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Jean-Philippe Béja, Joseph Cheng et Jean-François Huchet

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Editorial

A long and bumpy road....

JEAN-PHILIPPE BÉJA,
JOSEPH CHENG AND
JEAN-FRANÇOIS HUCHET

Ten years ago, observers were divided between the optimists, who believed that the integration of Hong Kong in the motherland would be smooth, that the economy would continue to flourish, and that the “one country, two systems” formula would function without a hitch, and the pessimists who were convinced that after a few years, Hong Kong would become “just another Chinese City,” where corruption would be rife and basic freedoms would fade away. Both were wrong.

Last June, as on every 4th June since the handover, Hong Kong was the only place on Chinese soil where tens of thousands of citizens peacefully commemorated the June 4th massacre. At the last free Legco elections (again, the only ones on Chinese soil) the pan democratic camp secured 25 deputies and 60% of the vote; China-watching magazines such as *Zhengming*, *Dongxiang* and *Kaifang* continue to be published in the SAR and have not toned down their criticism of the Chinese Communist Party. Demonstrations are more numerous than ever, and civil society is thriving.

So, were the optimists right? Things are not as simple. As Joseph Man Chan and Francis Lee show, “Hong Kong media ownership has increasingly been taken over by various pro-China business people who share similar backgrounds and business interests.” The promises of democratisation contained in the Basic Law have not been fulfilled and, last March, the Chief Executive was selected by a “small group of people.” The democrats may represent a political force, but, as Joseph Cheng shows in his article, they are deeply divided, and the constitutional constraints that prevent them from acceding to power are wearing them out.

During this last decade, the People’s Republic has seen amazing economic development, to the point that, in 2006, it became the world’s fourth largest

economy. Cities like Shanghai or Tianjin are becoming increasingly “internationalised”, and many multinational companies have transferred their headquarters from Hong Kong to the Yangzi metropolis. Container ports have developed along the coasts of Guangdong, and the SAR has lost much of its trade to the mainland. However, Hong Kong has been able to retain some of its comparative advantages: the presence of the rule of law which, despite everything, is still lacking in the People’s Republic, continues to attract international companies, and Hong Kong’s stock exchange has developed considerably since 1997 as shown by Anne-Laure Delatte and Maud Savary-Mornet.

However, the first decade of the SAR has not been easy: just a few weeks after the handover, the Asian financial crisis dealt a terrible blow to its economy. Unemployment developed, and international actors started to express doubt when the government intervened to help save the stock exchange. Yet despite this shock, Hong Kong showed its remarkable ability to adapt to difficult times, rebounding on the back of the internet economy. But this also ended in a serious crisis, one which this time brought the Hang Seng index down. The SAR was just recuperating when the SARS crisis hit. Hundreds of people died, and residents dared not go out. This in turn provoked further crisis, with shops closing down and employees being laid off. The SARS crisis also showed that Hong Kong was able to face the worst of crises without sacrificing transparency, helping the world understand the seriousness of the disease. The contrast between the SAR and the mainland appeared in all its clarity. Paradoxically, the crisis reinforced the specificity of Hong Kong.

During the first decade of the SAR, the central government has not always respected the “high degree of autonomy” it had promised. The NPC standing

committee has interfered many times to slow the pace of democratisation (see Michael Davis' article), and most famously, to try to impose the adoption of article 23 on subversion. The people of Hong Kong reacted strongly in both cases, but could not reverse the NPC decision to postpone universal suffrage. An earlier ruling by the NPC on the right of abode had already sparked fears among observers that judicial autonomy in the SAR was being eroded.

All in all, it has been a bumpy road, and Hong Kong is as far from democracy as it was in 1997, despite the promises contained in the Basic Law. But, the unpopular Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa eventually had to resign under popular pressure, and the Central Government appointed a popular representative of the old Civil Service. Although not through institutional means, Hong Kong residents have been able to make their opinion known, and to obtain some concessions from the Central Government. Their political culture, as described in Jean-Philippe Béja's article, and the strong civil society

described by Christine Loh have been instrumental in this resilience.

After ten years, Hong Kong has retained its main specificities. The economy has once again caught up with growth. Real estate speculation has sent the Hang Seng index to new heights. Today, Hong Kong relies on the mainland, its tourists, its investments, the listing of its companies more than it used to ten years ago. But Hongkongers have demonstrated that they are attached to their specific way of life, they have expressed their will to develop democracy: in a few words, they have shown that, contrary to what many mainland leaders have repeatedly declared, they are not only attached to "horse racing, dancing, and speculating". Ten years after the handover, the population has shown a strong attachment to its freedoms, and has demonstrated in many ways that Hong Kong, far from being only an economic city, remains a place with both a strong political awareness and, as shown by Gérard Henry's paper, a distinct and dynamic cultural identity. •