

Grey area

C.K. Yeung believes a diverse network of competing think tanks can provide good policy ideas that answer Hong Kong's critical need for better governance, especially post 2017

In democratic governance, a good policy idea is king. A key institution of democracy that supports good government is a thriving network of competing think tanks with a broad spectrum of policy ideas. This is missing in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong's governance has all along been characterised as an executive-led system anchored by a strong career civil service. It is a closed system that leaves little room to accommodate external advisers to the policymaking process. This structural limitation stifles the growth of policy think tanks and dries up the pool of fresh policy ideas. The lacklustre performance of the Central Policy Unit – the government's in-house think tank – testifies to this institutional deficiency.

Another limitation is ideological simplicity. All along, Hong Kong people subscribe to the purest form of capitalism for economics and the utopian form of liberal democracy for politics. Who needs think tanks to provide ideological diversity for the different forms and shapes of capitalism and democracy?

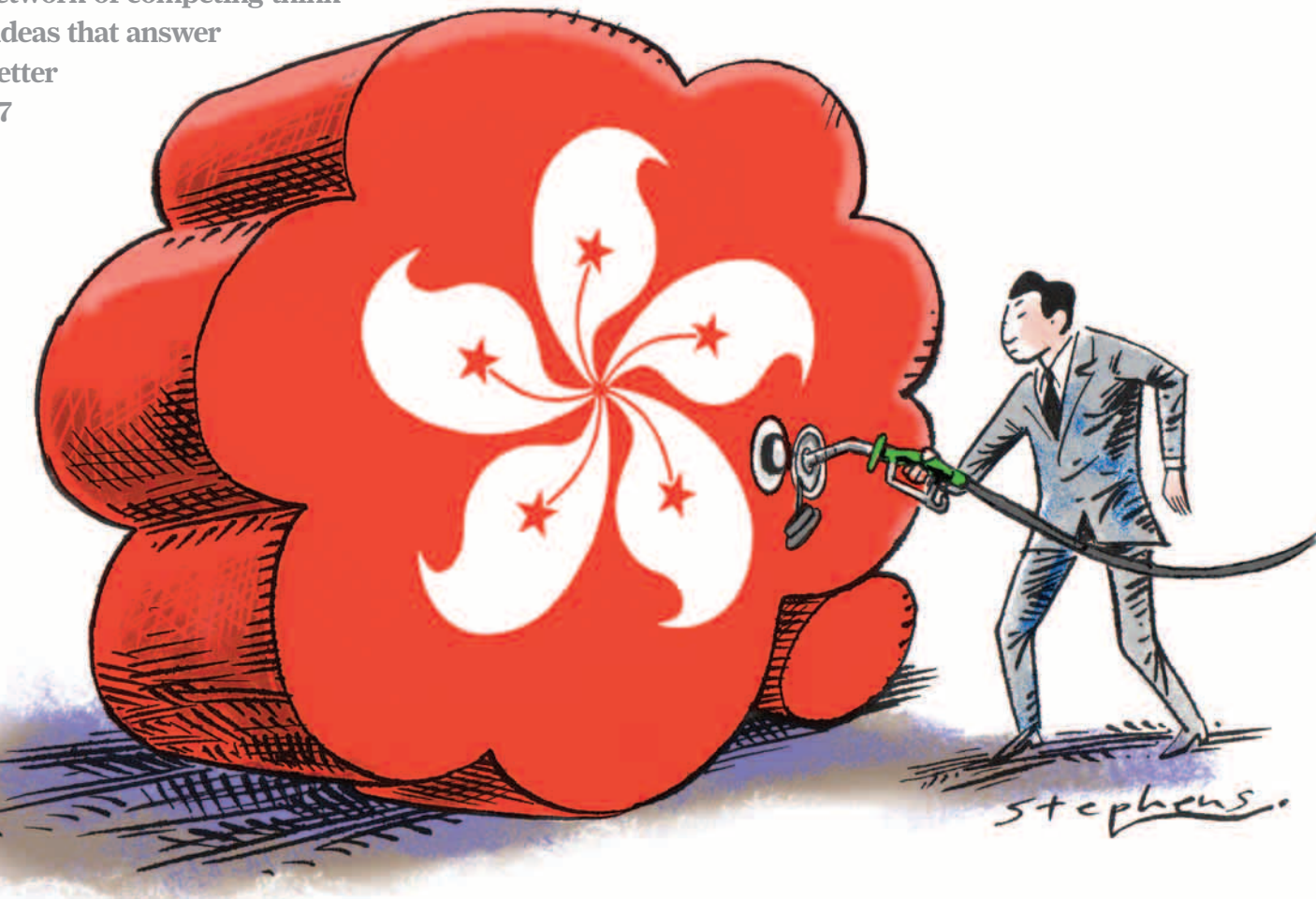
But the rise of an all-mighty China has created an ideological tension. How to achieve economic integration with the mainland, which most people embrace, without ideological or political integration, which many people resist? How to preserve what is uniquely Hong Kong while riding on China's miraculous economic rise?

The polarisation of our community triggered by the Occupy movement is but a violent manifestation of this contradiction. Our economic destiny and our political dreams are pulling us in different directions.

Much cerebral work awaits Hong Kong, as for many years we haven't had a quiet moment to think hard and ponder our alternatives amid the constant political bickering. Against this background, the initiative by former chief executive Tung Chee-hwa to set up a non-government think tank – Our Hong Kong Foundation – is both timely and welcome.

Topping its thinking list should be our governance system, which is lagging far behind our rapid pace of democracy. Twenty years is a short time for a system to evolve from having a colonial governor parachuted into Hong Kong to the election of our chief executive by one-person, one-vote in 2017.

Hong Kong's institutional underpinnings for democracy remain stuck in the colonial time warp but the people's craving



for democracy – with all its rosy promises, real or imagined – has surged past the readiness of our outdated system. A critical flaw – one which calls for a critical rethink – is that what is supposed to be an executive-led system, with the chief executive calling the shots, is now in tatters and exists in name only. The system is trampled by the



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force of democratisation, and the system commander is held hostage by a hostile legislative environment populated by quarrelsome politicians with their own agendas.

In the heydays of executive dominance, the Legislative Council was made up of men and women appointed by the colonial governor who grandly presided over it. Policies were made by senior civil

servants accountable to the Colonial Secretariat. It was superbly efficient in getting done what the government wanted to do, awkwardly effective by shutting out inconvenient voices, and unashamedly undemocratic.

The promised universal suffrage in 2017 will usher in a new political era as it will not only change the way the chief executive is chosen but also fundamentally alter the people's expectations of our leader. The consent of the governed could no longer be assumed, but has to be earned.

This requires a governance system that is not only effective in outcome and democratic in process but also forward-looking and responsive in seeking solutions, not merely reacting to challenges. This is a tall order, given our present structure and predicament.

If the governance system remains unchanged, and if the next chief executive cannot forge a strong ruling alliance with the legislature, come 2017, Hong Kong stands no better chance of having a leader more effective than the current one, with policy thinking stuck in the unimaginative rut and policy implementation held up in endless gridlock.

Tung's think tank has been set up expressly to influence public policies. As

an agent of change but without formal decision-making powers and without privileged access to the policymaking process, any success of its mission depends not only on the excellence of its research output and the superiority of its thinking, but also on its policy advocacy capability.

A policy idea wins because it is intellectually superior. But many brilliant policy ideas died on the vine, such as electronic road pricing to cut congestion, or selling public rental units at a discount and offering loans to young buyers to turn the units into their designer home – an investment they won't otherwise commit to, a goal they can't pursue, and a sense of belonging they won't develop, as long as their dwelling is rented from the government.

For a policy idea pushed from outside the governing circle to be successfully adopted, it must not only convince policymakers but also win the support of those who will feel its impact – opinion leaders, businesspeople, unions, the professionals, the media and, through them, the people. The post-2017 political landscape demands that.

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Tongue twister

Kelly Yang says more can be done to help Hong Kong children improve their English, if we accept costs to their Cantonese proficiency



The rise of mainland China's English proficiency and decline of Hong Kong's should come as no surprise. It's a matter of simple maths – two is fewer than three. Children on the mainland have two languages to master – Putonghua and English – while most Hong Kong kids have to know three different tongues – Putonghua, Cantonese and English.

Stroll through any local school and what do you hear? Cantonese. As Hong Kong people, we are fiercely proud of our vibrant dialect and do not want to give it up. Many say Cantonese is our last hope of keeping our city unique. Without it, we are at greater risk of becoming just another Chinese city.

Thus, for important cultural and deeply emotional reasons, our city clings to trilingualism. But this comes at a cost. It's rare to meet someone who can speak three languages perfectly.

What's much more common is for a person to have one dominant language and two secondary ones. For most local schoolchildren, the dominant language is Cantonese. That's because it's the lingua franca of the environment for most, whether it's in the playground, at home, or on the streets.

Mainland Chinese children, on the other hand, have Putonghua as their dominant language. And with the rest of their time and energy, they focus on learning English. As the number of after-school English learning centres rises, along with household spending on education, it should come as little surprise that their English proficiency has overtaken that of Hong Kong students.

If Hong Kong's top priority is to get children to be able to speak both Cantonese and Putonghua, then there's no problem. Nearly all our children can speak both dialects of Chinese, whereas most mainland children can speak only one. Hong Kong children can speak perfect Cantonese and their Putonghua is improving year after year.

However, if the priority is English, then we have a problem. We need to rethink the main language of instruction in local schools and, more importantly, how local schools teach English. The only way to beef up English is to have more English. English-medium instruction should be used for all subjects, aside from Chinese. Currently, only select local schools, many of them Direct Subsidy Scheme schools, do so; the rest still teach mostly in Cantonese.

More importantly, the way local schools teach English needs to change. Right now, students as young as six spend hours cramming for exams and then routinely disregard their new vocabulary as soon as the exam is over. The emphasis needs to shift to discussion- and project-based learning.

If these two things happen, expatriate families will start to send their children to local schools rather than put up with the exorbitant international school fees. This, in turn, will cause the language environment in the playgrounds of local schools to switch from Cantonese to English, thereby changing the dominant language. But that's if we want it to. Whatever path we take, there are trade-offs. Ultimately, it's up to us as a city to decide.

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Having tasted freedom, Hong Kong will never settle for a fake democracy

Robert Boxwell says even if the streets are cleared of protesters, their fight for the vote will persist

I was in Bangkok in May 1992, staying a few miles from where 100,000 Thais had converged to protest at the appointment of Suchinda Kraprayoon as prime minister. Suchinda was one of the generals who led a coup in 1991 to oust a government that the military complained was filled with corrupt politicians – “unusually rich” was the Thai term for them.

In March 1992, fresh elections were held, ostensibly to give a clean government back to the people. But a coalition of military-friendly parties “invited” Suchinda to be prime minister, though he hadn't been elected and had promised to stay out of politics. With tears in his eyes, he said he would make a “sacrifice” and take the job. Two weeks later, he named his cabinet. Eleven of the “unusually rich” politicians were in it.

The machinations brought crowds onto Bangkok's streets. Thais knew a fake democracy when they saw one.

Finding myself with a free afternoon, I asked the transport desk for a car to take me to see the demonstration. As my middle-aged, uniformed, English-speaking driver and I approached and took in the magnitude of the crowd, the driver became excited. He suggested walking around with me.

He left his jacket in the car and we walked towards the edge of the mass, approaching a group of young people milling about, mostly seeming to enjoy themselves. We struck up conversations and they talked to

us about why they were there. We stayed about an hour.

On the ride back, the driver was animated. Wading into that mass of Thai people, he said, had been one of the most exciting things he had ever done. This made me happy, like I had done my small piece for democracy. People who live free have a funny habit of thinking like that.

About a week later, just after dawn, Thai soldiers opened fire to disperse the crowd, which had grown increasingly restless after a month on the streets. They killed dozens of their fellow Thais, wounded hundreds more, and broke the hearts of the rest of Thailand's 60 million citizens.



Thais still fight for real democracy. People who have it never want to give it up

I have lived and worked around Asia for 20 years, including a year in Hong Kong, and have followed the democracy protests in the city closely. There are plenty of differences between what happened in Bangkok that May and what's happening in Hong Kong – especially the absence of military involvement. But there are plenty of similarities too. And the main one is that people

know a fake democracy when they see it, and don't want it.

Thailand has had numerous coups since its conversion to democracy in 1932. While the country has not been an example of political stability through the years, one thing has been constant: Thais still fight for real democracy. People who have it never want to give it up. Which is why it's hard to believe China's leaders were ever sincere about letting democracy take root in Hong Kong.

Imagine real universal suffrage coming to Hong Kong in 2017. How exactly are things supposed to work then, in 2047, when “one country, two systems” expires? Out with three decades of vibrant democracy, of people shaping their own future, and in with Beijing's one-party rule? Not likely. The democracy genie could never be put back in the bottle. China's leaders, renowned for their love of the long view, must have always known this.

Yet to placate restive Hongkongers, and to appear to keep its promises, Beijing would be OK with democracy in Hong Kong – as long as it has a revised definition. This acknowledges that people want democracy but tries to beguile them into accepting a fake.

This didn't fool anyone in poor Thailand. How was it supposed to fool rich, educated Hong Kong?

Hong Kong's young people look to the future and the future looks bleak. Hong Kong's tycoons own them. The 1 per cent are driving up property prices. Journalists are under

attack. After decades of effective anti-corruption efforts, Hong Kong's people hear anti-corruption propaganda from the mainland that boasts of having snared 8,000 corrupt officials and roll their eyes – the Communist Party has 80 million members. And now China reneges on democracy, the only hope most of Hong Kong's people have to influence their own futures.

Meanwhile, that beacon of freedom, the US, looks like Exhibit A in the propagandists' case against democracy. Look at crooked Wall Street. Look at Newtown, Connecticut and Ferguson, Missouri. Look at the democratic process itself. It's a money-driven popularity contest that brings incompetent people to power and chaos to the streets.

Many of China's people are happy to be ruled for now, putting aside freedom for economic security. The freedom-loving people of Hong Kong reached that point decades ago. Many realise a rich life doesn't always mean making more money. Whither Hong Kong, they wonder. They might leave the streets, but they will never leave the idea of democracy. And they want the real thing, not a fake.

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Clean stoves programme fuels China's green campaign

Kamilia Lahrchi commends the reductions in household pollution

Despite mounting criticism as the world's largest polluting nation, China has implemented the most successful programme to adopt clean and safe cooking solutions for households, to improve people's livelihoods and ultimately reduce emissions.

This proves Beijing can boost its economic growth, develop energy security and reduce pollution at the same time. Notwithstanding its current pollution levels, it should be remembered that China is also the largest investor in green energy.

Emblematic of Beijing's environmental leaps, it announced a historic deal with the US to rein back greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 at the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

Promoting the use of clean cooking stoves is an under-reported, albeit critical, area in environment and health. Lung cancer is the fourth biggest killer in the world, ahead of Aids. Traditional stoves produce the same amount of smoke as 400 cigarettes in one hour.

By coming to grips with this issue, China has vowed to be a clean power and lead the way. It has grasped the detrimental consequences of rapid industrialisation on health and the environment.

Traditional stoves – coined “silent killers” – contribute to household air pollution, which causes the death of more than one million people every year in China, according to statistics from the Global Alliance for

Clean Cookstoves. Some 608 million Chinese suffer from household air pollution as they rely on solid fuels, namely coal, wood, crop residues and animal dung for cooking and heating.

Between 1982 and 1992, Beijing successfully distributed 180 million improved stoves to households, thanks to its national programme, Wang Yanliang, director general of the Rural Energy and Environment Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture told the Cookstoves Future Summit in New York last week.

This programme enabled the replacement of more than 60 per cent of traditional stoves in rural households.



The price of fuel determines rural households' choice of whether to use clean stoves

This makes it the world's most successful plan of action of its kind and the largest, as it has benefited 150 million rural households.

Civil society leaders and policymakers hailed China's advances in curbing greenhouse gas emissions during the two-day summit.

The global alliance that organised the event appointed Chinese actress Zhao Wei as its

ambassador to highlight China's role in paving the way for clean solutions.

Although coming to grips with climate change remains a challenge for China – some 700 million Chinese still use solid fuel for cooking and heating – its programme could be a model for other nations.

One reason for its success is that Beijing has entirely subsidised the enhanced stoves – a key strategy, as the price of fuel determines rural households' choice of whether to use clean stoves over traditional, high-polluting ones.

Another reason is that the Chinese government invested in research and development, training and public information sharing to raise awareness of clean stoves' health benefits.

The Ministry of Agriculture and the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves together launched two market assessment studies in Liaoning (遼寧), Gansu (甘肅), Henan (河南), Hubei (湖北), Chongqing (重慶) and Shaanxi (陝西). They surveyed more than 3,600 households.

The findings will help in developing a programme to provide clean stoves for another 40 million households by 2020.

And as a sign of Beijing's long-term commitment to green energy, the national programme will be incorporated into the 13th five-year plan, as well as other government policies.

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