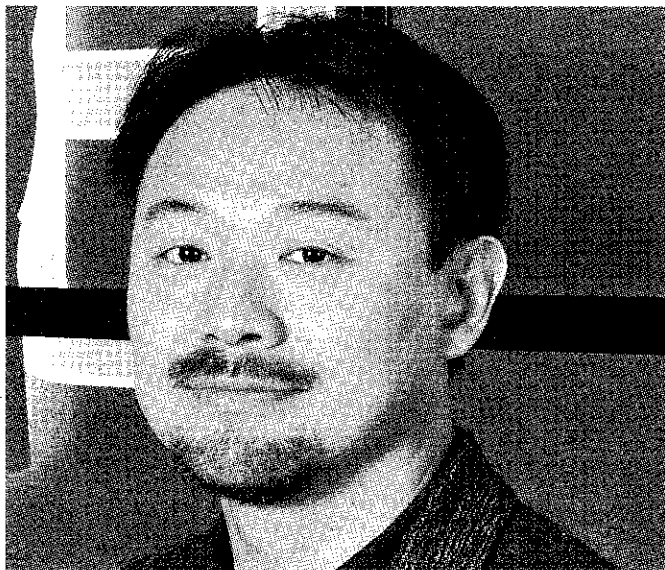# Diaspora diaries

King George V alumnus Jason Leigh is making waves in the field of artificial intelligence, writes **Kavita Daswani.**

As a secondary school student at King George V School in Kowloon in the late 1970s and early 80s, Jason Leigh would arrive two hours before the bell rang, to play with computers.

"I was intrigued by them," Leigh says. "A computer club had sprung up and, even though there were no formal classes, I became really enamoured with the technology. I was basically self-taught. I picked up every book I could find."

Born Lee Chik-shing, Leigh was given his English name when he was a day old.

"My dad figured it would be easier to get a Chinese kid into a British primary school [if he had] a British name. My first attempt was at Beacon Hill [School], since it was near our apartment, and, in the end, I wound up at Kowloon Junior. My dad claims Beacon Hill didn't take me because it didn't take Chinese students back then."

After he graduated from King George V, while waiting for his United States college applications to arrive, Leigh would spend time at an Atari store in Tsim Sha Tsui. While there, he stumbled across an American computer magazine. He submitted one of the programs he had taught himself to write to the publication and was surprised a couple of months later to receive a letter saying it would be published and he would be paid US$50.

Leigh's early enthrallment with computers wasn't a passing fancy. Although he had intended to study chemical engineering, he switched to computer science on his first day at the University of Utah. Today, Leigh is the director of the Electronic Visualisation Laboratory and a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Leigh's father was an English teacher and his family was among the many who left Hong Kong before the handover. Leigh has not returned to the city of his birth since.

He hasn't the time. The laboratory that Leigh runs has been attracting a lot of interest recently. Under his leadership, the team is working on technology to create virtual "avatar" clones of real people: holographic images that can be imbued with language and memories that would live on when the mortal self has passed away.

His team is also working to create computer graphics that will help geologists understand the history of the planet and make predictions about global warming, and enhance capabilities in subjects ranging from engineering to medicine to the arts.

"This is basically an interdisciplinary lab that combines art and computer science, and where the faculty and students from all disciplines can work together to apply new advances in computer science to solving real world problems," he says.

The lab is working with General Motors to create a virtual car that can be tested without having to build a real one and is using virtual reality technology as a substitute for cadavers in medical training.

"With this technology, a student of medicine can make a mistake and repeat the cut again and it won't cost more than the price of electricity," he says.

Nonetheless, it's Leigh's "avatar research", which has its genesis in video-game design, that has been creating the most buzz.

"When we first started on the project, we were focused on the notion of digital archival preservation. But when the media heard about it, it was pitched as digital immortality."

Leigh says he can see a lot of applications for it in the fields of health and military training. But there are challenges still to be overcome before people really comprehend artificial intelligence, and no longer fear it.