

Hong Kong's one-legged return

By Li Datong,
Created 2007-07-11 12:52

The celebrations for the tenth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to the People's Republic of China were just as grand as for the handover itself in 1997. Hu Jintao and a raft of senior officials all visited Hong Kong. Meticulously-planned variety performances were played out one after another. The mainland Chinese media provided blanket coverage [1] of how Hong Kong had become "even more wonderful" over the last ten years, with China Central Television broadcasting the events live for the whole day. However, the scenes after Hu's departure, when tens of thousands of Hong Kong citizens took to the streets for a pro-democracy demonstration [2], were not reported by the mainland media.

Opinions on whether the decade since the handover has been a success or failure are widely divided. In economic terms, Hong Kong has been generally successful as a "special administrative region [3]" (SAR) of China, but research has shown that the economic middle-ground is shrinking, with numbers of the very poor and very rich increasing. Politically, it seems almost no progress has been made. There is still no timetable in place for full, direct elections to select Legislative Council (LegCo [4]) members, or the chief executive [5]. This shows that the central government's policy is still governed by fears that democracy will lead to a loss of control.

Meanwhile, over 60% of Hong Kong media workers believe that press freedom has taken a step backwards. The main reason is self-censorship by media chiefs anxious not to offend Beijing. Even more revealing statistics can be found in a survey carried out by Hong Kong University and published in June 2007 to mark the tenth anniversary of the handover. The results [6] indicate that only 36% of Hong Kong citizens see themselves as "Chinese", with 61% seeing themselves as "Hong Kong-ese". This is perhaps the biggest change in mindset and sense of belonging in the last decade. The protests of 2003, when over 500,000 people took to the streets and forced the authorities to withdraw Article 23 of the Basic Law [7], were important in forging awareness of a Hong Kong identity.

Beijing's prison of fear

The central government has indefinitely delayed [8] the progress of democracy in Hong Kong because it lacks confidence in the stability of party rule on the mainland. Similarly, when Deng Xiaoping made the decision to pursue policies of reform, it was because he saw that if the people remained poor, Communist Party rule would become less and less secure. The reforms

Also in **openDemocracy** on Hong Kong, China and democracy:

Christine Loh, "Hong Kong's democratic road: an interview [2]" (16 September 2004)

Agnes Chong, "Hong Kong marches for 'one person, one vote [2]" (8 December 2005)

Li Datong, "Hong Kong's example [2]" (7 February 2007)

Emily Lau, "Hong Kong's long march to democracy [2]" (14 March 2007)

of the 1980s rapidly increased the living standards of the Chinese, in particular in rural areas, and reversed the damage done to the party's support base by Mao Zedong. However, the party's legitimacy has again been weakened by the violent repression of the 1989 democracy movement, the endemic official corruption which took hold in the 1990s, and the widening rich-poor divide.

At no time in the history of the People's Republic of China has the party been more afraid of losing power than today. The priority of a dictatorship is to maintain and strengthen its grip on power. When there are conflicts between different policies, the tendency is ultimately always to maintain power. It is common knowledge that the principle of "one country, two systems" was originally conceived [9] and developed with the aim of reuniting Taiwan with the mainland. However, with the return of Hong Kong in 1997, the principle ended up being first implemented in Hong Kong.

The practical joke played out by history is that Hong Kong's capitalist system is "lame". A complete capitalist system should have two legs. One leg is the market economy, underpinned by private ownership. The second leg is a two- or multi-party system with elections [11], and the separation of the legislature, executive and judiciary providing checks and balances. Under British colonial rule, power ultimately rested with the royally-appointed governor. The British withdrawal left a political vacuum which was filled by the Chinese government. This is the main reason why in today's Hong Kong, the economy is developed and democratic politics are weak [12]. This is the legacy of British colonial rule.

It is regrettable that the party seems to have forgotten the initial purpose of the "one country, two systems" policy; that is, the return of Taiwan and not Hong Kong. Now that the hand of history has made Hong Kong a testing ground for the policy, the Taiwanese authorities are naturally paying close attention [13] to how it plays out. Obviously, if the policy was carried out to the letter in terms of both politics and the economy, and if in addition reunification would bring economic benefits and increased international clout, the position of the Taiwan separatist movement would be considerably weakened. Then, reunification would be a much more realistic proposition. The chances for reunification hang almost entirely on the assessment of the "one country, two systems" policy by the Taiwanese authorities and people.

The Chinese government, however, has shown itself to be shortsighted and narrow-minded. In fact, even if Hong Kong held full democratic elections, it could not serve as a model for democracy on the mainland. Its geographical position, historical [14] traditions, and economic reliance on the mainland would prevent this, and any Hong Kong government that emerged from democratic elections would not be able to openly rebel against the central government.

The Taiwan effect

Li Datong is a Chinese journalist and a former editor [10] of *Bingdian (Freezing Point)*, a weekly supplement of the *China Youth Daily* newspaper

Also by Li Datong in **openDemocracy**:

"The story of *Freezing Point* [10]" (12 September 2006)

"China: a 'great nation'? [10]" (10 January 2007)

"Chinese political reform: official discourse, real meaning [10]" (7 March 2007)"

What China's new property law means [10]" (21 March 2007)

"The Chinese 'nail house': a Chongqing saga [10]" (4 April 2007)

"'Public opinion' and China's Japan policy [10]" (18 April 2007)

"An end to exclusivity [10]" (2 May 2007)

It is a shame that the Beijing authorities have such a fear of democracy that they have lost confidence in the logic of their own power. A single issue like democracy in Hong Kong can set off [15] the centralised power's instinctive fear of a chain reaction, and so it continually delays democracy. The chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress, Wu Bangguo, even marked the tenth anniversary by declaring [16] on 6 June 2007 that "the Hong Kong SAR has as much power as the central government chooses to give it." What does this say about the "high degree of autonomy" enjoyed by Hong Kong?

For the mainland, Taiwan [17] is much more strategically important than Hong Kong. If Taiwan was reunited with the mainland under "one country, two systems", the whole of China's relations with the United States, Japan, and even all of southeast Asia, would be transformed. But the Chinese government's political performance in Hong Kong is doubtless turning the Taiwanese authorities and people off the idea of reunification. For a Chinese government that aims for reunification, such behaviour in Hong Kong is almost suicidal. As the old Chinese proverb goes, they may end up picking up the sesame seed, but dropping the watermelon.

"China's veteran voices of reform [10]" (16 May 2007)

"Chinese and American unions shake hands [10]"
(30 May 2007)

"China's unlearning: a potent anniversary [10]" (13 June 2007)

"The root of slave labour in China [10]" (26 June 2007)

Source URL:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy_power/china_inside/hong_kong_return

Links:

[1] http://english.gov.cn/special/xghg_index.htm

[2] <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601080&sid=aOUnlzhFRu3c&refer=asia>

[3] <http://www.info.gov.hk/ef3.htm>

[4] <http://www.legco.gov.hk/english/index.htm>

[5] <http://www.ceo.gov.hk/eng/biography.htm>

[6] <http://hkupop.hku.hk/english/release/release475.html>

[7] http://www.info.gov.hk/basic_law/fulltext/

[8] <http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-03-07-voa27.cfm>

[9] <http://www.chineseembassy.org/eng/ziliao/3602/3604/t18027.htm>

[10] http://www.zonaeuropa.com/20050817_2.htm

[11] <http://www.elections.gov.hk/ce2007/eng/facts.html>

[12] <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/07/11/asia/AS-GEN-Hong-Kong-Democracy.php>

[13] http://www.upiasiaonline.com/politics/2007/07/06/commentary_dictatorship_is_the_natural_enemy_of_a_free_society/

[14] http://www.ibtauris.com/ibtauris/display.asp?K=181463430384866&sf_01=CAUTHOR&st_01=tsang&sf_02=CTITLE&sf_03=KEYWORD

[15] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/6257956.stm>

[16] <http://www.cctv.com/english/20070607/103055.shtml>

[17] http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/cup_detail.taf?ti_id=3886

[18] <http://chinglishfriend.com/blogs/shanghaiist/archive/2007/08/30/detained-straits-times-journalist-ching-cheong-ailing-in-prison.aspx>



Copyright © Li Datong, . Published by openDemocracy Ltd. You may download and print extracts from this article for your own personal and non-commercial use only. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Contact us if you wish to discuss republication. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.