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# Doctor Who?

Polymath, revolutionary and martyr, Jose Rizal developed a taste for freedom in permissive 19th-century Hong Kong. As 2011 marks the 150th anniversary of his birth, **Stuart Heaver** asks why the founding father of the Philippines is not better remembered here.

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his year marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of arguably the most important revolutionary thinker of his generation, and perhaps the most revered national hero in Southeast Asia. But despite his close connections with Hong Kong, you will struggle to find any mention here of the individual described by his biographer as “one of the greatest men Asia has ever produced”.

Dr Jose Rizal was an exceptional linguist, philosopher, scientist, artist, writer, doctor and nationalist. The polymath inspired a revolution in his native Philippines and was executed as a traitor by firing squad in 1896, aged just 35.

His fascinating story is entwined with the history of colonial Spain, the Philippines and Hong Kong. Rizal lived in Hong Kong in 1891 and 1892 and established a successful medical practice through which the “Spanish doctor”, as he was known, raised funds for the nationalist cause in the Philippines by working as an ophthalmic surgeon.

As shoppers and office workers make their way down D’Aguilar Street towards the junction with Queen’s Road Central, few bother to glance up to their left and see the modest oval commemorative plaque

to this Asian hero. Just above the plaque, you can see young people sipping cappuccino in the first-floor coffee shop. This is where Rizal would have operated on cataracts and other eye defects.

Despite these small clues to his close affiliation with Hong Kong, you will not find much evidence of his 150th anniversary. Indeed, few outside the Philippines seem to know much about him at all. For some reason, the name Rizal does not spring to the lips in the same way as those of better-known revolutionary heroes, such as Gandhi and Sun Yat-sen.

Paul Harrison, a conservator, historian and broadcaster, became “slightly obsessed” with Rizal while preparing a local history series for broadcast on RTHK, as part of the *Naked Lunch* radio programme two years ago. Harrison thought that the nine commemorative plaques on buildings across Hong Kong might prove a valuable source of material for his series and discovered that two of these nine plaques are dedicated to one man: Rizal.

“I was amazed and slightly ashamed that I was a professional historian and not aware of Rizal at all,” says Harrison, who now advises the Rizal museum in Manila.

Harrison points out the second of the Rizal plaques, located on Rednaxela Terrace, just a few paces from the Mid-Levels escalator. Here, Rizal lived with his family in a house in the middle of Hong Kong’s >>



**Above:** Rizal's business card.  
**Right:** historian and broadcaster Paul Harrison stands in front of a plaque on Rednaxela Terrace, Mid-Levels, where Rizal lived with his family.



Portuguese community that was almost certainly provided by his friend and loyal supporter Jose Pedro Braga, who had prospered in Hong Kong and later became the first Portuguese member of the Legislative Council.

"I was immediately impressed by his story as the national hero and founding father of the Philippines," Harrison says. "But it is the fact that this brilliant young polymath was executed by Spain just for his literary work that makes him striking as a historical figure."

Harrison could find no copies of Rizal's two political novels: *Noli Me Tangere* ("touch me not") and *El Filibusterismo* ("the filibustering"), anywhere locally. He did, however, manage to obtain a copy of Rizal's biography, by Austin Coates and compiled while Coates was serving as assistant colonial secretary in Hong Kong, from 1949 to 1956.

The biography was first published in 1968, a time when revolutionary heroes were very much in vogue. But while young people in the 1960s might have been wearing T-shirts emblazoned with Che Guevara or Karl Marx, Rizal never achieved this international iconic status.

Rizal was born on June 19, 1861, the seventh of 11 children and second son of a distinguished and educated Philippine family of Calamba, south of Manila. At the time of Rizal's youth, Spain, and in particular, the

of greatness and felt compelled to write an account of their meeting. "It is a shame that when so much has been written of Rizal, so little seems to be read about him," laments Harrison.

Rizal took on the role of walking product endorsement for his native country. He was educated, intelligent, charming and thoughtful: it was essential to his political cause that people inside and outside the Philippines perceived that the Filipino was capable of shaping his own destiny and was not dependent on the governance of Spain. It was Rizal's core political philosophy that, "there are no despots where there are no slaves".

If in Hong Kong one has to search hard for evidence of the man and his anniversary, in Manila, it is difficult to step anywhere without being made aware of the national legend. His statue and memorial dominates Rizal Park, where it is guarded night and day by two armed sentries. A huge sculpture commemorates his execution, on December 30, 1896. The words of his most famous work, *My Last Farewell*, written on the eve of his death and smuggled out to his family secreted inside an alcohol lamp, are etched into a large polished granite slab.

The cell where he spent his final days, in Fort Santiago, is now a

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friars of the Roman Catholic Church, had dominated the Philippines for more than three centuries. Filipinos were confined to the dark ages, discouraged from advancing themselves and too often considered nothing more than ignorant "Indios" by their colonial rulers. Rizal witnessed countless casual beatings, with members of his own family falling victim to frequent acts of injustice.

With support from his older brother, Paciano, Rizal completed his university education in Madrid, Spain, and travelled extensively across Europe on two occasions. Rizal obtained outstanding results in medicine and philosophy, mobilised a Philippine intellectual movement in Spain, wrote his first political novel and became fluent in six European languages. He studied medicine with the finest eye-surgeons in Heidelberg, Germany, and Paris, France, and studied at the British Museum in London. Rizal was welcomed by Europe's leading intellectuals in the fields of classics, anthropology, medicine and art.

"It is an astonishing feat in itself that a young man in his 20s, from a country many had not even heard of, could be received in such a way," Harrison says.

Rizal was a man of great integrity, always elegantly dressed and with perfect manners. Almost everyone he met was touched by a sense

of greatness and felt compelled to write an account of their meeting. Here there is more evidence of his Hong Kong connection: one of his original business cards, with the D'Aguilar Street and the Rednaxela Street addresses printed on it. The wash stand and bed used at his practice in D'Aguilar Street are also on display.

Zarah Escueta, curator of the Rizal Shrine, is familiar with Rizal's time in Hong Kong. "Rizal, who had thought to divorce himself from politics, now found himself immersed in them again," she says.

When Rizal arrived in Victoria Harbour, on the SS Melbourne, on November 1, 1891, it was a chance to be reunited with his extended family, who had escaped to the colony to avoid arrest and persecution. He had just returned from his second period in Europe and published the second of his major novels, *El Filibusterismo*, which Coates describes as an "irresistible urge to revolution".

The book made Rizal persona non grata with the establishment in Manila and, according to writer, historian and *Post Magazine* columnist Jason Wordie, Hong Kong was in many ways an obvious choice for a political exile.

"Hong Kong in the early 1890s was very international; at least in part because there had been 15 years of more or less uninterrupted >>



**Above:** posters of Rizal on display in Manila on the eve of the 113th anniversary of the proclamation of Philippine independence. **Right:** a Philippine honour guard holds the national flag during a June ceremony to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of Rizal.

economic growth. There were close connections between Hong Kong and the Philippines, partly driven by the Jardines' sugar interests," Wordie says. "Freedom of expression was very much in evidence, as long as it did not directly challenge government or overtly threaten government relations with other powers."

On February 1, 1892, Rizal wrote a letter to the *Hong Kong Telegraph* explaining his opposition to the oppressive friars of the Spanish church: "The conditions imposed by the Dominicans were so tyrannical and humiliating that no man with a spark of self-respect and with any intelligent understanding of right and wrong could submit himself to them without reducing himself to base slavery."

The *Hong Kong Telegraph* and its outspoken founder and editor, Robert Fraser-Smith, always a flamboyant champion of the oppressed, became an enthusiastic supporter of Rizal. It was said by some at the time that Fraser-Smith was imprisoned so often as a result of a litany of libel actions against the *Telegraph* that the newspaper was edited from the cells of Victoria Jail.

Coates suggests Rizal must have been influenced by the heady anything-is-possible attitude that is still endemic in Hong Kong. It was this environment that helped Rizal settle on his revolutionary aim, which "was now the total liberation of his country from Spain".

In 1891, with Queen Victoria's empire at the height of its powers and

He was the inspiration for the forthcoming violent revolution in the Philippines, but probably had little detailed knowledge of it.

Rizal had always feared that without modern weapons, overseas support and the involvement of the Philippines' intelligentsia to form an officer class, any armed revolution was doomed.

Rizal was not even in the Philippines during the early stages of the revolution. His desperate request to serve as a medical officer for Spain in the Cuban civil war, in order to escape exile, had finally been granted. He was on board a ship bound for Havana, only to be arrested on the ship's arrival in Barcelona and returned to Manila to stand trial.

At 7am on December 30, 1896, Rizal was executed for inspiring a revolution that he had played no physical part in. The prosecutor accused Rizal of being the "soul of the rebellion". It was his presence, words and ideas that had made a mighty imperial power so fearful that they felt the need to kill him.

As Harrison puts it, "Rizal was the freedom fighter who never actually fought."

Rizal despised the prospect of lying face down in the dirt, having been shot in the back as a traitor. In his final act of heroism, after being shot by the firing squad, he contorted his body to land on the earth facing the sky above him.

At the time, his execution made headlines around the world and

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with no other nation in Asia showing visible signs of breaking free of their colonial masters, this was radical stuff indeed.

Radical maybe, but though Rizal was a skilled swordsman and a crack shot with a pistol, he was no military man. Despite his revolutionary words, there was no prospect of him leading any armed uprising against Spain. Instead, Rizal was focused on setting up La Liga Filipina, a society that would push its members, not only to value dignity and courage and to defend their rights, but also to modernise agriculture, promote commerce and make capital available for new enterprises.

"The founding of the Liga in his homeland was the reason Rizal was determined to return to the Philippines," Escueta says.

So, against all advice and almost certainly aware that he was signing his own death warrant, Rizal departed Hong Kong for Manila on June 21, 1892, never to return. As he boarded the ship, the Spanish consul cabled ahead to report that, "the rat is in the trap".

This time he returned to Manila as the most famous man in the Philippines and a huge threat to the established order. He was arrested and exiled to Dapitan in the remote southern islands. It was the news of his deportation that led Andres Bonifacio to form the Katipunan, the secret society committed to armed revolution and the eviction of Spain from the Philippines, which started the armed insurrection on August 30, 1896.

It was difficult for Rizal while in exile to have much influence on the brewing insurrection being stirred up by Bonifacio and his followers.

inspired an armed revolution that eventually led to Philippine independence. The poem smuggled from his cell in the lamp was first published in Hong Kong by his great friend Braga, and has been translated into more than 70 languages.

"Why is he not better known?" Harrison muses. "It's certainly an interesting enough story. It had to be an interesting story, to be broadcast at lunchtime in between the rock 'n' roll [on RTHK]."

Given that Hong Kong is home to some 140,000 Filipinos, you would imagine "Asia's World City" would be more enthusiastic about commemorating one of Asia's most outstanding individuals on the 150th anniversary of his birth.

First and always a Filipino, Rizal was also a Hong Kong revolutionary hero. It was during his short time here that his commitment to independence and liberty hardened.

While Sun Yat-sen is honoured with a museum and a trail, and his name may soon adorn the international airport at Chek Lap Kok, Rizal remains largely ignored in Hong Kong.

To the Philippine nation, he is their founding father. For the rest of us, where military intervention and violent oppression often seem to dominate the news headlines, Rizal's legacy is different.

His story is testimony to the fact that the pen really can be mightier than the sword and that no one can kill an idea. Maybe for that reason alone, more of us should glance up to our left when we walk down D'Aguilar Street, and remember Dr Jose Rizal. ■