

The history of the Society is so rich, its place on the Shanghai social scene was fixed for so long, that it's hard to believe it ever disappeared. But, of course, none are immune to the whims of fate. Towards the end of Dr Liu's documentary, the narrator describes the penury into which the heroine, Golden Lily, fell toward the end of her life: "The sharp contrast with the extravagancy of her earlier days was but unbelievable."

### Rich man, poor man

Neither is the Society quite as richly endowed as it once was. Founded in 1857 by a small group of British and Americans seeking intellectual discourse in a city dominated by trade, the institution which began life as the Shanghai Literary and Scientific Society was formally affiliated with the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland within a year, and soon became the city's leading cultural enterprise. The Society's first proper home was an unprepossessing building housing a reading room and an upstairs museum, filled with stuffed birds shot by local sportsmen (these were the days when an ornithologist's glasses went hand-in-hand with his rifle). It was built close to the Bund in 1874, on grounds donated by the British Crown, and construction was funded by public donation – a sure testament to the support the Society enjoyed at the time. They were to have a good run. The Society's journal, first printed in 1858, would continue for 90 years; their library, assembled through donation, exchange and

dogged negotiation, would become one of the greatest foreign language libraries in the country.

But the Society long suffered from a perception of being over-scholarly. Although one Foreign Office official declared it "the one bright spot in Shanghai" in the 1930s, others lamented that it was "dry as dust". And charges of excess erudition were the least of its worries. In 1930, the first RAS building was torn down, the victim of ant infestation. Members struggled to raise the funds necessary to build a new venue. Then-director of the RAS Museum (and later president of the Society), Arthur de Carle Sowerby, published a letter denouncing the stinginess of the city's upper class. "There is probably no large city in the world where the really wealthy do less in the way of endowing such institutions, at least during their lifetime, as in Shanghai," he wrote. Sufficient monies were eventually found for a stunning art deco building opened in 1933, that still stands on Huqiu Lu, but construction was badly delayed, and the Society was left in serious debt. With the advent of the Second World War, the Society was all but finished. Foreign residents fled the city or – like Sowerby himself – were interned here, and, in 1943, thousands of books were looted from the library by the Japanese. A brief revival after the war came to naught, and the Society was dissolved in 1952.



1932: The RAS Building on Huqiu Lu



The first-ever RAS Studio event

Photo by Ros Juan

### A quiet return

The notion of sharing and advancing knowledge of Chinese culture never lost its relevance, but it wasn't until 2006 that the Society reappeared.

Today's North Asia RAS branch was initially established in Hangzhou by Dr. Judith Kolbas, a Vice President of RAS London, who felt the gap left in the wake of the Society's dissolution had never really been filled. There was simply no public forum for sustained intellectual conversation; a once-a-year Literary Festival wasn't nearly enough. It was Kolbas who instigated the move to Shanghai in early 2007, she who asked Peter Hibbard to take up the role of President. "It was a bit of a surprise, really," he admits. "The challenges are always there, and we haven't been able to grow so fast, because we have only limited manpower, but the last year has been great."

And it's fair to say that the reconvened Society has found its feet pretty quickly. Lindsay Shen, the Society's Honorary Editor, has worked in the non-profit sector for 15 years, but feels that "in China, compared to the West, things can be much easier to pull off – things can happen quickly, people are willing to put lots of time and talent into things they believe in." Hibbard concurs. "A lot of hard work and commitment has paid off."

Still, it hasn't all been plain sailing. The Society sent out invites for its 150th anniversary event (in May last year) to be held in the former RAS building, only to find out the following day that the venue had been deemed unfit for use. Hibbard had a moment of panic. "But, thankfully, David Laris and Paul Liu, whose 1933 Building in

Hongkou really fit the bill, offered to provide the venue – in what will be David Laris' new restaurant – and all equipment and facilities, for free. It was a fantastic day, with around 100 attendees." Certainly, the Society is not short of enthusiastic members. While they are yet to reach their pre-war peak (350 local members, another 400 outside of Shanghai), membership has been growing steadily over the last 12 months. But they do still need help – the Society Council is small, and already stretched.

Together they identify the key challenges for the year ahead as increasing membership, developing the resources available through the Society's website, reinstating the RAS Journal, and building up a private library collection. The Society has issued a formal appeal for financial support, but anyone with time on their hands is invited to volunteer. "We'd especially love to have some people help us with graphic design and technology," says Lindsay Shen. "We want our website to be a resource for sharing and exchange – not just an information site."

Hibbard is planning a section devoted to the history of the RAS, with a full listing of members from 1858 to 1952. "And we want to build up personal profiles of as many of those members as possible," he says. "We're after biographies and other materials to help us paint that picture." Once again, dreams of building up the Society's book collection are centre-stage.

### Pages of history

The story of the RAS library is symbolic of both the Society's greatest achievements and its misfortune. Establishing a library was one of its stated aims when it first formed

(to investigate subjects connected with China and publish the findings in a journal were the others). The collection began with the purchase of over 700 books from noted sinologist Alexander Wylie, and grew rapidly. Even today, 40,000 volumes from the Society's original library still survive, with more than 10,000 recovered from a Tokyo library after the war. The collection actually grew during the war years, as private libraries, left behind by escaping foreign residents, were added to the pile. But the Society's library was absorbed into the Shanghai Municipal Library system soon after the war, and the precious periodicals joined the other rare books in the Bibliotheca Zikawei, the French-Jesuit-founded library complex off Caoxi Bei Lu. The collection was almost destroyed in the Cultural Revolution, and the library was locked after 1966 to ensure its collections remained safe. It only reopened in 1977 for limited consultation, and was shuttered again in 1993 because of subway construction. It would be a further 10 years before the collection was opened again to the public.

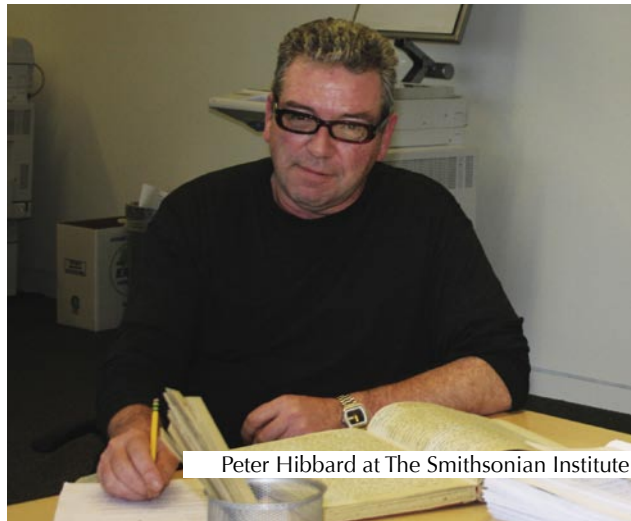
The books may no longer be in the Society's possession, but they still make for fascinating reading – descriptions of early excursions into inland China sit side-by-side with tips on how to make the most of a country drive out to Xujiahui. And, sure enough, Hibbard and his colleagues aren't averse to starting over. The core of the new book collection will be the Society's own journals – fascinating

studies of topics as diverse as Chinese language, ornithology, music, medicine, and ethnic minorities, that span the history of the Society. Seventy-nine volumes of the Journal, dating from 1859 to 1948, were discovered by Society Vice President Mike Nethercott in a Beijing bookshop. He and Dr. Liu have secured them for the Society, though they must first raise enough money to buy them. Lindsay Shen describes browsing these journals as her personal highlight of last year. "Seeing how much energy and scholarship was present in this society 150 years ago has been incredibly inspiring," she says.

### Walking the talk

Just as with the Society's activities of old, purchasing the journals again necessitates raising enough funds. Step forward, Peter Hibbard. Last year, he led several guided walks through the area around the former RAS building – currently empty, but still designated as for cultural use only, and somewhere the Society hopes to have a presence when the developers (The RockBund

Group) complete their work in 2010. He will be leading further fund-raising walks – each limited to 20 participants – on January 19 and February 2. The Society is also looking for biographies of its former members. Last year, Hibbard travelled to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington to retrieve materials from former-president Sowerby's archives, and the Society's affiliates in Hong Kong have also donated volumes of their own journals. Justin O'Jack, the Society's other Vice President, envisages further exchanges with other RAS branches, "We'll go to Korea and they'll come to us." It's a nice reminder of the fact that he and his fellow Society



Peter Hibbard at The Smithsonian Institute

members are doing more than just reviving a quaint Shanghai tradition – they are expanding the scope of an organisation with an already-impressive breadth, and a quite staggering history. Although Hong Kong, London, Shanghai, and Seoul are the only branches of the RAS still active today, they are affiliated to similar societies in Bangladesh, India, Japan, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. The RAS itself was inaugurated in London in 1823, but its roots go back even further, to the Asiatic Society first founded in Calcutta in 1784, which set out to study "everything concerning man and nature within the geographical limits of the continent".

The group gathered today in the darkened reading room is small. Their library is embryonic; their journal as-yet unpublished. They are still just getting started, and their plans for the society are modest. But so too were those of its founders.

For more information, visit [www.royalasiaticsociety.org.cn](http://www.royalasiaticsociety.org.cn). Anyone interested in helping the Society – whether by donating their time or money, helping to secure venues, or by joining one of Peter Hibbard's guided walks, should contact him directly at [peter.hibbard@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn](mailto:peter.hibbard@royalasiaticsociety.org.cn).