

Countdown to midnight June 30, 1997

As I write this editorial, I am suddenly very conscious that in twenty-seven days Hong Kong will have come to the end of an era. The Union Jack will have been taken down for the last time ; the five-star red Chinese flag will have been hoisted and very visible throughout what for more than one hundred and fifty years has been known as “the Colony”. The ceremonies will be over; the band will have stopped playing and the last governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten, along with the last contingent of Britain’s military, will be on board a ship heading for the United Kingdom. The sun will have set on Britain’s most coveted colonial possession. The People’s Liberation Army will suddenly be a familiar sight on Hong Kong streets.

And yet, perhaps the changes will not seem so abrupt since so many have already taken place. For the last year or two, each day has brought reminders that an unprecedented event was about to take place, one that would change the course of “the Colony’s” history.

The royal crown, so visible just about everywhere up to two years ago, has all but disappeared. It has been replaced by the bauhinia. The bauhinia, with its five-star tipped stamens, is now Hong Kong’s official flower, and a constant reminder that a new chapter is being written in Hong Kong’s colorful and often painful journey to maturity.

The picture of the Queen, up to now seen just about anywhere, but perhaps most commonly seen and used by all on Hong Kong’s postage stamps, has been replaced by new stamps featuring views of Hong Kong. The Postmaster General, Robert Footman, is keen on reminding people that if they have not managed to use up all those stamps with the Queen’s picture, they will be worthless as tender for posting mail after June 30. He has neglected to add that they are avidly being sought after, however, by stamp collectors.

The Royal Mail vans are getting a new look as well as the postal boxes. Gone is the “royal”; gone also is the “crown”.

The schools are also making a number of changes. Schools as well as school uniforms are losing their familiar emblems and replacing them with less “royal” types. Courses in the Chinese

language and Chinese history are being introduced into the curriculum to insure that students learn about their Chinese history and culture. Other facets of history are being rewritten as well. The Opium Wars are getting ample coverage and the Tiananmen incident is being omitted from the history books of this period.

The Royal Jockey Club is now the Hong Kong Jockey Club; the Royal Observatory with its 114 year history is now simply the Hong Kong Observatory.

These may seem to be mostly cosmetic changes and yet they carry a symbolic significance of considerable importance.

Other obvious changes involve the election of Tung Chee-hwa as the first chief executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). The State Council has approved the appointment of more than 25 senior officials. Three contingents of the People's Liberation Army have already arrived in Hong Kong, sporting snappy new uniforms.

All these and many other changes signal a paradigm shift in Hong Kong and in the every day life of its people.

There is no doubt that Hong Kong will change, that its Chineseness will become more and more apparent and that is the way it ought to be. Yet it is also fervently to be wished that the contribution of the British, made with the cooperation, the intelligence and the hard work of the millions of Chinese who came to Hong Kong in search of a better life will not be completely forgotten. It is no small feat for these two peoples, hand in hand to have turned this "barren rock" and "sleepy fishing village" into a thriving metropolis which today is the envy of the world. Hopefully, the leaders and people of the new Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region, will not lose sight of the elements that have made and which will be needed to keep making Hong Kong so attractive to the rest of the world: its rule of law, its fair and honest business dealings, its respect for human rights and expression, the care of its lands and peoples.

May the bauhinia continue to bloom as Hong Kong begins a new life. Both the British and the Chinese are going home. May the homecoming be a source of joy and fulfillment for both. (BAM)