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Hong Kong is still vibrant

Abdullah Ahmad

THREE years after it became China's Special Administrative Region (SAR) and despite the Asian economic crisis, Hong Kong remains a vibrant capitalist enclave.

I wrote this article on my flight home (Cathay Pacific) from Hong Kong yesterday afternoon. I had been to Hong Kong or Frangrant Harbour twice since its return to China and find it quite the same as it was under the British Colonial Government.

Hong Kong is one of the world's great financial centres serving trade and banking, publishing, film-making and tourism. These had taken over from manufacturings as the island's main enterprises. Though it has a small population (slightly over 7 million), Hong Kong is the world's eighth largest trading entity.

On the downside, it is a magnet for mainland sex and "women" from across the globe. The sex business has gone global. Last year, 3.2 million tourists (including 45,000 Malaysians) visited sleazy Pattaya alone. Several middle-aged men Viagra-ed themselves to death each year in the company of their young bedmates.

China may well be on the fast track to becoming one of the mega large economies early in the third millennium but many people do not think it will hurt Hong Kong. Shanghai will assume an increasingly prominent role though I doubt it will surpass Hong Kong anytime soon.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told 600-plus diners that Asian nations must work together to take their places as equals in the global community of nations. The irony is the audience at the black-tie dinner organised by the Asian Society in Hong Kong was made up of mainly whites, representing the faces and essence of Western capitalism and their mass media.

Dr Mahathir's speech, though a vote of confidence for Asians and market economy, did not make the Sunday Morning Post. What did was the Amnesty International's organised protest. The protesters, mainly whites and some Filipinos passing as Malays, claimed there was suppression of human rights in Malaysia.

The Prime Minister, I doubt, was even aware of the protesters (some 17 protesters) as he arrived at Hong Kong's Convention and Exhibition Centre to address the Asia Society gathering.

Dr Mahathir and Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa did not meet but spoke on the telephone. Tung was give China's seal of approval last Thursday for a second term though his first term does not expire until 2002.

The liberal section of Hong Kong society were upset over Beijing's open support for Tung because they maintained that it was unfair to the other candidates who might want to offer themselves for the post in 2002.

President Jiang Zemin lashed out at journalists in SAR for their repeated queries about the central government's support for the Chief Executive. He berated them: "I am angry" and accused the media of suggesting he had already decided who would get the job in two years' time.

The Hong Kong journalists said they're in a free society. Journalists were obliged to ask questions of public concern without fear or favour.

The last Governor of Hong Kong, Sir Chris Patten, now the European Union's (EU) External Relations Commissioner asked Beijing to keep its

nose out of Hong Kong and urged the EU to maintain close watch on SAR's workers. He said this when commenting on China's involvement in the controversial rights-of-abode lawsuits where the initial judgement was overturned. Patten wanted the EU member nations to support giving visa-free access to SAR's passport holders.

It does seem that Hong Kong's ability to enhance its international competitiveness may suffer in the long term because it is short of workers with a high standard of English.

According to Mr Choi Chee-cheng, Secretary to the island's Examinations Authority, "There is an urgent need for people with good Chinese and English proficiency. The current situation is that the number of people with good standard of English is not meeting society's demands".

Most employers are dissatisfied with their staff's proficiency in English. The criticism came despite the Hong Kong Government's RM25 million campaign to raise the standard of English.

In an editorial, the South China Morning Post says:
"The problem is not new, and it would be wrong to say that the locals now shun English because the territory is no longer a British colony. The fact is the number of Hong Kong Chinese well-versed in English has always been small.

"In fact, with the expansion of secondary and tertiary education over the past two decades, the numbers of English speakers have been growing. The 1996 by-census found that 34.9 per cent of the population spoke English as a second tongue, compared with 29.4 per cent in 1991.

"In terms of language standards, it is probably fair to say that more people than ever are speaking "good" English. At the same time, more people than ever are speaking "bad" English.

"The crisis which faces Hong Kong is that the number of people with sufficiently good English skills required for jobs in the service sectors has failed to keep up with demand. It does not help that those with good English are far more likely to emigrate and many had left before 1997 further reducing the small pool of bilingual professionals.

"A survey by the British Chamber of Commerce found that 75 per cent of British firms complained that the English proficiency of their employees in Hong Kong is unsatisfactory.

"If foreign firms cannot find staff for the if offices, they may be compelled to move elsewhere, or not set up here. Either way, that poses a serious obstacle to SAR's bid to maintain its status as an international financial and service centre."

It does sound a bit like here, doesn't it? Whatever, we must also do something fast to check the declining standard of written and oral English in our country.

I know there is going to be a tough job, there is no instant solution because it takes years for anyone to master a second language; any language for that matter.

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