

**Update, April 2007,
Watching the Flag Come Down
(HOLO Books June 2007) – POLITICS
(This web update won't mean much unless
you have read the book and its 2006 epilogue).**

We arrived in Hong Kong, from the Literary Festival in Shanghai, on 11 March this year to find the election campaign for the Chief Executive in full swing. And there was a pan-democracy (as it is now called) candidate standing against the Beijing incumbent Donald Tsang. Was it Anson Chan? No.

She had announced, on 23 September last year, that she would not stand in a 'pre-determined' election. What she had done, though, was to set up what she called her 'Core Group' – advisers she would call upon to put forward policy proposals. This was presumably the 'space' that, in June last year just before I stopped my published Epilogue, Anson Chan had told her supporters and the news media 'to watch'.

On 1 July, the ninth anniversary of the Handover, she had taken a prominent place in the march of 58,000 in favour of universal suffrage, surrounded by a protective linked ring of family and supporters. In mid-July, taxed again about standing for election, she said that she wanted 'to see one step, take one step'.

Having decided it was not worth standing, and set up her Core Group of five advisors – three women, two men, three of them Chinese, one Westerner, one non-Chinese Asian – on 5 March, in time to fuel the election campaign, she issued the result of their work: 'The Road to Universal Suffrage: a proposed roadmap and timetable for election to the post of Chief Executive and the Legislative Council on the basis of universal suffrage'.

For some, her proposal with, at its heart, the need to get rid of the business-oriented, privileged functional constituencies, did not go far enough; while, at the other end of the political spectrum, the business community rejected her view of the way forward. The abolition of functional constituencies without a system to replace them would unacceptably alter the political structure as prescribed by the Basic Law, proclaimed the non-Chinese president of the Business and Professional Federation (a former colleague of Anson's).

The following day, an official of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office ticked off pan-democrats for assuming they were 'heroes of democracy' when Beijing had already endorsed universal suffrage for the city more than 20 years previously.

On 13 March, the headline in the *South China Morning Post* (SCMP) declared 'Hong Kong International Role Boosted: Beijing signals city has won duel with Shanghai analysts say'. And the same day a National People's Congress leader issued a stern warning to the people of Hong Kong to stop 'messaging around' with politics and focus on economic development.

Meanwhile, Regina Ip, who resigned over the National Security imbroglio of 2003, and took time off to do a master's degree in political science in the United States, had, as I just managed earlier to record, arrived back in July 2006 and secured airspace for the central tenet of her thesis on Hong Kong governance and democracy. She was greeted as the second of Hong Kong's 'Iron Ladies' – Anson Chan being the first. (Traditionally these top public servants were among those known as 'The Handbag Brigade'. If these sobriquets were intended to put them down, they seem to have been singularly unsuccessful; and another of them, Fanny Law, is now 'Lady Commissioner' of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC)). Regina Ip then became founder and Chair of yet another independent think tank – Savantas – backed by Hong Kong people who, like her, had spent time abroad.

In her SCMP article of 12 March 2007, Regina noted, and I cannot forebear to quote at some length, that 'institutions compiling economic freedom indices are threatening to deprive Hong Kong of its world No 1 ranking. As these institutions have pointed out, politicisation is causing the city to consider introducing a minimum wage, which many economists agree has negative implications for freedom of the labour markets and job creation.' She added that 'More political rights, narrowly defined as electoral rights, will only generate more political pressures for meddling in the markets.' While she did also add that this is 'not an argument for not advancing towards universal suffrage', she continued 'But ...'

Regina has her eye, according to the SCMP, on being elected to Legco in 2008 and is popular (16%, according to a Liberal Party internal poll), though not as popular as pan-democrat Audrey Eu (20%), but ahead of the Party's vice-chair Miriam Lau (10%). What party Regina may stand for, her own – yet to be established – or another, is not clear.

On 15 March, the day before we left, Christine Loh, in one of the regular columns in which she propounds the views of her Civic Exchange think tank, was more interested in taking on the main electoral contender; but she might as well have been replying to Regina Ip when she suggested that the erecting of concrete infrastructure in the name of economic development, and Hong Kong's notorious air pollution that together reduced the quality of people's lives, may lead to more protests of the kind that have already been seen.

By this time the pan-democrats were quite excited because, Anson Chan having declared herself unavailable to stand as Chief Executive, a member of Audrey Eu's Civic Party – Alan Leong – had not only agreed to stand but, as an apparent light-weight with a pink tie and matching pocket handkerchief, had, many agreed, trounced Donald Tsang in a televised debate watched by 2 million of Hong Kong's 6 million or so population.

As the election of 25 March approached, everyone knew that Alan Leong could not win when the 800 electoral college was hand-picked to elect Beijing's choice. But it was a step, better than nothing. Except that is to Emily Lau and The Frontier. She began organising a demonstration for the 25th 'by land, by air and by sea' because voting in the 'small circle election' was to take place near the island-based Chek Lap Kok airport, far away not only from ordinary citizens (who would not be voting) but also the 800 who had to get there to vote.

On Saturday 9 March a demonstration against the 'small circle election' by the League of Social Democrats (set up in 2006 by someone with signature long hair, but not a woman), and supported by Emily, was scuppered as it tried to assemble and move off from Victoria Park – scene of many a candle-lit vigil. Hundreds of police penned in fewer demonstrators who, refused the luxury of arrest, had to call off the demonstration after two hours' stalemate.

Emily was incandescent. She was a journalist until 16 years ago when she stood for election to Legco and won. But she ended her article in the SCMP on 14 March: 'In the current farce that is called an election, the game plan is to give credibility and legitimacy to an undemocratic and unfair process. The media are doing their level best to achieve this goal, and I look upon them with nothing but contempt.'

Against all this, the Hong Kong Literary Festival started on 12 March, and it was interesting how it and the political debate – at least at citizen level – bounced off each other. The panel of which I was a member had as its topic 'The Handover: Ten Years On'. The format worked well – three of us and a moderator set the ball rolling, but the audience was expected to join in, and they did.

One strand that emerged was that people are fed up with politics. There is altogether too much of it, particularly party politics. (This linked in with opinions I had received elsewhere from sources that I respect: people, probably women, only too ready to fulfil their obligations to the community through public service – indeed they have already done more than their share – are increasingly deterred by the politicisation of the debate and the intrusion of the news media into their personal lives). I had to point out that politics is endemic in human affairs; and is not something a society can turn its back on, particularly if it aspires to democracy.

When the need for a good strong leader was raised, I ventured, 'Do you mean a dictator?'

Then there was the Gore Vidal factor. We had already heard him in the packed Glamour Bar at M on the Bund in Shanghai, now he was one of the stars at the first Festival evening at the University of Hong Kong. But first came the Man Booker lecture given by last year's winner Kiran Desai. Her lecture was a model – moving and thought provoking. But to some, perhaps those who had not realised that it was an annual, crafted, keynote lecture, it suffered from a lack of fireworks when followed by impish, wheelchair-bound Gore Vidal in conversation, with his attacks on his government and impeccable comic timing.

In Shanghai, Gore Vidal had talked of ascending to the top floor of the hotel in which we were staying and seeing stretched before him the new Shanghai – actually the much-vaunted skyline across the water in Pudong does not compare aesthetically or dramatically with that of Hong Kong. In that moment, Gore Vidal proclaimed, he realised that the Mantle, or Mandate, of Heaven had passed from the United States to (return to) China. He repeated this image in Hong Kong – without the ascent to the 27th floor – and it was raised at our panel discussion. To which I could only respond with a fervent wish for no more emperors and imperialism.

Perhaps one of the most interesting, and unexpected, points raised was the number of expatriates who, having left Hong Kong to return home or go somewhere they thought preferable, had missed it so much, and had so much confidence in its future that they have returned. Historically, non-Chinese came to Hong Kong to work, perhaps for all their working lives, but never thought of staying on in retirement.

One of my co-panelists was the Hong Kong novelist Xu Xi. She has spent much time in the United States and one of her recurring themes, as I discovered when reading her book of short stories *Daughters of Hui* on the plane from Shanghai to Hong Kong, is the scramble, in the years leading up to the Handover, by Hong Kong people to get a berth abroad, through marriage, however unlikely the partner, education or work. And we discussed whether or not they are coming back now.

On the plane home I became engrossed in Xu Xi's 'Handover' novel, *The Unwalled City*, set in the four years leading up to 1997. It's a good, atmospheric read, rather more literary than the usual 'Hong Kong novel', but I must tell her that our last four years were nothing like that of her rather sybaritic and troubled characters.

Libby Wong's *Rainbow City*, which I eventually procured from Australia via the publisher's website (wildandwoolley), is a pleasure I am keeping for holiday reading. I can recommend Christine Loh's *Being Here* which I sent off for from the SCMP. It's nearly always an eye-opener to be let into the family background of Hong Kong people, and Christine is such an all-round good egg, that her ideas are invariably worth reading.

The Festival offering on our last proper evening was Jan Morris in conversation with Simon Winchester. Many were surprised to find Jan turning against Hong Kong about which she has written so warmly and evocatively in the past. She had Shanghai yet to come and it would be good to know how she would compare them. It is true that in Tsim Sha Tsui tourists have always been accosted by shady characters hissing 'cheap handbags and watches' – that is, fakies – but Shanghai's Nanjing Street is now beyond a joke.

Reading this, I am aware that it has slightly the tone of one or two of the ranty blogs – written by disaffected denizens – that come up when you google Hong Kong. I am also conscious that I was there for only a few days at a pressure-cooker time in its political life. So, what are my views worth? Only as much as those of an outsider who was once slightly involved, has tried to keep up, and wishes Hong Kong well. (I should also correct the assumption in my 2006 epilogue that the election of the Chief Executive would take place later in the year.)

I'm not going to keep adding to this update, but I might just write something after the 2008 Legco elections – for my strongest impression of politics in Hong Kong is the noticeable contribution of women. Part of me wishes that those with similar views could band together but then, in struggle, it is often worth coming from several directions, each with a different barb. And, certainly, if Christine, Anson, Emily, and Audrey, for example, were in the same party they would have nothing like the same media exposure and opportunity to convey their views.

Oh, and the result of the election for Chief Executive: Tsang 649; Leong 123. Voters were assured beforehand that no one would know how they had voted.

PS I'm writing separately about the gathering of the Classmates and Derek's former team at the book-signing of *Watching the Flag Come Down*.