



A glimpse into the past: rediscovering Hong Kong's history of medicine with Professor Faith Ho

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If books are the bridges that connect us to the past and the future, then museums are surely the portals that bring us to experience them physically. This shining example of Edwardian architecture on Caine Lane has stood the test of time and witnessed the revolutionary reforms of environmental and hygiene policies of our city, revealing to us its manifold stories of Hong Kong's medical history. In the doorway stood Prof Faith Ho, former Professor of Pathology at the University of Hong Kong, who welcomed us and graciously led us into the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences. As we sat down in the conference room for tea, Prof Ho invited us to think of some reasons behind the initiative that led to the establishment of the Museum.

"What do you think is the *raison d'être* of the Museum?"

While we all had different answers to the question, we unanimously agreed that educating the public about the medical history of Hong Kong is probably the most important reason. Smiling gently, Prof Ho patiently agreed that this was the most logical response, but encouraged us to delve into this issue as she guided us through the untold tales of the Museum.

"The historical role of this building in safeguarding Hong Kong's public health has much to offer," Prof Ho remarked, "particularly in educating health professionals and the public and, more importantly, in preserving the cultural heritage of Hong Kong's medical development."

The museum building has made its mark in history as Hong Kong's first purpose-built medical laboratory, also known as the Bacteriological Institute, built in response to the plague outbreaks starting in 1894, and opened in 1906. As newer facilities have been built over the years, the Institute had fulfilled its historical role and was decommissioned in the 1980s. When the building became an officially declared monument in 1990, Prof Faith Ho, who was the President of the Hong Kong College of Pathologists

at the time, led an initiative to reinvigorate the monument and petitioned the government to transform it into the current Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences.

"The establishment of the Museum was a joint effort with enormous support from our community. I just happened to be in the right position at the right time to do the right thing"

As Prof Ho recounted the obstacles she and her team had overcome, she repeatedly emphasised that the success of the Museum was a result of the collective effort by medical colleagues and the wider community. As we asked why she opted to take up the leadership in spearheading the creation of the Museum, Prof Ho humbly gave the credit to her colleagues. The Museum was the brainchild of many enthusiastic colleagues and friends, who later joined together in 1995 to establish the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences Society, a non-profit institution that manages and develops the museum. As it receives no funding support from the Government, the museum would never have materialised nor continued without the donations (both in funds and in objects for display) by many individuals and organisations.

Engaging health professionals, students, and the public in understanding medicine has always been the prime objective of the Museum. From the Tai Ping Shan plague outbreak a century ago to the more recent memories of the 2003 SARS outbreak, Hong Kong has survived public health crises and embraced the lessons taught. "Our exhibits are not only designed to promote health education but also to reinforce our commitment to society. The Museum was built for the public. It always will be." Indeed, Prof Ho was involved in multiple projects designed to this end. She linked the Museum to the community by helping to establish the Tai Ping Shan Medical Heritage Trail, so that the public can catch a glimpse of the remnants of one of the earliest Chinese residential districts, and

retrace the beginning of public health in Hong Kong, including the first Chinese Hospital, bathhouses, disinfecting stations, etc. As a companion to this cultural treasure, she was also a member of the editorial team for a book on medical history for the Museum: *Plague, SARS, and the Story of Medicine in Hong Kong*. Additionally, Prof Ho was responsible for initiating the SARS Oral History Archive—a matter close to the hearts of doctors and Hong Kong citizens alike—to commemorate the sacrifices of so many, and to preserve for posterity the first-hand accounts and personal reflections from those involved in the fight against SARS (both from within and outside the health care professions), to help us learn important lessons from the episode.

As we wound our way past the exhibition rooms, Prof Ho shared with us her belief that there is more to history than a documentation of the past. “Contrary to conventional thinking,” she referred to various appliances long out-of-date, “the past is not static. These items should neither be labelled as obsolete, nor placed on a dusty shelf to be looked at once in a blue moon.”

History is dynamic because it has implications for the present and the future, and it was her belief that the younger generations—the future doctors—would benefit tremendously from understanding the legacy of which they will be a part. However, Prof Ho acknowledged that development in this direction was not without hurdles. The advancement of technology has revolutionised medicine, and for the most part the health care community has taken it in stride. These days new knowledge becomes old knowledge in the space of a few years. In a world so focused on the future, it may well be that doctors-in-training have difficulty looking for answers in the past. Towards this, Prof Ho counselled an alternative approach.

The Museum, she emphasised, is more than a place for academia, but rather a treasure trove of stories and experiences that engage the mind, provide inspiration, and ultimately facilitate learning. She placed her hand on a bizarre contraption composed of steel rods supporting two metal rings.

“This is a halo-pelvic traction apparatus for correcting severe spinal deformities in children,” she pointed towards a picture of a young boy strapped into a wheelchair, his head encased in a metal halo with steely limbs extending down his torso like a giant metal spider, “in the 1950s and 1960s spinal tuberculosis was very common in Hong Kong. This group of patients would spend months, sometimes years in the hospital strapped to this apparatus. Needless to say, the powerful correction forces to reduce the deformity caused much pain, and could produce many complications. Today, even though many patients in Hong Kong still suffer from tuberculosis, we rarely see kyphosis anymore, and this piece of equipment now serves little purpose

other than a historical relic for educational purposes.”

Noticing the puzzled looks, she smiled, “I will give you a hint. It has to do with the development of an important vaccine that revolutionised the incidence of childhood tuberculosis.”

It was as if a bolt of lightning had struck us where we stood, we exchanged looks of mutual understanding, and after several fumbling attempts at pronunciation, came up with the answer: *Bacillus Calmette–Guérin*.

Prof Ho treated us to something special at the end of the interview: a beautiful view of the Tai Ping Shan district at sunset. As we stood on the arcaded verandah of the Bacteriological Institute now-turned Museum of Medical Sciences, looking over what was the animal house—now a playground and bustling meeting place for the young and old alike—we marvelled at how seamlessly the Museum has blended into the social fabric. Indeed, the community has truly embraced the significance of this building, thus presenting many an exciting opportunity for the future. Prof Ho has recently stepped down from the chair of the Education and Research Committee of the Museum after almost 20 years of tireless voluntary service to the Museum and local medical history. Yet her passion for medical history and cultural heritage, inspiring people via the museum, still burns as bright as the sun. She believes that modernisation, with strong emphasis on creative, multi-sensorial experiences, is the best way to engage public interest. The Museum welcomes the participation of people from all walks of life. Whether you are a doctor, student, or just another history enthusiast, we invite you to celebrate this unique part of our cultural heritage.

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(left) Prof Ho explains an exhibit on the history of malaria in Hong Kong. The exhibit was an artistic impression of the life cycles of *Plasmodium* spp which cause the mosquito-borne disease

(middle) Prof Ho quizzes us about the identity of the bronze bust. It was gift from the French Consulate as a tribute to French physician and bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin for his discovery of the cause of plague in Hong Kong. The statue was made by French artist Antoinette Rozan and celebrated the scientific collaboration between France and Hong Kong, as exemplified by the HKU-Pasteur Research Pole

(right) Prof Ho recounts the tragic tales of Hong Kong’s struggle with SARS in 2003



(Left)

An interactive 3D reconstruction model of the influenza virus is displayed to facilitate understanding of the viral structures. The artefact was contributed by the Hong Kong Science Museum