**SCMP Article**

 **‘One country two systems’ reality: Beijing’s in control**

Most of us recognise the importance of the “one country, two systems” formula to Hong Kong’s success. The idea began in the early 1980s as an imaginative solution to the question of Hong Kong’s future. It was seen as a guarantee that Hong Kong could reunite with China yet keep its unique characteristics as a society and an economy.

We take those booming years of the 1980s and 1990s for granted now. But without the “one country, two systems” promise, we would have faced a future potentially without rule of law and free flows of information, people and capital. There could have been a crisis of confidence, and history would have been very different.

“One country, two systems” is still a fundamental assurance – the underlying reason that skilled and talented people choose to live here, and businesses continue to locate and invest here.

Over the past few years, I have noticed a growing belief that the year 2047 marks the absolute end of “one country, two systems”. Various commentators, not only opposition figures, have claimed that we are now in a countdown – there are only 30 years to go before life as we know it in Hong Kong comes to an end.

Columnist Michael Chugani made some points along these lines in a Post article several weeks ago, titled “Under red China, democracy is dead in Hong Kong”. Among other things, he predicted a time when People’s Liberation Army troops would be on the streets. Other observers, including people in the pro-Beijing camp, see a potential problem here. Some have called for discussions on Hong Kong’s post-2047 status to start sooner rather than later.\

Perhaps part of the problem is that people think the post-1997 arrangement can and should freeze the Hong Kong-mainland relationship in time. The “one country, two systems” concept dates from a time when China’s economy was far less developed. For example, few imagined that large numbers of mainland tourists would come here or mainland businesses would raise capital here. China now has the second-largest economy in the world, and its middle-class population is (depending on how you measure it) 50 million or 100 million. Chinese companies, tourists and students now go overseas in large numbers.

People who complain that you hear more Mandarin in Hong Kong today are missing the point. You hear more Mandarin in Japan, Canada and Africa. “One country, two systems” was not intended to cut Hong Kong off from the mainland; our economy would be stuck in the 1980s if it did.

Mainland tourists pose for photos in front of the Golden Bauhinia statue in Hong Kong on December 19. Chinese companies, tourists and students now go overseas in large numbers. Photo: AFP

Some commentators warn that Beijing is intervening more openly in Hong Kong’s politics, and this also represents a decline in “one country, two systems”. The truth is that “one country, two systems” was not designed to put Hong Kong beyond Beijing’s ultimate control. Officials in the lead-up to 1997 did not stress this angle – they wanted to assure everyone that Hong Kong would have considerable autonomy.

Since then, Beijing has increasingly reminded Hong Kong that this autonomy is granted from the centre. Wang Zhenmin, the legal chief of the central government’s liaison office in Hong Kong, is one of the officials to clarify, in recent days, that the “two systems” are part of the bigger “one country” framework.

Such comments might disappoint people who assumed Hong Kong has some sort of sovereignty of its own that equals or overrides that of the nation. But the “one country, two systems” concept remains the same: Hong Kong is a part of China but with its own identity as a society and its own systems as an economy.

It is natural to look forward. But we should bear two things in mind. First, Hong Kong’s separate rights and freedoms under “two systems” must benefit the nation as a whole. For example, the city contributes to the nation as an open business centre with high-quality institutions. We thrive from serving China’s economic interests.

Second, 2047 is 30 years away. Think what China and the world were like in 1987 – and imagine what changes we might see over the next three decades. We cannot see the future, but we can be sure the context of “one country, two systems” will be different. And Hong Kong itself will help create that context.