

OPINION

South China Morning Post

Cuts to sharpen military's edge

The impressive military parade that was the centrepiece of events in Beijing yesterday marking the 70th anniversary of Japan's second world war defeat was replete with meaning. President Xi Jinping's (習近平) announcement shortly before it began of a 300,000 cut in troop strength and a pledge of

China's peaceful development sent a conflicting message to some observers. To them, the technologically advanced hardware on show spoke more of sabre-rattling than friendship. But that belies the mission of the People's Liberation Army to be a force for peace and stability.

This was, after all, on a day honouring the sacrifice and heroism of Chinese who endured 14 years of Japanese aggression. From that experience has come a desire for peace and a will to prevent a repeat. As Xi said, "Prejudice and discrimination, hatred and war can only cause disaster and pain". For that reason, the PLA was "loyally committed to its sacred duty of defending the security of the motherland and the peaceful life of the people" and "safeguarding world peace".

Xi has been spearheading a modernisation of the military, and reducing its numbers from 2.3 million furthers his aims to streamline operations. The strategy of shifting strength away from the army to air and naval forces means fewer personnel are needed. It is the reason the numbers of PLA soldiers have been cut by one million over the past 18 years. That does not diminish the PLA's effectiveness; rather, it improves strategic capabilities and its ability to respond to threats.

The US and regional governments that worry about China's growing might doubt Beijing's sincerity. Rather than accepting invitations for leaders to attend the event, they either chose to stay away or sent lower-ranking officials. The parade of 12,000 troops, ballistic missiles, tanks and armoured vehicles, with jets overhead, was viewed by some outsiders as a continuation of a perceived assertive posture on show through activities in the East and South China seas. But military parades are not unusual in other nations, nor is it rare for them to put their latest equipment on show: it is all about combat readiness.

China has long shown it is a responsible player in regional and world affairs. Its military is for defensive purposes and Chinese have long been an integral part of global peacekeeping operations. But peace, as China so tragically learned more than 70 years ago, cannot be taken for granted. Only through a well-prepared military can peace and stability be guaranteed.

Toughen stance on Islamic State

The Islamic State does not respect culture or history. Its blowing up, bulldozing and looting of centuries-old sites is aimed at eradicating rival societies. Each strike is an attack on a population's identity, an attempt to prevent it from knowing itself, who it is and where it is from. The latest

wilful acts of laying waste, the destroying of two 2,000-year-old temples in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra and the execution of the elderly archaeologist who oversaw them, dramatically escalates the conflict in a way that can no longer be ignored.

Videos and pictures of gruesome beheadings have been used by the Islamist group to shock enemies and attract recruits. Executions are bound to catch international attention, as much for the insanity of the acts as their incomprehensible cruelty. The images of destroyed artifacts are arguably even more eye-catching, though, not being edited in the name of decency by the media or buried in the depths of the internet. It is easier to understand the loss and what it means: The destruction is in the present, but it also obliterates the past.

Not since the second world war has there been such disregard for a past that belongs to all people. The Islamic State's goal of creating a caliphate across the Middle East governed under its radical form of Salafism, a branch of Sunni Islam, ignores the cultures and heritage of unbelievers. Its taking control of Palmyra in May, after already razing ancient sites and smashing and looting museums in Iraq, sparked particular concern among archaeologists and historians. A Unesco world heritage site, its Greco-Roman architecture and art with Persian influences spans the centuries and civilisations.

The majesty of the Baalshamin temple and the main building of the Roman temple of Bel have gone forever, blasted to dust and rubble by explosives. Khaled al-Asad, 81, the city's director of antiquities, was beheaded and his body hung from a column. These acts give clarity to the extremists' mission. The international community, not just governments involved in the battle, have to redouble their efforts against the Islamic State.

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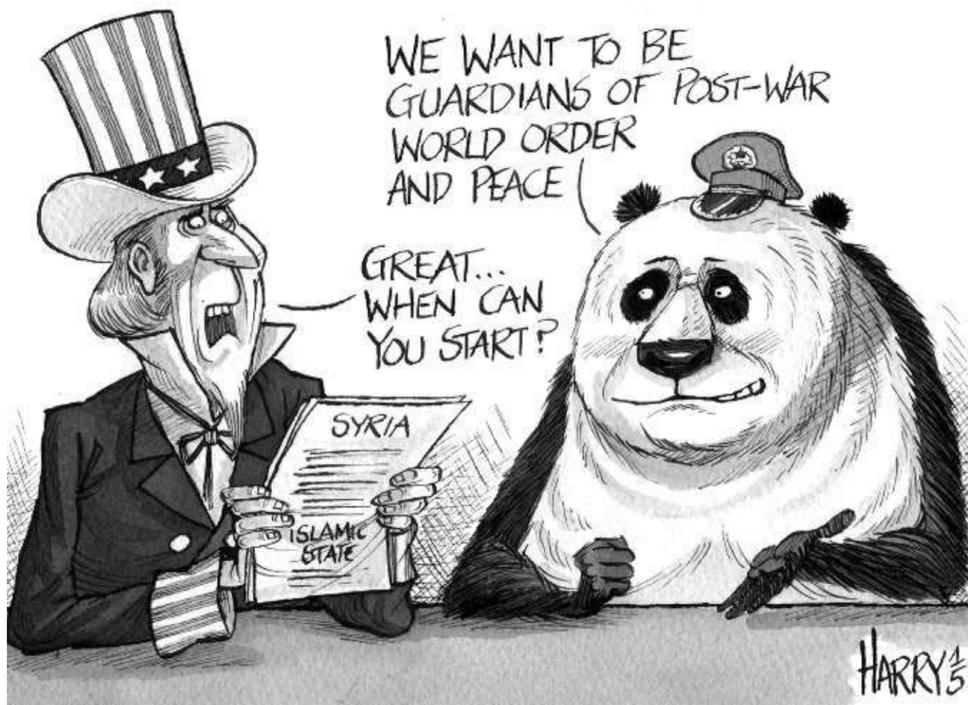
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Funds squandered.
Do you agree with lawmaker Fernando Cheung that the HK\$839 million being spent on the government's non-accountable cash allowance for civil servants could have been put to much better use, and would have been enough to build 18 care homes for the elderly?

LETTERS

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Taxi drivers need to lift their game

I refer to the report ("Surge in complaints against Hong Kong taxi drivers as passengers complain of rudeness, overcharging and hire refusals", August 16).

The car-hailing app Uber has become more popular in Hong Kong because people are so dissatisfied with taxi services. The main bones of contention are the refusal to hire and the attitude of some drivers.

Uber is a convenient and mostly reliable transportation service. Using the app is easy, with just a few key strokes.

The attitudes of the drivers are generally better than the taxi drivers. The latter have to rush to get as many fares as possible in a certain period of time and they can be rude. As an Uber passenger, sitting in a comfortable, clean car being driven by someone who is polite, is a better experience than travelling in a Hong Kong cab.

However, there are some disadvantages with Uber, such as concerns over the cars and their drivers having the right kind of insurance.

Also, if Uber has to cancel a booking, this can prove disruptive if, for example, you have a flight to catch. One advantage of the taxi is that you can walk out onto the street and find one fairly quickly.

They both have merit, but new technology is certainly presenting a challenge to the city's taxi operators.

Carmen Ip, Lam Tin

Trams not to blame for traffic jams

A retired planner has suggested scrapping the tram route from Central to Admiralty to ease serious traffic congestion in that area.

However, the trams are an iconic part of Hong Kong's public transport network. They are loved by Hongkongers and are an integral part of our heritage, carrying an average 180,000 passengers a day.

They are also hugely popular with tourists who especially enjoy taking them at night to enjoy the views of Hong Kong on the tram route, including Victoria Harbour, and do so at a leisurely pace.

For many citizens, they are a cheap and convenient mode of transport.

They are not the reason for the traffic congestion in the central business district, as some suggest. That is caused by the high volume of illegally parked vehicles.

The government should be revising the laws and punishments to curb illegal parking

and the police should be doing more regular spot checks in an effort to crack down on this practice.

Chris Lam, Tseung Kwan O

Illegal parking: Are police really serious?

The police say they have stepped up issuing tickets for illegal parking.

The question that has to be asked is how long they can sustain this. I am not convinced by the claims the force is making. Even if there is a crackdown, once it is over, we will be back to normal.

I am sure you could go out with a camera and find 50 black spots every day where illegal parking is widespread.

The bottom line is, how diligent are our police officers when it comes to curbing illegal parking?

I have seen officers walk by vehicles in Lockhart Road (tour buses, private cars), Des Voeux Road West (lorries in front of shops), for example, which are parked illegally, without taking any action.

Joseph Lee, Quarry Bay

Voice of the people must be heard

Former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad joined protesters on the streets of Kuala Lumpur last weekend and called on "people power" to remove the country's present prime minister Najib Razak.

I think those Malaysians who took to the streets have been very brave and they are voicing the views of many fellow citizens. They just want fair elections to be called so they can choose a new leader.

Some of these demonstrators were teenagers. I suspect many parents are not happy about their children joining such marches, but I hope they will eventually feel proud of what they are doing and of the courage and determination they are showing.

They just want things to be



Anti-government protest in Kuala Lumpur. Photo: EPA

Hong Kong airport's efficiency is all about market forces

I refer to Clive Noffke's letter regarding the aircraft mix and flight destinations at Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) ("Hong Kong airport is busy without due benefit or reward", August 22).

Mr Noffke suggested HKIA should request that airlines use more wide-bodied aircraft, and reduce its number of destinations to enhance efficiency and resource utilisation. The "new destination incentive arrangement" has not been in force since December 31, 2014.

Mr Noffke seems to believe that HKIA can control market demand and needs. But in reality, it is the airlines, acting according to the market (that is, prevailing passenger travel patterns and preferences), that dictate aircraft mix. An airport simply provides the platform to help airlines optimally meet their passengers' needs. Any administrative interference that goes against market demand tends to reduce efficiency for both the airport and its users.

Hong Kong's success stems from its market demand-driven economy. It is also worth noting that HKIA is already the world's most efficient airport in terms of average number of passengers and volume of cargo carried per aircraft (or workload unit). In addition, over 60 per cent of aircraft at HKIA are wide-bodied, which represents the second-highest percentage among the world's top 100 passenger hubs.

If Mr Noffke's suggestion were valid, then it would be hard to explain why London Heathrow Airport - where capacity has been constrained for decades - has not changed its aircraft mix in favour of wide-bodied aircraft. Currently, more than 60 per cent of aircraft at Heathrow are narrow-bodied, which reflects the fact that the markets served by Heathrow demand high-frequency shuttle services best fulfilled by smaller aircraft.

Regarding flight destinations, airlines serve places that show business potential. Over time, destinations without real market support will be replaced by ones that have more demand.

This market adjustment mechanism ensures the most efficient use of every landing and take-off slot. Arbitrarily reducing the number of destinations at HKIA would ignore real demand and make the airport less effective in terms of serving the needs of the travelling public.

HKIA's extensive flight network took a long time to build, and its connectivity is a core part of Hong Kong's competitiveness. HKIA grows with Hong Kong and will always continue to serve the city's future development needs.

Julia Yan, general manager, strategic planning and development, Airport Authority Hong Kong

better in the country for their generation. Such protests are not without risk for the activists, but they are willing to accept this, which shows how dissatisfied they are with the government.

I hope the government is listening and will respond to the demands that have been made.

Haley Yu, Tseung Kwan O

Schools offer students lessons in life

I refer to the August 31 letter by Charity Ng Shuk-ling ("Mainstream schools still the best option").

Your correspondent said that taking youngsters out the mainstream education system is a less favourable choice and referred to the drawbacks of homeschooling. I agree that homeschooling will limit children's social skills.

Whole person education is important, not just focusing on a child's academic performance.

Students are offered so many extracurricular activities in schools, which can help them unleash their potential. Having a sound, all-round personality can give you a competitive edge when you are seeking a career.

Students who are homeschooled may lack good social and communication skills. In society, interaction with others is a crucial part of team work in an office.

Through communicating with peers at school, students can not only broaden their social circle, but also learn to interact with people who have varying personalities.

Group projects in mainstream schools can also provide students with opportunities to cooperate with each other and learn to compromise when dealing with people who have differing views.

They may exercise their critical thinking skills and, after discussing an issue with peers who have different ideas, seek a broader perspective.

Mainstream schools may put pressure on students, but in dealing with this head-on, youngsters can learn about stress management.

Schools are a miniature model of society. By having regular exams and tests, they learn to cope with the stresses and strains they will face in adult life.

They learn to manage their own schedule. These are challenges young people will not face in a homeschooling environment.

Hope parents opting for homeschooling will think very carefully before making a final decision.

Sharon Lam, Ma On Shan

Tap English resources to improve skills

Germany's consul-general, Nikolaus Graf Lambsdorff, has urged Hongkongers to improve the proficiency of their English ("If you are new to China, go to Hong Kong first", August 28).

English is a mandatory subject in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong.

However, a lot of people complain that many children can barely communicate in the language, even after 12 years of mandatory education.

I have read programme plans and performance reports from different secondary schools. A lot of them point out that students with a poor foundation in English are passive when learning the language.

Hong Kong has no lack of sources for us to learn English (such as online resources, English newspapers, English drama). What we have to do is make a first step.

However, a lot of students with a poor foundation have no motivation to learn the language.

Some are lazy and some of them are afraid they will make a mistake and they make no progress. We ought to face these obstacles.

At primary school, I had a classmate from the mainland. In his first Primary One English class he could not even answer a question from his English teacher. However, he refused to give up.

Instead, he forced himself to read English books regularly and joined different classes. Eventually he became a high-performing student at a school where English was the medium of instruction.

Many young Hongkongers may not be exposed to English in their daily lives, but they have to try and read English papers and listen to English-language radio as much as possible.

Henry Wong, Kennedy Town

Wrong to link morality and economics

Using a quantitative survey to steer people towards ethical behaviour, as outlined in Mark Peaker's letter ("Repression of gays hurts economics", August 29) leads to unsafe philosophical ground.

Enlightened morality cannot hinge on commercial outcomes.

Human equality is worth respecting because it is true and axiomatic, not because a defined group is perceived to out-contribute in the endless cycle of production, growth, consumption and yet more growth.

Those who are persuaded to acknowledge equality only by a survey that touts economic benefits are the kind of people who inevitably turn their gaze to groups that they believe under-contribute economically.

Who, in such a dollar-obsessed society, would then protect those people?

That's why our morality always has to transcend economics.

Simon Osborne, Pok Fu Lam

OPINION

South China Morning Post

Be cautious on self-drive cars

Technology has a habit of always being a step or two ahead of regulation. The boundaries are forever being pushed with innovations using the internet and mobile communications, creating concerns about security and privacy. Vehicles fitted with software that takes navigation out of the hands of drivers raise the important matter of safety. Hong Kong authorities have to keep the sharpest possible eye on developments to ensure roads are as safe as possible.

The Transport Department has wisely been quick to raise concerns over a downloadable software update for Tesla Model S cars that allows for “hands-free” driving. Through radar, cameras and sensors fitted to the vehicle, the “auto-pilot” feature lets it automatically change lanes, steer between road markings, move with traffic flow and park. Although the company has stressed the software is supposed to be only used on highways and roads that are clearly marked and drivers should keep their hands on the wheel at all times, videos posted online reveal how it can be abused; some show those driving reading newspapers or playing hand-held games. The firm has been advised that authorities have to first approve changes, while police have reminded motorists about road rules.

Carmakers are arguably at the forefront of the technology revolution. Competition is driving production of vehicles that are increasingly easier to drive and are ever-more fuel-efficient or have no polluting emissions through being fully electric. The leading high-tech firms Google and Apple are among companies racing to make cars that are self-drive; Google’s test models have just stop and go controls and no steering wheel or accelerator and brake pedals. Launch dates are years away, but the aim is to speed up travel and eliminate accidents and the need for driving knowledge and skills.

Many latest-model cars already have features that automate aspects of driving. Software and hardware can take over when braking is necessary, if a vehicle gets too close to the one ahead or during parking. The drafters of Hong Kong’s road regulations and the lawmakers who approved them could not have predicted such innovations nor the ones that will follow. Liability and insurance are among matters to be considered should there be an accident as a result of driver misuse, defective or faulty products or deliberate misrepresentation of capabilities by manufacturers. Until these issues can be resolved, there is every reason for authorities to be cautious.

No compromise in aviation safety

Hong Kong’s modern international airport, complete with dedicated infrastructure, may be the envy of many other transport hubs, but the government needs to snap a run of embarrassing blunders and mismanagement. In the latest example, Chief Secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-

ngor has unequivocally reassured lawmakers that a HK\$575 million air-traffic control system bought three years ago to replace an outdated one would not be implemented while doubts remain over its safety and reliability. This capped an awful year, beginning in February when a Legco panel condemned Norman Lo Shung-man, the director general of civil aviation, for spending more than HK\$67 million on extra security, electronics, space for expansion and staff amenities for his department’s new headquarters without prior approval. In June, the same official was criticised over repeated changes to the flight-radar tender, partly blamed for delays and cost overruns.

Last week, temporary closure of the only road and rail link to the airport for a safety check on a bridge cut the airport off from the city for two chaotic hours.

But the most serious administrative and management issue, and potentially the most dangerous because it goes to the heart of aircraft safety, remains the air-traffic control fiasco. In test runs last year and in July respectively, the new system lost track of aircraft for 10 seconds and failed to respond to input.

Lam accepted lawmakers’ criticism of the department’s control services and wisely focused on damage control, vowing the new system would not go into operation until proven reliable, and then only after independent advice from an overseas consultant. She also said the government was considering expanding the department to help cope with growth of the airport and aviation, with extra funding for more senior management posts rather than expansion of frontline resources. We trust that this also improves performance. The department needs to do a better job.

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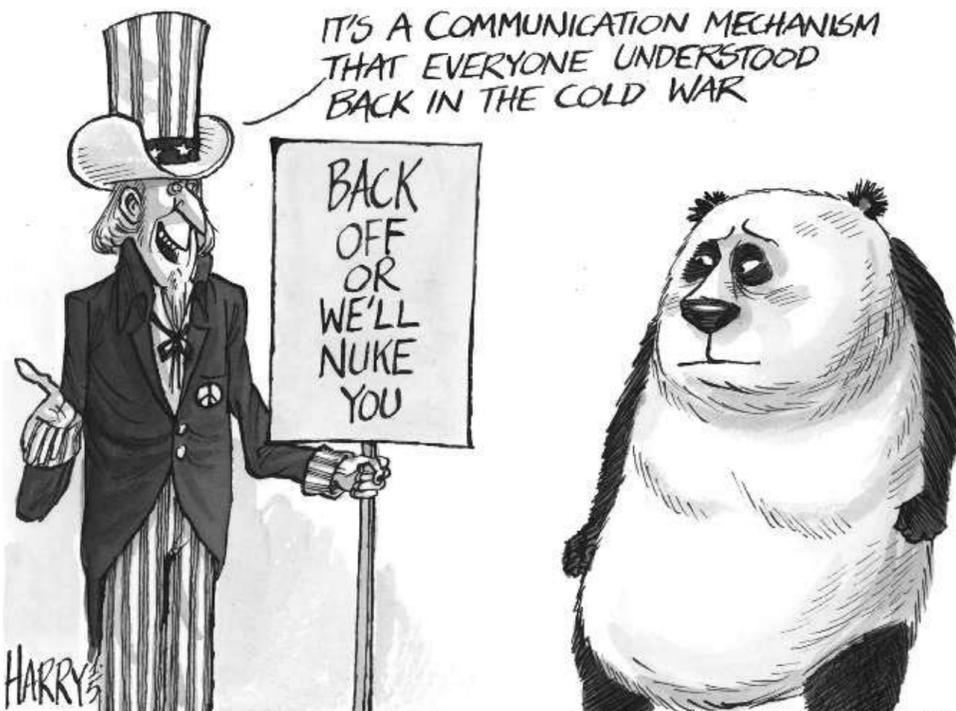
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Road safety. Battery-powered hoverboards, which are popular with some Hong Kong people, have been classified as “motor vehicles”. Riding one on the streets is considered illegal, but a legislator says our transport rules are outdated. What do you think?

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Reconsider insurance limit for boats

The Hong Kong Bar Association has been pressing for some time to increase the compulsory insurance limits for all marine vessels, especially the high-speed vessels. These vessels often carry as many as 300 passengers and, as they weigh less than 300 tonnes, the compulsory insurance coverage is very low.

In the recent accident involving the high-speed ferry Horta, quite a number of passengers were seriously injured. The owners of this vessel will be able to limit their liability to as low as HK\$260,000 per passenger, notwithstanding that claims may run into millions of dollars.

This arises because under the Athens Convention, this is “regional transport” and the limitation is fixed at 46,666 special drawing rights under Article 7 of the convention – see Hong Kong’s Merchant Shipping (Limitation of Shipowners Liability) Ordinance. When converted to Hong Kong dollars, the sum is about HK\$260,000.

Thus, there is a huge disparity between, say, a high-speed ferry and a 130-seat bus. Bus companies cannot limit the payout to an individual passenger to the sum of HK\$260,000. This is bizarre.

According to the Marine Department, about 40 million passenger journeys a year are undertaken on these vessels over 300 tonnes, and the number is growing exponentially.

So, obviously, the compulsory limits should be increased and the limitation per passenger removed.

This can be done easily by the adoption of Article 7(2) by which the Athens Convention allows local jurisdictions to afford better protection to passengers than afforded to them by means of this convention. This means the limitation per passenger could be substantially increased or made unlimited.

Further, it is obvious that these ferries should be required to make passengers wear safety belts at all times when going at a high speed. One has to in a private car on a motorway, so why not a fast-moving ferry? If this terrible accident was

indeed caused by such a small thing as a floating tyre, then seat belts should be worn at all times.

Nicholas Pirie, member of the Bar Association’s personal injuries and insurance practice committee

Race-baiting column missing facts

Yonden Lhatoo is at least honest in acknowledging his own prejudice as motivation for his clearly racist views (“It’s time we put an end to Hong Kong’s white worship”, October 30). However, he is long on anecdotes of white kids getting preferred for school teams (how he knows this he doesn’t say) and short on evidence.

What we do know is that there was (quite rightly) a deliberate government programme of localisation in the civil service before the handover. No sign of “white worship” there. This was a government policy of positive discrimination.

When my wife and I adopted our Chinese child in Hong Kong, there was a hierarchy within the process of Chinese couples given first preference, mixed couples second, Caucasian and other ethnicities third. We had no problem with this. No sign of white worship in the government’s official adoption procedure.

When we applied for a Hong Kong passport for our other adopted child of mixed race, the Immigration Department denied it because he had “no Chinese blood”. No sign of white worship there.

Asia’s “world city” can only lose from the sort of divisiveness that Mr Lhatoo is trying to stir up. Race-baiting opinion pieces such as these make for unedifying reading.

Chris White, Mui Wo

HKU council hurting name of university

As a University of Hong Kong alumnus, I am concerned about the unfolding saga in relation to the appointment of a pro-vice-chancellor.

First of all, as an institution funded by tax payers, HKU has an obligation to explain to the public the rationale behind the rejection of the search committee’s recommendation to appoint Professor Johannes Chan Man-mun to the post.

Are we supposed to believe that the search committee made an error after investing so much time, tax dollars and internal/external expertise to identify Professor Chan as the most suitable candidate?

Ethnic minorities’ hard work goes unappreciated

Ethnic minorities have settled in Hong Kong for generations and many who are locally born actually strive hard to learn Chinese to be integrated in society, to have a better future in Hong Kong.

For many ethnic minorities in Hong Kong, Chinese is not even our second language, but our third, fourth or even fifth language. For example, a Pakistani child may know five languages including Punjabi (a dialect), Urdu (the official language of Pakistan), Arabic (the language of the Koran), English and Chinese. Thus, it is more challenging for ethnic minorities to learn Chinese well, especially with inadequate support from school and home.

As a youth of this background, I had the chance to meet Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying at the Commission on Poverty summit last month, and I asked him questions about issues relating to ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

Also, I shared with him the experience of my younger siblings, in which every school teaches ethnic minority students Chinese in its own way and adopts different methods without any benchmarks or curriculum, resulting in a low level of Chinese proficiency.

In his response, Mr Leung expressed how proud he was of Hong Kong being the only city in the world that uses both Chinese and English widely (which is factually incorrect). He acknowledged that people who do not know both languages may not be able to actualise their potential to the fullest. Thus, he appealed to the ethnic minority community in Hong Kong that we should try to be bilingual as much as possible.

Mr Leung cited the example of his own parents who had lived in Hong Kong for almost 70 years and yet still struggled to speak Cantonese because they did not try hard enough to learn the local language.

I was disappointed with his response. In other words, he meant ethnic minorities were not working hard enough to learn Chinese, which is very different from the reality.

Since many schools only offer a low level of Chinese to ethnic minorities, no matter how hard we work, the level of Chinese for many of us is comparable to Primary Two or Three when we graduate at the end of Form Six.

Many of us are motivated to work hard and I hope ethnic minority youths can overcome the language barrier to prove those people who doubt our talents, abilities and hard work wrong.

I am sure that in the near future, we will see more home-grown successful ethnic minorities in Hong Kong.

Waqas Mahmood, Lok Fu

The HKU council cannot and should not hide behind its “confidentiality rules”, a subject which is not even mentioned in the University of Hong Kong Ordinance. If the Legislative Council believed the HKU council requires such powers, they would have been incorporated into the ordinance.

Secondly, if a PhD was mandatory requirement for those applying for the pro-vice-chancellor post, that should have been clearly mentioned at the outset.

Finally, the enthusiasm shown by the council chairman in obtaining an injunction against publication of the leaked audio tapes from the council meeting is surprising. In contrast, the council dragged its feet for a long time to make a final decision after the search committee’s recommendation to appoint Professor Chan became public.

The chairman Dr Leong Che-hung said he did not seek the views of other members before applying for the injunction. The University of Hong Kong Ordinance does not give such dictatorial decision-making power to the chairman.

Unfortunately, the current council is inflicting irreparable damage to the whole university due to its opposition to a single individual.

Nalaka Jayaratne, Farmington, Connecticut, US



Companies must get their staff to exercise. Photo: Dickson Lee

Let companies do more for staff fitness

Many Hong Kong people lack exercise, primarily due to their heavy workload.

People should set up a regular timetable for exercise and try to follow it.

But more to the point, companies should understand the gravity of the situation and do something about the problem. They should organise a range of sport activities to encourage their employees to take part. This will also increase employees’ sense of belonging in the company. I think if the companies take this initiative, it would greatly improve the situation.

Au Kit Yan, Yau Yat Chuen

US, China need economic restructuring

I agree with Stephen Roach that the economic relationship between China and the US should shift from codependency to interdependence (“Are China and the US heading for a break-up?”, October 1).

Tension between China and the US is increasing in almost every aspect: renminbi depreciation, cyberhacking, naval confrontation in the South China Sea. Though Xi Jinping’s (習近平) state visit to the US was seen as a great success, it didn’t ease the tension. Less than a month after Xi’s visit, US warships were dispatched to cruise in the South China Sea, risking a clash.

The so-called economic interdependence of these two powers appears to have failed to head off potential conflict.

Therefore, we should reevaluate their economic relationship. Their asymmetric relation – seen in China’s overdependence on its cheap domestic labour, exploitation of abundant natural resources and pollution of the environment – has made the relationship pretty fragile.

On the one hand, low salaries limit Chinese consumers’ ability to buy American goods. On the other hand, cheap Chinese goods resulted in excessive consumption in US, which to some degree caused the financial crisis. Both Chinese and American citizens suffer from the codependency.

To solve this problem, both countries should restructure their economies. The US should revive its manufacturing, not only to raise its employment, but also to provide moderately priced goods. China should change its mode of development and turn to producing high-value-added products, as well as reduce pollution, raise salaries and promote domestic consumption.

Only when the two countries have built a healthy economic system can interdependence benefit both.

Austin Gong, Tai Wai

Opt-out is no option in free societies

Many people have pointed out the potential problems of an opt-out scheme to increase the number of organ donors. I agree with them.

Such a scheme can lead to conflict between medical personnel and the families who may still subscribe to the traditional Chinese belief that the body should remain intact after death.

It may also infringe on our human rights. Without the full, explicit permission of donors, there will always be the suspicion that someone’s rights have been violated.

The opt-out scheme is not a feasible solution. Education is. Enhancing people’s awareness of the issue and opening up minds via education will be the best way to tackle the shortage of donated organs.

Chow Hiu Ching, Fanling



Ferry passengers should wear seat belts. Photo: Edward Wong

OPINION

Sunday Morning Post

Over-drilling robs the joy of learning

Examinations are a big deal in Hong Kong. Pupils are being coached to cope with exams as early as the third year in primary schools. The phenomenon owes much to the highly competitive education system as well as the importance attached to academic achievement by schools and parents. The children are sadly denied the joy of learning and become exam-oriented robots.

The grievances of those who felt victimised by the system can be reflected in that on an online campaign. Having gathered support from tens of thousands of disgruntled parents, the organiser issued an open letter urging the government to scrap the open exam for Primary Three pupils. But education chief Eddie Ng Hak-kim insisted that the Territory-wide System Assessment (TSA), which gauges pupil's competence in languages and mathematics, was necessary. The problem lay with over-drilling, not the exam, he said.

The government stresses that the exam can give teaching feedback to schools and will not affect pupils' admission to secondary school. But schools which do not perform well will feel pressure inevitably. That explains why they spend much time coaching pupils to get higher marks.

Coincidentally, exam drillings were also put on the agenda of the US government this week. But the response was rather different. Instead of blaming parents and schools, the US education department admitted that there were far too many exams. The issue was even taken up by President Barack Obama, who said parents have rightly expressed worries that too much testing would take away the joy of learning. He instructed the education authorities to eliminate "drill-and-kill" test preparations and cap test taking time at 2 per cent of classroom time.

According to a US study earlier, each student will take more than 100 mandatory tests between kindergarten and grade 12, representing 20 to 25 hours of testing a year. Similar figures for Hong Kong exams have yet to be produced for comparison.

As long as there are exams, pupils will feel compelled to study hard. But the pressure can be reduced if schools and parents adopt a more relaxed approach. The TSA has its merits in that it can help identify room for improvement in teaching and learning. If the stakeholders are still worried that the exam may affect school rankings and admission, the government should work harder to ease their concerns.

Publicity push goes to waste

Someone forgot to tell those Guinness-record-hungry chefs in Yangzhou (揚州) that it's quality, not quantity that counts.

Last week, city organisers in the eastern province of Jiangsu (江蘇) attempted to cook the world's biggest helping of the famous fried rice that bears its name.

Chefs cooked up 4,192kg of the dish, according to news reports, as part of a city-wide commemoration of the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the city.

After the stunt, organisers promptly fed the massive amount of fried rice – to pigs.

Perhaps the chefs who cooked the rice didn't think it was good enough. Or their bosses just didn't care about the waste so long as they made it into the record book.

In any case, they suffered, deservedly, a media backlash, which prompted an abject apology.

In 2002, city officials tried to trademark Yangzhou-style fried rice by promulgating a standard recipe based on ingredients specified in three classic cookbooks dating back centuries. That attracted lots of foreign media coverage. The sanctioned recipe includes sea cucumbers, dried scallops, bamboo shoots, shrimps, chicken, spring onion, dried mushrooms, smoked ham and eggs cooked in soya sauce, a chicken broth and Shaoxing wine.

As in many major mainland cities, the central government has been enforcing a widely publicised campaign against waste and extravagant spending among officials.

Guinness has disqualified the attempt partly because they had wasted the food. There is nothing wrong to try to gain publicity to promote one's city. But sharing food instead of wasting it should have been the theme, especially for an occasion that was supposed to celebrate the city.

This time, organisers went too far and generated plenty of well-deserved bad publicity. As many mainland cities are also trying to pull similar publicity stunts, let this be a lesson for all of them.

HARRY'S WEEK

THE UNPRECEDENTED SOPHISTICATION OF THE NEW STYLE MILITARY CONFERENCE...



Tired doctors. Hong Kong doctors' prolonged shifts have led to more blunders and accidents, a survey has found. Apart from a suggestion of introducing standard working hours, what more can be done to help overworked doctors?

LETTERS

We welcome all letters. Include your full name, address and telephone number, not necessarily for publication. Please keep letters to a maximum of 400 words. **Email** letters@scmp.com **Fax** 2250 3242 **Post** 22 Dai Fat Street, Tai Po Industrial Estate, Tai Po, Hong Kong.

Helpers could try country parks to meet

I refer to Ruan Wen's letter ("Give helpers venue where they can meet", October 23).

There is no denying that thousands of foreign domestic helpers assemble in public squares and overpasses on their days off, especially in areas like Central and Causeway Bay, which are usually crowded with pedestrians. Some citizens think they cause a nuisance to passers-by. The problem needs to be tackled quickly.

Your correspondent suggests the government should play the leading role in providing more meeting places for the domestic helpers, but I disagree.

Hong Kong is a densely populated concrete jungle, and everyone in the city is jostling for more living space. In fact, the government can do little to resolve the issue as it is an unshakable fact that Hong Kong simply lacks space. It is up to the domestic helpers and Hong-kongers to be more tolerant of all public space users.

To ease the congestion in city centres, domestic helpers could explore other areas, such as our lovely country parks, to gather on holidays.

Charlotte Chan, Kowloon Bay

Protesters and police need cool heads

Recent protests in Hong Kong have seen police and protesters clash, and we should try to defuse the stand-off.

Protesters should clearly inform the police of their plan in advance, such as the destination and scale of the rally, and how long it will run. They should pledge not to overstep the boundaries set, and in turn receive a pledge from the police that they would not interfere in the protest activity if all goes according to plan.

The government and the police should review the rules for enforcement and prosecution. The administration should ensure that police officers re-

ceive training for emotion control, and that the force is committed to the protection of protesters' rights.

The root cause, however, lies in addressing protesters' dissatisfaction. The government must listen and respond to citizens' demands.

Once government credibility is restored, clashes at protests will end.

Elvis Yam Kam-hang, Tiu Keng Leng

Our cultural heritage can lure tourists

There's been talk recently that Hong Kong is losing its appeal for tourists due to the lack of new attractions. However, I don't agree with this view.

The government devotes a lot of resources to building grand infrastructure and shopping malls, but is that a good way to increase Hong Kong's competitiveness?

Probably not. Hong Kong has limited land and it's impossible to keep building new attractions that meet only the needs of tourists.

By contrast, the government ignores the development of our cultural heritage.

If attractions are well developed and promoted, they can attract tourists but apart from museums, there are few that introduce history and culture.

The government should improve its heritage conservation measures, and roll out more comprehensive plans for such sites.

Officials can promote new attractions at overseas exhibitions.

Tse Ka-wing, Yau Yat Chuen

HK taxi space is not too crowded

I refer to the letter from Athena Ng Yi-kwan ("Legislation protects taxi firms", October 20).

Uber is a car-hailing app with many supporters in Hong Kong but questions have been raised about whether it breaches existing regulations. And its opponents arguing that it is threatening local taxi firms.

What should first be noted is Uber will not be a threat but a competitor. Its service comes at a higher cost than local taxis and passengers are free to choose.

Competition between firms will improve the overall service level in order to win more customers. Uber should stay.

Anna Fok Hiu-yi, Shek Mun

Pearl River Delta has not yet ascended to hi-tech hub status

I refer to the article by Peter Wong ("How China's Pearl River Delta went from the world's factory floor to a hi-tech hub", October 6). Mr Wong called the Pearl River Delta the "Silicon Delta".

I think that it is too early to make such a claim. If the Pearl River Delta really wants to be a hi-tech hub, it has a long way to go.

Shenzhen has become home to some of the largest hi-tech companies in China, including Tencent, Huawei and ZTE. However, compared with Zhongguancun, Beijing's hi-tech park, it has fewer top universities, like Peking University and Tsinghua University, and multinational corporations, such as Google, Microsoft and IBM. Zhongguancun is placed in a very important position by the country to be a leading information technology centre. Large flows of capital and top talent land there.

Shanghai is also an innovative area to watch and Hangzhou (杭州) is on the map, thanks to Alibaba. Recently, Uber, the private online car-hire service company, officially set up a registered internet company in Shanghai with a registration capital of about US\$330 million. Some people comment that this company with millions in capital should have been set up in Guangzhou, which is one of Uber's top three cities now, carrying one million Chinese a day.

The provincial government needs a more concrete policy to build the Pearl River Silicon Delta, and be open-minded to embrace new economic patterns. It also has to restructure the roles of the cities, like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, avoiding duplication of function and negative competition.

In the end, I agree with Mr Wong that Hong Kong should play the role of an educational and financial centre in the Pearl River Delta.

Caroline Cheung, Wong Tai Sin



Shenzhen's hi-tech sector is booming. Photo: Dickson Lee

Beware the downside of extra study

More students are now attending tutorial classes.

Due to the cut-throat competition in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education, many students have no choice but to sign up for these classes so as to have an edge.

They seem to have become the norm. But I wonder how advantageous these classes are?

During the lessons, the tutor will equip students with extra examination skills and exercises, ranging from the drilling to the more challenging ones. Whenever students come across difficulties in some topics, they can turn to the tutors who can deeply delve into the problems with them. Their understanding of different topics can be deepened and they can catch up with their studies more easily.

However, there are catches that should not be overlooked.

Attending tutorial classes is definitely time-consuming, which actually erodes study time.

Many classes usually last for two hours, if not longer. After lessons at school and tutorial centres, students end up with only one or two hours to revise.

I always hear my classmates complaining about not having sufficient time to study, which turns out to be counterproductive.

Moreover, these classes will pile on the pressure. Pinning high hopes on their child, many parents don't mind splashing out on the tutor fees so as to gear their child up well for the exams. Nonetheless, students are already preoccupied with their schoolwork.

Under undue stress, many are overwhelmed by the huge workload and they become depressed. Some also get fed up with their studies and refuse to revise, sparking family conflicts. Tutorial classes can bring more harm than good to some students.

Of course, whether they can benefit from tutorial classes hinges on their time-management and mental control.

Students can definitely ride the wave if they get to manage their time wisely and strike a balance between entertainment and studies.

Also, parents play a pivotal role in encouraging their child and can act as a morale booster. Only by praising their child and allowing a little playtime can they provide their child with the right incentives to strive for excellence.

Seto Ka-yun, Tai Wai

Union reps need to show backbone

How the bosses all laugh when trade union representatives threaten to resign from a negotiating body ("Take action on working hours or we quit talks", October 14).

These representatives [in talks on a standard working hours law] in the never-ending conflict between their 50-hour working-week, long-suffering-membership, and the fat-cat employers display poor leadership skills.

How long would the talking last, if the union leadership called for selective boycotting of specific businesses and threatened a general strike?

Sadly I cannot see the rise of a Hong Kong Arthur Scargill [British trade union leader in the 1980s], and the workers will as ever eat the crumbs from the rich men's table.

John Charleston, Tuen Mun

What's being said on [facebook.com/southchina.morningpost](https://www.facebook.com/southchina.morningpost)

On German ambassador's comment that any Chinese help in the EU refugee crisis would be appreciated:

Poyee Leung – Most of the refugees are Muslims. China is not going to let more Muslims flood its backyard. China is rich and should/could provide emergency funding.

Kenny Yu – If it's one thing China doesn't need more of, it's people. If China is to spend its trillions in helping the poor and destitute, it has plenty within its own borders – spend billions improving rural education and social welfare standards or on cleaning up another European quagmire?

Angela Hui – Is China becoming Germany's mum? Financial problem? Call my mum. Refugee crisis? Call my mum...

Marco Ma – So obvious even refugees don't want to go to China.

Devian Jale – The architects of regime change in Iraq, Libya and Syria worsened the refugee situation. You break it you own it.

What's being said on [scmp.com](https://www.scmp.com)

On Alex Lo's column, "Hong Kong's poor haven't a chance with Financial Secretary John Tsang", October 27:

Kubrick – John Tsang and most of the senior officials live in a bubble and are isolated from the reality of life in this town... Mr Tsang should pull a 12-hour shift washing dishes and then tell us if HK\$12,000 is enough.

Jlaudonhk – My biggest fear... this joker might even run for CE in 2017. John "middle class" Tsang is even more out of touch than CY.

anthonyngmail – When the rent of a subdivided flat is around HK\$6,000, I would say a HK\$12,000 salary is too meagre. Johnny should start using his brain to think about the rents and the peg.

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OPINION

South China Morning Post

Address needs of recycling industry

Given our colour-coded dustbins have been in place for years, one would have thought that separation of waste for recycling would be a way of life now rather than a goal still to be achieved. But the sad reality is that there are still far too many households and individuals who pay little regard to the importance of recycling. The problem is compounded by the insufficient support given to the recycling industry.

Thankfully, that could be about to change. In a belated step, the government has launched a HK\$1 billion fund to enhance the sustainability of the industry. There are two funding programmes – a matching grant for upgrading and expanding recycling operations and one for non-profit and trade support organisations. The former offers grants equal to 50 per cent of approved expenditure for a two-year period for up to three projects with cumulative funding of HK\$5 million; the latter gives 100 per cent grants capped at HK\$15 million. The aim is to raise the quantity of recyclables, promote markets for products made of recycled materials and, ultimately, ease the burden on landfills.

But the industry appears to be sceptical about how effective the scheme will be. Some traders are wary about investing in new machinery when their profit margins are shrinking amid soaring rents and falling plastic and oil prices. Their concerns are valid. Officials should listen to their views and try harder to meet their needs.

Recycling of plastic bottles in the city has reportedly been suspended recently because there is no money to be made in the business. There are also suggestions that as soon as households have sorted their garbage into recycling bins, cleaners mix them together and send them to landfills. If that is the case, it would make a mockery of the upstream efforts in recycling.

Our regional neighbours, like Japan and Taiwan, have made much progress on waste reduction and recycling. It is a shame that we have spent so much effort in expanding our landfills, but are still tip-toeing around the introduction of a waste charge.

The government is seeking to raise the recycling rate to 55 per cent by 2022. Laudable as it is, the goal cannot be achieved unless there are good business prospects for the recycling industry. The funding scheme is a long overdue step to give the industry a helping hand. But it is important that the needs of the industry are addressed.

Work together to tackle forest fires

The diplomatic blame game that each year accompanies the choking haze from Indonesian fires has for once eased. In its place is a willingness by Jakarta to accept help and go after the people behind the burning of forests to make way for plantations for the palm oil and paper

industries. Aircraft from Singapore, Malaysia and Australia have joined firefighting efforts and China, Japan and Russia called on to help. Challenging root causes make it impossible to prevent a return next year, but a combination of coordinated actions, policies and strategies will, over time, clear the skies.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo has promised to stamp out the problem in three years. Personally intervening, he has ordered the building of canals and water reserves in fire-prone, peat-rich forests in Sumatra and Borneo. Indonesia, under pressure from Singapore and Malaysia, whose economies and health have for the past 18 years been affected by the smoke, in 2014 began taking a series of measures, from finally signing a 12-year-old regional pact on haze prevention to enacting laws and making arrests and levying fines. Singaporean and Malaysian authorities have stepped up pursuit of those it believes are culpable and products by accused firms are being boycotted.

Indonesia's perceived lack of action over the fires and growing nationalism led to frayed relations with neighbours. But Indonesians as much as Singaporeans and Malaysians are suffering, the haze forcing the closure of airports, schools and shops and threatening the health of the young and elderly. The slash-and-burn methods of clearing forests are illegal, but also the most cost-effective. Peat in the soil that is up to seven metres deep makes putting out the blazes difficult, while law enforcers struggle to fight the collusion between officials and plantation firms.

The fires have for too long taken a costly toll. Companies and individuals must not be allowed to profit at public expense. Indonesia has taken welcome steps; it has to further cooperate, implement institutional reforms and strengthen enforcement.

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Partial solution.
 Is the MTR Corporation's proposed registration scheme for larger musical instruments satisfactory, given that it will not include all oversized instruments so that musicians with, for example, a double bass, harp, or guzheng, will still not be allowed to travel on the network?

LETTERS

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Knee-jerk reaction hurts healthy trees

I refer to the letter by Dr Wong Hong-yau ("If old tree poses a risk to public safety then it has to be cut down", October 7).

This statement appears to make good sense and few people would disagree. However the thorny problem is the assessment of risk and the degree of prudent pruning. Dr Wong is correct that the century-old Chinese banyan tree which collapsed on Bonham Road did so during one of our worst rainstorms. Such black rainstorms load the boughs and branches to an extreme degree: we all know what heavy work it is to carry a pail full of water.

This abnormal degree of water loading can threaten most trees in the city. Does this mean we should immediately fell all our trees, so that Hong Kong becomes an urban desert?

People must use some intelligence, such as recognising that walking under large trees or against retaining walls during amber, red or black heavy rainstorms is to take a tangible risk. Just as standing under a tree during a thunderstorm increases one's chances of being struck by lightning.

When our civil servants are put on the spot, they become completely risk averse. It is much easier to fell any tree that overhangs a public area rather than make a reasoned responsible assessment. This is what is happening.

The four banyan trees on Bonham Road referred to by your correspondent were radically cut down to the roots and will probably die. Surely the boughs overhanging the road and giving the most mechanical stress could have been cut, but those standing vertically could have been retained. Then those old banyans could have continued to grace our city.

Earlier this month, in Battery Path Central, healthy trees were cut down because the trunks were sloping away from the bank towards the light. They presented little public risk. Trees, especially large mature trees, are a necessity in cities, as they spread an air of calmness.

Without them, our nerves become frayed, and we would have to find many more spaces in our already over-stressed mental hospitals. Dr Wong's economic argument against trees is too simplistic.

I. M. Wright, Happy Valley

Nostalgia for British rule is misplaced

In justifying the showing of the old colonial flag in Hong Kong ("Beijing needs change of attitude", October 11), Henry Wong

claims Beijing "has called pro-democrats traitors and asked us to be thankful for its rule". He further claims Hong Kong's chief executives are lacking in credibility and appear to speak for Beijing's interests instead of Hong Kong residents.

If any Beijing official called anyone a traitor, it wasn't a mainstream argument and Beijing has never asked Hong-kongers to be thankful for its rule. Chief executives must represent Hong Kong citizens and the central government.

When local people got annoyed over mainlanders' bulk purchases of milk powder, the chief executive pushed for a limit on purchases. After the severe acute respiratory syndrome crisis, the then chief executive pushed for more mainland visitors to help the local economy. Following complaints about parallel traders, the chief executive called for limits to the number of visits that mainlanders can make.

Past British governors tried to stamp out any opposition to British rule.

Wong cites good social welfare policies pursued by governor Murray MacLehose. Those reforms were introduced to help silence opposition to British rule (as well as to counter the appeal of communist troublemakers).

Anti-mainland sentiment notwithstanding, Beijing has not stamped out freedom of speech in Hong Kong, or even freedom of assembly, as witnessed by its non-involvement in Occupy Central.

Maybe if enough local youngsters knew that Hong Kong passports were downgraded to deny Hong Kong people right of abode in the UK, they would stop waving the colonial flag.

And maybe if they had the chance to live in Britain and face racial discrimination, they would also stop waving the flag.

We must outgrow nostalgia for second-class racial status.

John Chiu, Wan Chai

Postbox plan is an act of vandalism

Mike Rowse is spot on in his scathing criticism of Hongkong Post's proposal to eradicate the



The queen's crest on a postbox in Hong Kong. Photo: AFP

HK presents a hostile environment to those seeking protection

Recent letters about the present European refugee crisis suggest that Hong Kong will do the right thing if there is an influx of Syrian refugees.

While I hope this sentiment is true, it must be remembered that Hong Kong's response to the Vietnamese crisis was a government-led initiative, which took considerable courage and commitment. It was the government leading the people by example to reach out to accommodate a large influx of refugees.

It was a positive response to an urgent need. The government worked hard to bring society together in providing a solution while moderating any anti-refugee propaganda which might lead to racially fuelled tension.

However, the situation has changed since those days in two significant ways. Today, the boot is on the other foot and the government itself seems to largely portray refugees as unwelcome illegal immigrants, rather than encouraging the public to understand that refugees have a right to seek protection here under its own recognition of the UN Convention against Torture. Information presented by the Immigration Department always emphasises the growing numbers of people claiming protection, the high cost of providing legal aid for the screening process, and the costs of providing humanitarian assistance and housing.

There is no celebration of Hong Kong's humanitarian values in being able to extend protection to people under threat of death, but instead an irritation at having to expend money and effort in sifting through a heap of "fake refugees" in order to find the few "genuine" cases.

Secondly, a recent study of the portrayal of refugees in the media seems to largely underscore this negative impression, with derogatory comments and opinions directed at protection claimants. With a few notable exceptions, refugees are often connected with crime, illegal work and drugs, while racial slurs and offensive labels are commonly observed.

The human story of desperation, anguish of separation from family, and being alienated in a foreign culture hardly ever gets told.

Hong Kong cannot continue to look back with nostalgia to the boat people days and rest on its laurels.

Today's reality is that Hong Kong presents a hostile environment to those seeking protection. This is carefully engineered by the government and nurtured by the media.

We really need to do better than this if we are to face again an immigration influx like the Vietnamese crisis of the 1980s

Tony Read, Tung Chung

royal insignia from the territory's postboxes ("Don't hide Hong Kong's colonial past", October 12). Not only is this act of vandalism an insult to the queen, it also pays no regard to Hong Kong's heritage and is a waste of taxpayers' money.

Britain does not destroy artefacts left by its former colonial masters, the Romans, in fact it treasures them, as do most other civilisations.

The post office proposal is in principle a similar act of vandalism to that being perpetrated by Islamic State in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan where Roman and Buddhist artefacts have been destroyed.

I cannot believe that Hongkong Post is acting on orders that filtered down from Beijing.

I urge the post office to scrap this proposal and hope that certain sections of the Hong Kong community get over post-colonial angst and come round to respecting our heritage.

Eric Edwin Taylor, Sai Kung

Need for more temporary shelters

I agree with correspondents who have written about the homeless woman who passed away at a 24-hour McDonald's outlet.

This highlights the need for the government to deal with the plight of homeless people.

Poverty is widespread in Hong Kong and it is common for street sleepers to seek shelter in the McDonald's outlets that are open round the clock, because they have nowhere else to go. Other customers come and go and will generally ignore them.

The government needs to build enough temporary shelters to meet the needs of the homeless. Without a bed in these shelters, their only option is to find somewhere to sleep outside.

The administration also has to accelerate its public estate building programme.

There is such a limited supply of public housing and people find they have to join long waiting lists. If more estates can be constructed, waiting lists can be cut.

It also needs to look at possible rent adjustments and consider cutting rents for public housing tenants.

Rents in Hong Kong just keep rising, even in subdivided flats.

Some people are forced onto the streets and have to sleep rough, because they cannot afford the steadily increasing rents.

There is an urgent need for the government to try and deal with these housing problems.

Mario Man, Tseung Kwan O

We should not underestimate local teachers

I wish to respond to Kelly Yang's article ("Together, local teachers and NETs can boost English learning", October 7).

I agree with her that local and native-speaking English teachers should work together so that the gap between the two groups is eliminated. It is important that the abilities of local teachers are not underestimated.

I am impressed by the teaching skills of NETs and their ability to make lessons more interesting. As they come from different cultures, they have their own unique teaching styles. For example, they will sometimes use games and storytelling in class. As a student, I find this to be a relaxed and creative way to learn English.

However, we should not ignore the important contribution local teachers make to raise students' standard of English.

Students often struggle with some English terms and with grammar, and the contribution of local teachers in these areas is invaluable. It helps that they can speak Chinese and English, especially when you are struggling to translate a sentence in Chinese into English. The local teachers can recognise these weaknesses and help students with them.

I think NETs and local teachers are equally important in schools in Hong Kong. However, it appears that NETs have more fringe benefits and this must be rectified.

The implication is that they are better than local teachers and this is sending the wrong message.

Linda Ng Lai-yin, Kwai Fong

Early start help students concentrate

I refer to the letter by Yang Wenyi ("Later starting time will help students", September 21).

I do not agree with your correspondent that it would be better for students if the school day started later, at 9am.

The earlier start that is the norm in Hong Kong means an earlier finish and this is important. I think you can do your best work when it comes to studying and learning in the morning.

Young people should feel fairly fresh so long as they have had enough sleep. I think tiredness is not caused by too early a start, but by not getting enough sleep the night before.

Students have a lot of homework in Hong Kong. If they start and then finish an hour later, then it follows they will finish their homework an hour later.

As I said, you are at your best when you are rested and fresh in the morning.

It therefore follows that if you have to work late into the night, you can no longer perform as efficiently as before, because you are tired. It will be more difficult to concentrate.

There is no need to change the school hours.

Lovelyn Wong, Tsing Yi

OPINION

South China Morning Post

India, Indonesia need bold leaders

Asian economies are so entwined with those of the world's biggest, the US and China, that the analogy of boats on a tide comes readily to mind. As American and Chinese trade and demand for commodities rises and falls, so do their fortunes. That is especially challenging for Indian Prime

Minister Narendra Modi and Indonesian President Joko Widodo, who won elections last year on waves of expectation that they could lift their nations to the next stage of development. Had they been able to implement promised reforms, investor sentiment would have been more positive.

India's growth, at 7 per cent for the second quarter, neck-and-neck with China's, is below the 9 per cent average of the past two decades and short of levels needed to lift from poverty more than 21 per cent of the population. About 11 per cent of Indonesians live below the World Bank's poverty line and 35 per cent just above it; growth slipped in the second quarter to 4.67 per cent from 5 per cent for 2014. Increasingly, support for Modi and Widodo is being replaced by dissatisfaction.

Both leaders are being hampered by corruption, bureaucratic red tape and obstructionist politicians. Their inability to push reforms has disappointed those who saw their election as a turning point. Years of strong economic growth was not matched by investment in infrastructure. Both nations now desperately need power plants, roads and ports.

But drawing the investment so crucial to build infrastructure, boost the industrial and manufacturing sectors and create jobs is difficult given the economic climate. Even before the plunge of Chinese equity markets and devaluation of the yuan, there had been a drop in exports and commodity prices and concerns about China's economy. There has since been falls in the region's currencies, with the Indian rupee and Indonesian rupiah among the hardest hit.

Bickering in the upper house of India's parliament has delayed approval of a goods and services tax that would create the world's biggest single market and boost growth. In turn, labour and land legislation, crucial for job creation, has been pushed back. Many of Widodo's economic programmes have struggled to get off the ground, being beset by implementation and bureaucratic problems. In recent weeks he has put in place a new economic team, unveiled major infrastructure projects and announced plans for a new stimulus package. But both leaders need to take bolder steps to push for promised reforms.

Don't skimp on mental health

According to World Health Organisation standards, Hong Kong is short of around 400 psychiatrists needed to treat new and chronic cases of mental illness in a city of this size. The most worrying example is to be found in our public health system.

According to senior psychiatrists, a specialist has to see at least 30 patients in a three-hour session of consultations and the Hospital Authority has been short of nurses to maintain visits to psychiatric outpatients.

These are not revelations. Such depressing observations tend to go around in the wake of domestic tragedies that never cease to shock the community. They have arisen again after a 38-year-old mother leapt from the 30th floor of a public housing block in Tuen Mun last week with her 10-year-old son. Police are investigating an apparent murder-suicide. It emerged she had suffered from postnatal depression ever since giving birth, prompting concern whether she had received adequate medical treatment. The Hospital Authority says the woman had her last hospital consultation in April. In another example of a stressed system, the average queuing time for a first appointment with a psychiatrist jumped from three to seven weeks between 2000 and 2012.

Access to psychiatric resources that meet WHO standards will not eradicate mental illness or the risk of tragedy. But timely intervention, regular treatment, counselling and support might alleviate the terrible toll of children at the hands of parents who take the distorted view that it is for the children's good.

Mental health services must compete with other social priorities for resources. There remains merit in the suggestion, from the Hong Kong Mental Health Council, of a commission to handle long-term patients who can miss out under a policy that focuses on medical services. There may be constraints on the HA's budget, but the government cannot claim it does not have the money to address an egregious example of under-resourcing. At the least it could aim at restoring service quality to year 2000 levels as a first step.

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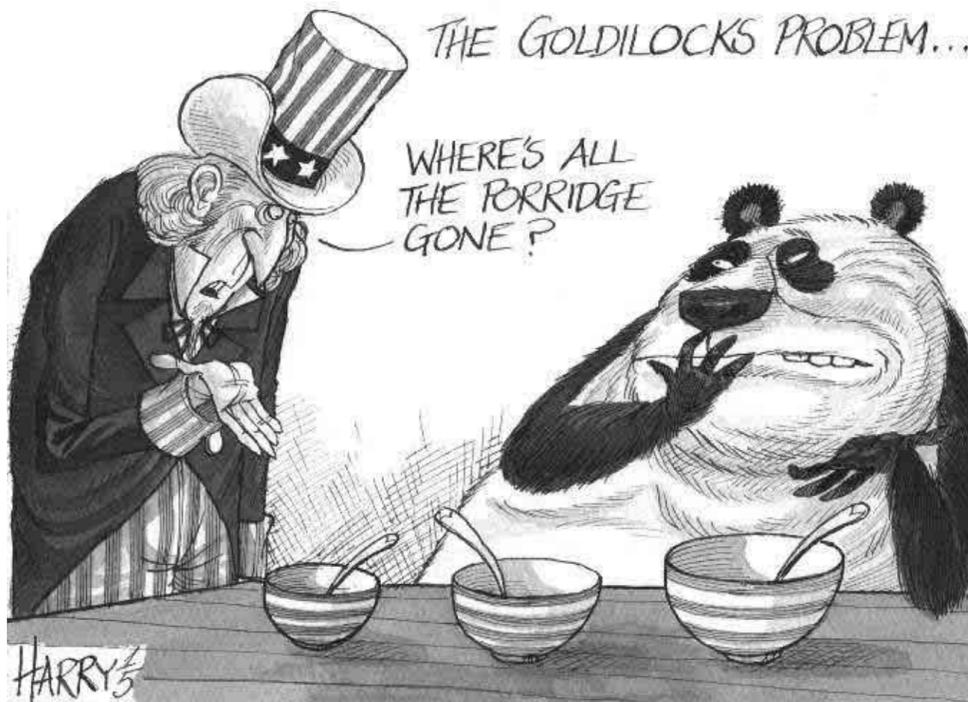
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Weed out cheats.
With important elections later this year and in 2016, should the Registration and Electoral Office double its staff numbers and run more detailed checks on "problematic" voter registrations, to ensure fairness at polls and curb vote-rigging?

LETTERS

We welcome all letters. Include your full name, address and telephone number, not necessarily for publication. Please keep letters to a maximum of 400 words. Email letters@scmp.com Fax 2250 3242 Post 22 Dai Fat Street, Tai Po Industrial Estate, Tai Po, Hong Kong.

Allow online application for Primary One

As a parent of a five-year-old boy, I recently received a package from the Education Bureau, including a DVD video, about the Primary One admission system and booklet about schools in my district.

In addition to filling out a paper form and submitting it to the primary school of my choice, I also need to provide copies of my Hong Kong identity card, my son's birth certificate along with proof of address (for example, a letter from another government agency).

I do not understand why the bureau provided the DVDs and the printed versions when all the information could be made available online. Granted that Hong Kong is also facing the problem of digital divide, but the bureau should at least allow parents to opt out from receiving the hard copies so we can show our children we do care about the environment.

Likewise, all parents should be given the option to fill out the form online, thereby saving the school staff the trouble of re-entering the data manually into the computer system.

In fact, the bureau already has the information of most students and parents who participated in pre-primary education voucher scheme.

Transferring data from the voucher scheme to the admission system would significantly simplify the application form and save a lot of time that we the parents could have spent with our children. The proof of address is also unnecessary if data across different government departments could be shared - for example, the bureau can confirm my address with the Rating and Valuation Department.

Resources are always scarce and especially so for education. The bureau should optimise the Primary One admission system so that less resources are spent on paperwork and more on educating our children.

Simon Wang, Kowloon Tong

No-walk plea on escalators irrational

I am grateful to Vincent Chow for shedding light on what passes for reasoning within the Electrical and Mechanical Services Department ("Standing still effective way to prevent escalator accidents", September 14).

Escalators, we are told, "are not designed to be walked on". This is a startling assertion which would come as a surprise to countless millions of users worldwide and the numerous transport authorities overseas

which actively encourage walking on escalators to boost passenger throughput. Walking on escalators is, according to the department, "especially dangerous when an escalator stops suddenly in an emergency", though why the risk in such circumstances should be thought any greater for those in motion than those standing still is a mystery.

But the true revelation comes in the figures for MTR escalator accidents: just one passenger in almost three million was involved in an escalator accident in 2014. We are not told how many of this vanishingly small number were caused by the act of walking on the escalator as opposed, for instance, to passengers focusing more on their smart-phones than their surroundings.

Mr Chow's letter helpfully confirms that there is no rational basis for the government and the MTR to continue to waste resources bombarding the Hong Kong public with this absurd campaign. Fortunately, the city's travelling public is smart enough to carry on walking - and stay safe.

Mitchell Stoker, Happy Valley

Newspaper kiosks can get in the way

The concept of pedestrianising parts of Central should be lauded. However, it should be part of a territory-wide attempt to make the lives of pedestrians safer and more bearable.

Bringing about the necessary changes in Central is fraught with difficulties and will take time. There are, however, simple expedients, besides a more proactive police approach to, for example, illegal parking and speeding, that could have an immediate effect on reducing the plight of our long-suffering pedestrians in all parts of Hong Kong.

The pavement, I assume, is a public thoroughfare; therefore any blocking of this right of way is theoretically illegal.

Why then are newspaper vendors in particular, permitted to partially block what is one of the most crowded streets in Hong Kong? There are four operating in a 200-metre stretch extending westward along



News stands common sight on our streets. Photo: Felix Wong

Busy south Lantau communities cannot handle more cars

I refer to the letter from assistant commissioner for transport, Irene Ho ("Small increase in car numbers won't destroy Lantau idyll", August 18), attempting to justify raising the number of permits issued to private cars and tour buses on south Lantau's roads.

Her letter is typical of the Transport Department's tunnel-vision approach on this subject. This issue illustrates the wider problem of the government bowing to special interests to the detriment of the common good.

In a meeting last week with Lantau residents, Ms Ho acknowledged the impetus to review traffic volume in south Lantau came from the Lantau Development Advisory Council, which is stacked with government officials and vested interests.

Set up in 2014 by the government, the 28-member council consists of eight officials at the permanent secretary and director level, plus 20 members from the private sector. Of the private-sector members, eight have declared business interests on Lantau, two are pro-government legislators, and one has openly advocated the development of Lantau's country parks. Thus 19 out of the council's 28 members will support policies that prioritise development, despite its lip-service rhetoric about preserving the island's unique natural environment.

The department dutifully recommended issuing 50 additional permits per day on weekdays for private cars, and 20 more per day for tour buses.

The department overlooked the fact that south Lantau's most popular sites - Tai O, Ngong Ping, the beaches of Cheung Sha, Pui O, Tong Fuk and Mui Wo - are already at saturation point in terms of parking spaces and capacity to accommodate visitors. On an average day, there are 186 cars parked illegally in Mui Wo, according to figures from south Lantau district councillor Wong Fuk-kan.

These communities simply cannot handle more cars. Nor can south Lantau's narrow roads, full of twists and turns, safely accommodate more vehicles.

Despite the large number of objections it received during its so-called public consultation, Ms Ho did not commit to holding a public forum to give the public the opportunity to raise questions and concerns about opening south Lantau's roads to more cars and tour buses.

Incredibly, she admitted that the department does not have any report studying the alternatives, such as car-pooling, park-and-ride schemes, or increasing bus service frequency.

The only option it proposes is putting more cars on the road, a measure that is contrary to every transportation and environmental policy direction in the world.

Tom Yam, Lantau

King's Road from North Point MTR station. To make life even more difficult for pedestrians is the equipment left to stand for an inordinate amount of time after job completion by our Public Works Department.

There are so many obvious ways of making walking in the city a more civilised experience, but who in authority has the courage or will to implement them?

Jim Francis, North Point

Home-school environment can be better

I refer to the letter by Wu Hiutek ("Schools have obvious advantages", September 7).

I disagree with the points he makes about homeschooling. When it comes to determining the true purpose of education, I think homeschooling can do just as well as mainstream schools and maybe even better.

Young children are naturally curious, but once they enter Hong Kong's spoon-fed education system, there are few opportunities for them to satisfy that curiosity. They are overwhelmed by classes and homework, stressed out by a large curriculum. They end up being

confused and disheartened and feel they are learning without knowing the purpose.

In this system, their curiosity vanishes. However, in the right homeschooling environment, it can be encouraged. With long- and short-term goals, children can keep that natural curiosity and achieve their goals.

Mr Wu said that schools help students to integrate into society. Yet, many employers say that some of the young people they hire are not punctual at work, are self-centred and irresponsible. This is hardly a sign of integration.

Many youngsters are pampered by their parents and focus solely on getting good academic results. They do not learn social skills like how to behave in a workplace. And they have great difficulty integrating into a work environment.

However, with a customised curriculum, homeschooled children, under parental guidance, can learn self-discipline, good time management and independence. They can acquire the practical skills that enable them to cope well with social integration.

Regarding the claim of lack of interaction, parents can take their children to meet with other homeschooled children, so they are not isolated.

Clover Lau, Ma On Shan

Having right work attitude is what counts

I refer to the report "Employers 'would rather hire mainland graduates'" (September 10). I can understand the difficulties new Hong Kong graduates experience when looking for work. And when they find a job they do not earn a lot, on average HK\$10,800 a month.

Hong Kong is a competitive society. These young people need to make whatever improvements are necessary to ensure they are more competitive on the job market.

Compare this to the mainland where young adults recognise that they have to work harder if they want to get a good job.

This is why many local employers prefer to hire them. Young Hongkongers need to recognise this and change their work attitude.

Anson Ng Tsz-hin, Tseung Kwan O

Later starting time will help students

Many schools start early in Hong Kong, leaving pupils feeling very tired.

They have a lot of tests and this means they have a great deal of homework to do every evening. This is especially the case with students in senior forms.

They may have to stay up late at night in order to finish it all. If they have to start school the next day at 8am, they will likely go in tired as they will not have had enough sleep.

In addition, they may also have to attend tutorial classes, which puts even more pressure on their schedule after school. They are often left with very little time to relax.

I think it would be better if the school day started at 9am. It would make a big difference if students could get that extra hour of sleep.

We should look at other school systems and follow their example. In Finland, students start much later than in Hong Kong and obviously these youngsters will start their school day feeling fresher and more alert.

We need to do away with the 8am starts.

Yang Wenyi, Tuen Mun

Internet room at Pyongyang functioning

I would like to update readers following your article on North Korea and the installation by the regime of an internet room at the capital's airport ("Pyongyang's new airport internet room doesn't have any keyboards - or internet", August 26).

Having just returned from Pyongyang, I can report that the system is fully functioning with high-speed surfing, keyboards and open access to global sites.

Magnus Marchand, Kennedy Town