

## Report on NHS Dinner Talk held at HKU on 9 September 2011



There are always three concerns as to whether a dinner talk will be successful: will everyone find the venue? will the speaker show? and will the food be agreeable?

Everyone found the venue, albeit 'eventually' for some, as the traffic was bad. The speaker did not show! But of course your organiser had a "sub" who turned out to be, using a description from the soccer world, a "super sub". And the food was very good!

The "super sub" was Dr Lawrence Ramsden, a HKU biology veteran. I am sure he does not mind being described as a veteran since he knew a hell of a lot about the **Bauhinia** plant. As an indication of how well the talk went, comments overheard included "I didn't know one hour had gone" and "I took notes!"

Lawrence's talk about the bauhinia covered the botany of the plant, its discovery both in the world and in Hong Kong, and the origins of the plant.

The Bauhinia genus belongs to the pea family, Leguminosae, and within the genus there are 300 to 500 species. It is a tropical genus and Hong Kong is at the limit of its distribution. The Bauhinia was discovered by a monk, Charles Plumier, in 1690 in the Dutch Antilles (NE South America) and was named after the botanists Johann and Casper Bauhin.

In Hong Kong there are three species of bauhinia tree (two from India and one indigenous - the Blakeana) and three species of bauhinia liana (woody vines), all indigenous to Hong Kong.

The Bauhinia Blakeana is the tree seen everywhere in Hong Kong and its flower is now our official emblem. It was named after Governor Blake (1898-1903). The other two trees are the Bauhinia Purpurea and the Variegata. The Blakeana was discovered near Bethany in Pokfulam. Nobody knows how it got there in the first place, but possibly a French missionary brought it from overseas and planted the first one whilst recuperating at the missionary sanatorium which used to be on the Bethany site.

There is now conclusive proof (DNA) from Lawrence's research that the Bauhinia Blakeana is a hybrid (of the Purpurea and the Variegata) and that all the ones overseas are genetically identical to the Hong Kong one.