

Hong Kong celebrates Big Walk ritual

Contributed by Thingfish
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As the sun bakes the pavements and the humidity soaks us like warm gravy, over 100,000 people will gather this afternoon to share a long walk through the heart of Hong Kong.

The 1 July march is an annual celebration of aspiration, where Hong Kongers of every variety turn out to demand the right to the same self-respect and self-determination that citizens of pretty much every other modern, civil society enjoys.

Because while Hong Kong has all the hallmark of a modern society, Cynics dismiss the march as a pointless ritual, and ritual it is, but by all accounts, Beijing views it as a lot more than that. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre. Closer to home, it's the date when Hong Kong people refused draconian anti-subversion laws and effectively drove unpopular chief executive Tung Chee-hwa from office.

Everyone's favourite ritual

It's true, the march really has become a ritual, but it's a ritual every bit as important to Hong Kong's freedoms as our regular and unrepresentative elections. People turn out to vote not because they have faith in the system, but because they know that a vote is a privilege best not squandered. And it's the same with the march.

In the past few weeks, Beijing-backed newspapers toeing the party line, and the sorry pack of lackies whose owners are on the scrounge for favours, have run column after column by cynics and apologists claiming the march is at best pointless, at worst, unpatriotic. They point out that the marchers are a cacophony of competing pressure groups, all demanding their own voices be heard. But isn't that exactly the point?

Among the tens of thousands crowding Hennessy Road today, there'll be democrats, Tiananmen mothers, harbour defenders, the Falun Gong, domestic helpers, anti-smokers, pro-smokers, students, arts groups, historical preservationists, civil servants, small businessmen, labour rights groups, immigrants, tax-payers, betrothed gays, god-botherers, cyclists, ecologists and mainlanders enjoying a rare right to protest. You name it, someone will be marching for it, and that's exactly what democracy is for.

Except for the Lehman Brothers mini-bonds victims. They're holding their own march because nobody likes them.

The whole point of this march is to demand an equal say for anyone who chooses to cast a vote. No more tycoons with multiple votes, no more functional constituencies with double digit constituencies and no opposition and no erosion of the legal system. A chief executive and legislative council who are accountable to the people, not to the party. No matter what their banners say, every person in this march is asking for one simple, common right - the right to an equal say in who represents them.

The annual big walk may have become a ritual, but it's a ritual that's proved vital in defending the rights of Hong Kong people against the meddlesome instincts of our landlords across the border. If it weren't for this ritual, Hong Kong would have gone the same way as Macau, where there's no opposition, no right to free speech, and where the chief executive doesn't even pretend to stand for election.

Donald Tsang's true colours

If the government's regular foot shooting, electoral delays and the various anniversaries, Hong Kong chief executive Donald Tsang has given Hong Kong an extra reason to join the march this year. In the past, the CE has turned out for a flag waving in the morning, followed that with a fancy lunch, some meetings and a bit of hob-nobbing with his bosses. But this year The Donald has chosen to step outside his cloistered bubble.

This year, he'll start the day celebrating the handover before an audience of 1,000 specially-selected fawning lackies. After that, he'll join a mob of Beijing loyalists named the Hong Kong Celebrations Association, who plan to stage a celebration of the handover. But there's more to their celebration than a bit of harmless patriotism, and the Donald knows it. What he's joining is a countermarch, intended to divide nationalists from democrats; to send a message that love of the motherland means love of the status quo.

This is the same man who, on the anniversary of Tiananmen, told us China's prosperity justified the clamp-down and claimed to be expressing the opinion of Hong Kong people. But Donald doesn't represent Hong Kong people any more than I do, because neither of us were elected. By joining the Communist countermarch, Donald Tsang is showing his true colours and proving that he doesn't speak for the people of Hong Kong, he speaks against them.