



February in Hong Kong

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A condensed press review prepared by the Consulate General of Switzerland in HK

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Economy + Finance

Government gives cut-price land to Hong Kong's Housing Society, in bid to boost supply of homes (SCMP, Feb. 1): Hong Kong's second-biggest public housing provider will get land at a cheaper rate from the government, as it tries to boost the city's supply of affordable homes. The Housing Society, tasked with building 6,600 flats across Kowloon over the next seven years, will get one site intended for public rental housing at a nominal price of HK\$1,000 (US\$127), the Transport and Housing Bureau announced. The price would normally be a third of the market rate. The society will also get four sites earmarked for subsidised homes for sale, paying only a third of the market price, down from the usual half.

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We don't want your money: Chinese shoppers told to spend cash elsewhere by frustrated Hongkongers who just want some peace and quiet (SCMP, Feb. 4): A group of activists staged a protest against mainland Chinese shoppers in a town near Hong Kong's western border, in the latest of a new wave of anti-mainland sentiment that has spread across the city. A group of 10 activists gathered at the cross-border bus terminus and urged the tourists to buy new year necessities at home instead. Last year, Hong Kong's tourist arrivals hit a record high of 65.1 million, with 78 per cent of them mainland visitors. Anti-mainland tourist sentiment has recently resurged in various Hong Kong districts that have been inundated with visitors, such as Tung Chung, Sheung Shui and Kowloon City, prompting the government to look into diverting visitors to other parts of the city.

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US-China trade war could knock half a percentage point off Hong Kong's economic growth, says commerce chief Edward Yau (SCMP, Feb. 9): The US-China trade war could cost Hong Kong half a percentage point of economic growth, the city's commerce chief Edward Yau said, while warning increased tariffs from the end of this month could hit local consumers in the pocket. Hong Kong, nearly half of whose exports are originally from mainland China and destined for the US, is caught in the middle of the tariff feud. Yau added that the impact on the overall economy was unmeasurable. "Hong Kong's economy is no longer only about manufacturing. Therefore, under the influence of the global economic environment, it is difficult to estimate the impact on the investment prospects or the profitability of enterprises," Yau said. "As we have seen from the past 10 months, the trend of the global stock market has become increasingly uncertain."

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Hong Kong banks must step up cybersecurity, protect customers' data as online scams multiply, warns industry leader (SCMP, Feb. 13): Hong Kong's banks must step up their efforts to combat cybercrime and protect customers' data amid a dramatic rise in online attacks, one of the city's most senior banking executives has warned. Mary Huen, chairwoman of the Hong Kong Association of Banks (HKAB), said that as lenders have rolled out more digital banking services allowing customers to conduct transactions on their computers or smartphones, so the risks have multiplied. Her concerns are supported by figures from the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA), the city's de facto central bank, which show cyberattacks on banks doubled last year.

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Hong Kong's port business drops out of top five in world for first time as Asian rivals Shanghai, Singapore, Ningbo, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Busan leave city in their wake (SCMP, Feb. 15): Hong Kong's once-booming port business has fallen from its perch as one of the world's top five for the first time, losing out to rivals in the face of intense competition as well as the impact of the US-China trade war. The city was a dominant global player as the world's busiest port for more than a decade until 2004, but sank to No 7 last year from No 5 after Shanghai, Singapore, Ningbo, Shenzhen, Guangzhou and South Korea's Busan in terms of throughput, according to London-based Drewry Shipping Consultants.

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Hong Kong office space rents 'to further soften as US-China trade war lingers' (SCMP, Feb. 15): Prime office rents in the Central business district are forecast to decline by as much as 7 per cent this year as mainland Chinese companies pare back their expansion plans amid uncertainties ranging from the US-China trade war to cooling domestic economic growth, according to Knight Frank's latest global outlook report. Hong Kong is likely to keep its crown as the world's most expensive city to lease office

space, even as rents begin to deflate, Knight Frank said. The consultancy estimates annual office rents in Hong Kong would cost US\$239.54 per square foot in 2019.

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Slowest economic growth in two years expected amid US-China trade war and weak retail, Hong Kong finance chief Paul Chan says (SCMP, Feb. 18): Hong Kong's economy expanded at its slowest pace in two years as the US-China trade war and weak domestic consumption dragged growth down to an estimated 3 per cent last year, the city's finance chief Paul Chan revealed. Chan said the economic growth rate for the fourth quarter of 2018 would be lower than 1.5 per cent – the weakest since the first quarter of 2016. "The impact of the US-China trade war has started to emerge ... and it was almost zero growth for commodities exports in the last quarter. This was a sharp drop from the 6 per cent average growth in the first three quarters," he wrote. "Consumption was also affected – retail volume only grew by 2.1 per cent in the fourth quarter, much lower than the 12 per cent growth in the first half of the year."

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US-China trade war and stronger US dollar will cause Hong Kong's tourism industry to slow in 2019 (SCMP, Feb. 19): The US-China trade war and a stronger US dollar will cause the growth in Hong Kong's tourist arrivals to slow down abruptly this year, the city's tourist board has said. About 66.4 million visitors are expected in Hong Kong in 2019, topping last year's record high of 65.1 million. But the 1.9 per cent increase would mean a significant slowdown from the 11.4 per cent rise between 2017 and 2018. "Tourism is very much affected by the larger environment," Anthony Lau, the Hong Kong Tourism Board's executive director, said. He added that a slowing Chinese economy was also a factor. The board said a stronger US dollar – to which Hong Kong's currency is pegged – had made the city a more expensive destination than other countries.

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Hong Kong's role in Beijing's 'Greater Bay Area' scheme spelled out: focus on strong suits of finance and trade; cooperate with Shenzhen and Guangzhou (SCMP, Feb. 19): The "Greater Bay Area" blueprint, which covers 11 cities in the Pearl River Delta, supports Hong Kong in entrenching its status as an international finance, transport and trade centre as well as an aviation hub, promoting the development of high-end and high-value-added financial, commercial, trading, logistics and professional services. Professor Wong Kam-fai, associate dean of engineering at Chinese University, believed Hong Kong had what it takes to succeed in the bay area project. "Hong Kong as an international city could be the driver in the upper research stream while the mainland cities could use their manpower to work in the lower stream," Wong said. He saw Hong Kong's free flow of information, with free access to tech giants like Facebook, Google and Twitter, as among its key strengths, while enterprises and tech start-ups could progress to get their ideas to market in the mainland bay-area cities and tap the enormous mainland market. While Wong was confident Hong Kong still had the edge as an international city with the rule of law, he warned its high living costs would be a deterrent.

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Lord Mayor of London sees fintech promise in China's Greater Bay Area plan, seeks stronger ties with Hong Kong ahead of Brexit (SCMP, Feb. 20): The City of London is looking to foster closer business ties with Hong Kong as a gateway to southern China's "Greater Bay Area", as Britain seeks new trade links worldwide amid the looming threat of a no-deal Brexit. Lord Mayor Peter Estlin said the plan to transform 11 cities around the Pearl River Delta into a global economic powerhouse held much promise for financial technology, in which London is a major player. He said Hong Kong remained a large, vibrant capital market under the "one country, two systems" governing formula. He wants to entice greater fintech investment from Hong Kong and vice versa, as well as promote London's role as an offshore yuan trade settlement hub in the western hemisphere.

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Set up drug test centres for medical data exchange near Hong Kong to develop city's biotech sector, industry leader says (SCMP, Feb. 23): Drug-testing centres for clinical trials and medical data exchange should be set up in mainland zones bordering Hong Kong to develop the city into a biotechnology hub, an industry leader has said. Hong Kong Biotechnology Organisation chairman and neuroscientist Albert Yu pointed out that for Hong Kong's biotechnology sector to take off, the local government should fight for a national policy on drug administration to be introduced near its border – by setting up regional centres under the China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA) for bio data analysis and drug testing.

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Could the rest of Fanling Golf Course also face redevelopment beyond 2027? Hong Kong minister says it's possible (SCMP, Feb. 24): The fate of a Hong Kong golf course beyond 2027 remains uncertain even as authorities spare most of it from development in the coming years, according to a minister. Secretary for Development Michael Wong's comments followed the government's

announcement earlier that it would only redevelop a fifth of the 172-hectare Fanling Golf Course for much-needed housing, with no plans for the rest of the premises. Authorities intend to renew the lease with operator Hong Kong Golf Club on the remaining 140 hectares when it expires next year, but the terms will run out by 2027. The Fanling site has been embroiled in controversy centred on space-starved Hong Kong's housing needs.

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Hong Kong's limit on baby milk formula to stay as fears grow demand from mainland China could cause repeat of shortage (SCMP, Feb. 26): A ban on people leaving Hong Kong with more than two tins of baby milk formula will remain indefinitely amid fears lifting it may cause repeat widespread shortages, the city's health authority said. The Food and Health Bureau said parallel trading activities were persistent and relaxing the ban may trigger increased demand from the ever-rising number of mainland Chinese tourists. Under the ban, people aged 16 or older were only allowed to carry 1.8kg of infant formula – about two tins – within a 24-hour period. It was introduced in March 2013, when Hong Kong parents complained traders were causing shortages of certain brands.

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Hong Kong's finance minister offers HK\$150 billion in targeted spending on health, welfare and IT (SCMP, Feb. 28): Hong Kong's financial secretary unveiled a budget with a HK\$150 billion (US\$19.2 billion) package offering immediate relief to Hong Kong's overburdened health and welfare services while helping businesses invest in longer-term safeguards in the face of economic headwinds. Warning of profound changes in the global political and economic landscape, Paul Chan presented a spending blueprint that laid out a strategy to fulfil the four "S" objectives of supporting enterprises, safeguarding jobs, stabilising the economy and strengthening livelihoods. While he offered the usual tax breaks to salary earners and businesses as well as rate waivers for property owners, along with subsidies for students, this budget was light on sweeteners as expected. The budget was more targeted at specific sectors such as small and medium-sized enterprises, public health care, innovation and technology and education. With the local economy having grown 3 per cent in 2018, Chan said he anticipated a further tapering, to between 2 and 3 per cent in 2019.

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Paul Chan's budget sounds alarm over need for Hong Kong to adapt to survive economic headwinds (SCMP, Feb. 28): The message was clear that Hong Kong would have to think hard about diversifying its economy and investing more in the future as Financial Secretary Paul Chan warned that the city's surplus would shrink significantly over the next five years. Chan predicted in his annual budget speech that the surplus would plunge 54.7 per cent to HK\$58.7 billion (US\$7.48 billion) in the financial year ending on March 31, from a record HK\$138 billion (US\$17.6 billion) last year, as sagging property and stock markets took a toll on land premium income and stamp duties. The main factors influencing Hong Kong's positioning and future direction, Chan said, were the US-China trade war, changes in international cooperation, opportunities in emerging Asian economies, strategic opportunities offered by mainland China, and development of innovation and technology. Analysts agreed that reform of the city's economic structure was long overdue. Billy Mak, associate professor of finance at Baptist University, said it would be worrying if the government continued to rely on land revenue and stamp duty as its major sources of income because both were tied to economic cycles and vulnerable to volatility.

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Domestic politics

Lawmaker Eddie Chu launches legal challenge to his disqualification from rural representative election (SCMP, Feb. 2): Lawmaker Eddie Chu Hoi-dick launched a legal challenge against his disqualification from a rural representative election and argued electoral officials were not entitled to vet his political stance. Chu's petition against returning officer Enoch Yuen, who oversaw the election for the post of village head at Yuen Kong Sun Tsuen in Yuen Long, and elected candidate Yeung Kam-lun, marked the pro-democracy camp's fourth such challenge against disqualification from running in elections at various levels. Chu said it was vital the case was promptly resolved, as it might have implications for candidates in future elections, such as those for the district council later this year.

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Don't blame new migrants from mainland China for Hong Kong's housing and health care woes, rights groups say while calling for race hate law (SCMP, Feb. 4): Rights groups have called for a race hate law in Hong Kong as new migrants from mainland China are being accused of "eating up" the city's resources although most work for a living. The Society for Community Organisation (SoCO) and the New Immigrants Mutual Aid Association also accused some local politicians and professionals of playing the "politics of hatred". Debate over the influence of new migrants on Hong Kong society has heated up recently. Civic Party lawmaker Alvin Yeung was planning to move a motion to review the one-way permit system under which up to 150 mainlanders are allowed to settle in Hong Kong every day.

Dr Alfred Wong, a cardiologist at Tuen Mun Hospital, recently told a television news programme that the one-way permit scheme was a source of overcrowding at public hospitals.

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Politicians from both sides of Hong Kong's divide reaching out to international contacts as US-China trade war threatens to hit city (SCMP, Feb. 8): Hong Kong political parties from across the spectrum have stepped up interactions with the international community, as trade disputes between the United States and China threaten to affect the city's free trade status. The largest pro-Beijing party, the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong (DAB), has tasked vice-chairman Holden Chow with strengthening ties with foreign politicians, diplomats and businesspeople, while the Democratic Party has set up a high-powered committee to bolster overseas connections. Previously, the pro-Beijing camp was more circumspect about going overseas to talk about developments in the city, while their pro-democracy rivals were more active to the point of being accused by pro-Beijing media of bad-mouthing Hong Kong abroad.

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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam urges city's neighbours not to fight over economic benefits of Greater Bay Area development (SCMP, Feb. 13): Hong Kong's leader has called for cooperation rather than unhealthy competition with mainland Chinese cities over the financial benefits of the "Greater Bay Area" development, with a national-level blueprint for Beijing's ambitious project expected within days. Beijing's plan aims to integrate the 11 cities into an innovation hub to rival Silicon Valley in the United States. "The nine cities in Guangdong province, and Hong Kong and Macau should ... leverage our strengths and advantages, to create a much bigger economy," Lam said. Lam said more details of the blueprint would surface during a symposium held in Hong Kong on Feb. 21, which will involve top officials from China's National Development and Reform Commission, as well as leaders of Guangdong and Macau.

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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam tells critics there's no room for compromise on any threats to city's stability (SCMP, Feb. 14): Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has told her critics not to expect any room for compromise when it comes to the city's "one country, two systems" governing formula and threats to long-term stability. She said her duties as chief executive were to implement one country, two systems, uphold the city's mini-constitution, defend the rule of law, and promote a deep and positive relationship between mainland China and Hong Kong. Her ability to carry out these tasks had been tested "time after time", she said.

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Hundreds of Hong Kong protesters march to Kwong Wah Hospital, claiming city's health care system overwhelmed by mainland Chinese migrants (SCMP, Feb. 18): Members of more than 10 political parties, interest groups and nurses' representatives claimed a scheme allowing 150 mainlanders a day to relocate to the city was a source of overcrowding at public hospitals as well as medical blunders. The protest was the second in the past week against the so-called one-way permit scheme. Organisers claimed 1,000 took part, while police put the number at 380. Protest spokesman Roy Tam of the NeoDemocrats, said: "We don't need to be maths geniuses to know Hong Kong cannot cope with an unlimited inflow of 150 people a day, which is more than 50,000 a year." But welfare charity the Society for Community Organisation said migrants were a major source of labour and had contributed to Hong Kong's economic success. The group accused the activists of playing the politics of hatred.

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China's State Council reveals details of 'Greater Bay Area' plan to turn Hong Kong and 10 neighbouring cities into economic hub (SCMP, Feb. 19): A cluster of world-class cities for work, life and leisure forms the central vision of China's "Greater Bay Area" finally unveiled by Beijing, laying out a road map to what it hailed as the new era of opening up. The blueprint identified five "strategic orientations", including closer integration between mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau, while upholding the governing principle of "one country, two systems" for the two special administrative regions. It confirmed that Hong Kong, Macau, Shenzhen and Guangzhou would be the four key cities of the bay area and the core engines for regional development. "First, it can help identify new areas of growth for Hong Kong and foster the diversified development of its economy and industries. Second, it will expand the space for living and development of Hong Kong residents," a spokesman for Chief Executive Carrie Lam's administration said of the blueprint. While business chambers and pro-establishment politicians joined the government in welcoming the blueprint, opposition lawmakers warned that rather than being complacent, local authorities would have to stay vigilant in protecting the city's core values during integration.

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Beijing's top man in Hong Kong hails new era of patriotism and rationality, urging lawmakers to work with him on sovereignty, security and development (SCMP, Feb. 20): Beijing's top official in Hong Kong has hailed a new era of patriotism and rationality in the city, while urging lawmakers to continue working with the central government. Hosting a gathering for the pro-establishment camp at his office, Wang Zhimin, the director of the central government's liaison office in Hong Kong, also called on the legislature to follow Beijing's lead on issues surrounding China's sovereignty, security and development. It was the first time all lawmakers had been invited to a gathering at the liaison office, but 26 opposition legislators boycotted the event. Despite the protest action, Wang conveyed his greetings to the pro-democracy camp, whose members had said they were more interested in having a serious policy discussion than "entertainment and feasts".

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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam rejects concerns about city's autonomy under China's Greater Bay Area plan (SCMP, Feb. 20): A day after Beijing unveiled the blueprint for China's "Greater Bay Area", Hong Kong's leader has highlighted the "active role" played by the city in its planning, rejecting concerns it had no autonomy in the ambitious mega plan. Chief Executive Carrie Lam insisted the central government had taken on board many of her administration's views in planning to transform Hong Kong and 10 cities around the Pearl River Delta region into a global economic powerhouse. Responding to critics, including opposition lawmakers, who had questioned whether Hong Kong would have any say over its role, Lam said her government had been involved in the planning since she took office in July 2017.

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Hong Kong legislators seek details from Carrie Lam on Beijing's 'Greater Bay Area' plan (SCMP, Feb. 21): Legislators from across Hong Kong's political divide sought more details on the central government's "Greater Bay Area" plan from the city's leader. But Carrie Lam gave no concrete answers, causing opposition lawmakers to express disappointment at the lack of specifics. Lam was grilled by pro-democracy legislators on whether the city's autonomy was intact under the bay area plan. But Lam said the administration's approach was to create a win-win situation, and was "never about destructive competition or simply to cooperate with the mainland".

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Hong Kong's autonomy is a strength that will power Greater Bay Area's success, officials tell high-powered symposium (SCMP, Feb. 22): The "one country, two systems" policy under which Hong Kong and Macau are allowed a high degree of governing autonomy is a key strength of the new "Greater Bay Area" blueprint for China that will make it stand out among other bay areas and help transform it into a world-class city cluster, according to speakers at a high-powered symposium. National Development and Reform Commission officials Lin Nianxiu and Guo Lanfeng both called for an accurate implementation of the governing principle to uphold national sovereignty, while protecting the unique identities of Hong Kong and Macau. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said at the event the city would be an active participant in the bay area project. While business chambers and pro-establishment politicians joined the government in welcoming the plan, opposition lawmakers questioned whether the one country, two systems principle, and Hong Kong's freedoms, would be eroded during integration. Lam said: "It will not blur the boundaries between the two systems, nor will it weaken Hong Kong's status as a separate customs territory. It certainly will not lead to the assimilation of Hong Kong into the mainland either."

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Hong Kong National Party ban upheld by panel which says it doesn't trust group not 'to resort to violence' in independence bid (SCMP, Feb. 22): The Hong Kong National Party's appeal against an unprecedented ban has been turned down by the city's leader and her cabinet, with officials saying they believed the outlawed party could "resort to violence or advocate violence" in pursuit of a "Republic of Hong Kong", the Post has learned. In a response to party founders Andy Chan and Jason Chow, officials said the primary objective of the party, an independent Hong Kong, was unlawful. A legal source confirmed that a three-member panel appointed by Chief Executive Carrie Lam and the Executive Council, had dismissed the appeal. The HKNP could still take the matter to court and Chan, the party leader, has previously indicated he could explore this option. Chan said he had to consult his lawyer before making a decision.

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Mainland affairs minister Patrick Nip says Hong Kong has freedom to manoeuvre when it comes to 'Greater Bay Area' plan (SCMP, Feb. 24): A top government minister has said Hong Kong has the freedom to choose how it implements China's plan for the "Greater Bay Area", as he moved to further allay any fears that the national blueprint would erode the city's autonomy. Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Patrick Nip also said while there was no way to stop talented employees moving between cities, Hong Kong could turn the national blueprint to its advantage by seizing the development

opportunities it created. When responding to repeated calls to exempt Hongkongers working in the region from paying the mainland's hefty salaries tax, Nip said there needed to be further discussion over the complicated and long-standing central government policy.

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Beijing backs city government's ban on Hong Kong National Party, leader Carrie Lam says (SCMP, Feb. 27): Beijing has for the first time requested a report from Hong Kong's leader on the banning of a separatist party, as it officially backed the tough action taken by her government. Chief Executive Carrie Lam revealed the unprecedented state letter detailing the central government's formal request, sent days after she and her cabinet turned down the Hong Kong National Party's (HKNP) appeal against the ban. Lam stressed she had never received any direct order from Beijing to ban the HKNP, and dismissed concerns about interference in the city's affairs through the official request via the formal letter. "As the chief executive, who is accountable to the central government, I have to submit reports from time to time ... that is only legitimate," she said. The letter that followed from the central government expressed support for her administration's decision.

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Change tax and money transfer rules to help Hong Kong youth embrace Greater Bay Area plan, local groups say (SCMP, Feb. 27): The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, which interviewed 522 Hongkongers aged between 18 and 39 last month, found Hong Kong's younger generation were reluctant to work in mainland cities. Some 62 per cent of those polled said they were not willing to live in any of the nine mainland cities, and 68 per cent said they were unwilling to work there. Asked about the difficulties they faced or feared, 86 per cent cited differences between Hong Kong and mainland China's legal systems, and 80 per cent cited difficulties in handling tax issues.

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International relations

Form a dedicated committee to keep an eye on Hong Kong, politicians and civic groups urge British lawmakers (SCMP, Feb. 11): British lawmakers should task a dedicated parliamentary committee with scrutinising any encroachment on Hong Kong's freedoms and autonomy, the city's former No 2 official Anson Chan and a number of groups have said. The recommendation was made by the former top official, the Civic Party, the Hong Kong Journalists Association and a coalition of 45 civic rights groups in response to a committee inquiry under the House of Commons. Since Hong Kong's handover from British rule to China in July 1997, the British foreign secretary has submitted a written report about Hong Kong to parliament, assessing the latest situation in the autonomous city. The MPs however do not have a specific committee to regularly debate Hong Kong, although they can raise oral or written questions with officials. The Chinese and Hong Kong governments have both opposed the British and US reviews, and warned that foreign governments should not interfere with internal affairs.

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Differential treatment for Hong Kong will continue even though city is stuck in middle of US-China trade war, consul general Kurt Tong says (SCMP, Feb. 14): The United States' top envoy in the city said Hong Kong would continue to enjoy differential treatment under an existing policy even though it was caught in the crossfire of the US-China trade war. Washington would honour its Hong Kong Policy Act while the city remained a special administrative region of China, consul general Kurt Tong said. Under the policy, trade tariffs against mainland China do not automatically apply to the city. "As long as it is a special administrative region of China, the US will treat Hong Kong as a special place under the law which allows it to make some differentiations in how we apply US laws to residents of Hong Kong and Hong Kong's economy," Tong said, during an event to mark the country's 175-year diplomatic history in the city.

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Legal affairs and human rights

Hong Kong police chief Stephen Lo defends two-year time limit for prosecuting offenders in controversial national anthem bill (SCMP, Feb. 3): Hong Kong's police chief Stephen Lo has defended the decision to give law enforcers up to two years to investigate abuse of China's national anthem under a proposed law. Lo said the national anthem was mainly played at large events such as on sporting occasions, where there were more people. As such, it could be difficult to complete an investigation within half a year. "We do not consider which law it is, its background or aim." Lo said the force would only look at the issue from a law enforcement angle. The commissioner also justified his support for a law to make insulting officers on duty a crime.

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Fugitives face extradition to Macau, Taiwan and mainland China under Hong Kong government proposal to amend law this year (SCMP, Feb. 13): The extradition of fugitives between Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and mainland China may be possible as early as the second half of this year under a

government proposal to amend legislation and enable the surrender of suspects in criminal cases. The policy change is aimed at plugging loopholes exposed by a homicide case in February last year in which Taiwanese authorities were unable to prosecute a Hongkonger accused of killing his pregnant girlfriend in Taipei before fleeing to Hong Kong. Taiwan's request for his surrender to stand trial on murder charges could not be processed in the absence of a formal extradition arrangement between the two jurisdictions. The amended legislation would allow Hong Kong to surrender fugitives to any jurisdiction with which the city has not entered into any bilateral extradition agreements, including Macau, Taiwan and the mainland. Hong Kong has signed extradition agreements with 20 countries, including the United States, Britain, India, Singapore and the Philippines.

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Fugitives should only be extradited to Taiwan, not mainland China, Hong Kong opposition lawmakers and lawyers' group urge government (SCMP, Feb. 14): Hong Kong's pro-democracy lawmakers and the head of the Bar Association want the government to work out an extradition arrangement with Taiwan instead of changing the law to include mainland China, Macau and other parts of the world. Their main concern is that the mainland might take advantage of the change to seek the transfer of people in Hong Kong who are wanted across the border, and the lawmakers have little faith in the legal system there. But security minister John Lee dismissed their counterproposal during a meeting with members of the Civic Party, and made clear the government would proceed with a plan to introduce a case-by-case approach for extradition requests from jurisdictions that did not have a treaty with Hong Kong.

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Eight in 10 Hongkongers would be willing to report corruption, ICAC survey finds (SCMP, Feb. 16): Eight in 10 Hongkongers say they would be willing to report corruption – a record high since the question was introduced nine years ago into an annual poll by the city's anti-graft agency. Some 98.7 per cent believed making the city corruption-free was important for its development. The agency's image remains positive among the public, according to the survey. Some 79 per cent of respondents said the ICAC's work was effective. ICAC commissioner Simon Peh said that staunch public support had helped put the city on the map as one of the most corruption-free places in the world.

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Hong Kong plan to send fugitives to mainland China not cause for human rights concerns, security minister says, as 55 countries already have extradition deals with Beijing (SCMP, Feb. 16): Hong Kong's security minister told local lawmakers not to judge through "coloured lenses" a plan to hand over fugitives to mainland China, because 55 countries already trusted Beijing enough to have signed extradition treaties. Secretary for Security John Lee defended the government's proposal to transfer suspects on a case-by-case basis to and from Taiwan, Macau, mainland China and any other jurisdiction where a formal agreement with the city was absent. Pro-democracy lawmakers have repeatedly voiced strong opposition to the plan in light of the mainland's human rights record, but Lee said the proposal was about securing justice. Legal experts previously cautioned that the proposal could place in jeopardy Hong Kong's existing treaties because the deals were based on trust in the city's legal system. But Lee said these agreements would be unaffected as suspects could not be re-extradited to a third country.

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Privacy concerns over hi-tech system to track illegal parking in Hong Kong (SCMP, Feb. 22): By the end of March, 12 surveillance cameras will be mounted on street lights at three traffic black spots in a trial scheme put forward by the Development Bureau's Energising Kowloon East Office (EKEO). As well as reading number plates, the CCTV and monitoring system will be able to identify different types of illegal parking, including double-parking and stopping on double yellow lines. But the information collected cannot currently be used in prosecutions, because the law requires that officers slap a ticket on a car, or hand it to the owner, at the time of the offence. The head of the EKEO Brenda Au said that might change. "The government's long-term goal is to be able to use technology to facilitate the police and the government in their enforcement actions," she said. She said the government would have to amend the Traffic Ordinance to remove the need for officers to issue penalty tickets on the spot, and let them issue them based on the CCTV recording.

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Taipei won't sign any extradition deal with Hong Kong if it implies Taiwan is part of China, official says (SCMP, Feb. 23): The Taipei government will not sign any extradition deal with Hong Kong that has potential implications for the one-China principle, a Taiwanese official overseeing Hong Kong affairs has said. Huang Ting-hui, who is tasked with handling affairs concerning Hong Kong, Macau, Inner Mongolia and Tibet at the Mainland Affairs Council, asked the Hong Kong government to consider the well-being of the people on both sides, noting that the city government's plan to amend laws to make it easier to extradite fugitives had already sparked public concerns in Hong Kong. The proposal comes in

the wake of a murder case last year involving a Hong Kong man who returned to the city after allegedly killing his girlfriend while they were on holiday in Taiwan.

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Proposal to hand over fugitives to mainland China, Taiwan and Macau is necessary, says Hong Kong justice minister Teresa Cheng (SCMP, Feb. 27): The city's justice chief Teresa Cheng said the government's proposal to hand over fugitives to mainland China, Taiwan and Macau was necessary to plug legal loopholes. She said the proposed plan would prevent suspects from using the city as a haven to evade justice. She met the vice-presidents of the Supreme People's Court and the director general of the Department of Treaty and Law of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. The United States' top envoy to Hong Kong warned that the proposed changes to the law could hurt bilateral arrangements for legal assistance between the city and the US if the wording of the law was not right. US Consul General Kurt Tong stressed that "the details in this kind of thing really matter". "There is a possibility that if it is structured in certain ways, then that could have some impact on the implementation of our bilateral arrangement between the US and Hong Kong," said Tong, who was quick to add: "But I don't want to prejudge that."

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Health

Answer to overcrowding in Hong Kong's public hospitals may lie in paying patients to go private, suggests doctors' group (SCMP, Feb. 3): The Hong Kong Public Doctors' Association has said the government should subsidise patients for private medical treatment while capping private health care fees, as a way of easing the pressure on the overburdened public health care system. Association representative Dr Arisina Ma said that most Hongkongers went to public hospitals for treatment, but the majority of the city's doctors worked in the private sector. By the end of 2017 there were 14,290 doctors in Hong Kong, but the public sector employs about half of them while caring for 90 per cent of inpatients. Ma's comments came as the city's public hospitals reached breaking point under the influx of patients and mounting stress during the peak flu season, with doctors and nurses staging protests last month, complaining of a lack of staff, beds and other resources.

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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam pledges to improve city's health care system as numbers suggest worst of flu season could be over (SCMP, Feb. 6): Hong Kong's top officials have pledged to offer better medical services to residents by improving primary health care and recruiting more doctors and nurses. Chief Executive Carrie Lam was speaking as latest figures suggested the worst days of the peak flu season in the city could be over. Lam added that to cater to the city's needs, the Education Bureau had been subsidising tertiary education programmes to train more nurses. "As our population is ageing, my administration emphasised the need to improve primary care, as well as to promote [the importance of] health and check-up services," she said. Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung was also asked if the government would try to make it easier to hire doctors from overseas. "We are open to the idea of making special arrangements for Hong Kong people who graduated, or are practising overseas," he said.

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Health service bureaucracy has gone too far says head of Hong Kong's oldest medical school, as he questions whether red tape is doing anything to help patients (SCMP, Feb. 13): The head of Hong Kong's oldest medical school Professor Gabriel Leung has said the Hospital Authority is too bureaucratic and questioned whether extra meetings truly benefit patients. "The bureaucracy seems to be going a bit too far," Leung said. "Should the amount of time spent on meetings, paperwork, administration or governance be reduced? The Hospital Authority should really think about it." Professor John Leong, the authority's chairman, said some of the meetings concerned important matters and were necessary. The health minister Professor Sophia Chan said the authority would also need to review its governance if frontline staff raised concerns about the process.

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Hong Kong health minister Sophia Chan compares e-cigarettes to an epidemic as she defends coming ban (SCMP, Feb. 15): Hong Kong's health minister likened the e-cigarette trend to an epidemic, as she defended the government's push to remove alternative cigarettes from the market, saying they posed new challenges to the authorities' drive to deter teenagers from picking up smoking. The government announced that it planned to amend the Smoking Ordinance to ban any import, sale and promotion of new smoking products, including e-cigarettes, heat-not-burn products and herbal cigarettes. Chan said that after years of smoke control measures, the city's smoking rate had dropped to about 10 per cent.

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Environment

Is there something fishy going on, or is Hong Kong government really trying to revive an ailing industry? (SCMP, Feb. 11): The Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department is proposing to tighten licence requirements for fish farmers. This, on top of lifting a cap on new licences and the addition of four new culture zones to the existing 26. But drawing most ire is a proposal to require licensed fish farmers to maintain fish cages in at least 70 per cent of an entire licensed mariculture site. For each square metre, they must ensure a density of at least 10kg of fish. "These new rules will basically mean losing their licences," said Wong Yung-kan, a former fisheries sector lawmaker and representative. Wong harbours suspicions that it is all an elaborate government ploy to kill the industry with regulation so it can carry out land reclamation unimpeded. But fisheries authorities have a different assessment. "It's not that we want to take back their licences. We just want to ensure better use of public resources," said Mickey Lai, assistant director for fisheries at the department.

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Will Hong Kong's largest private recycling plant solve woes over plastic bottles waste? (SCMP, Feb. 18): Hong Kong's largest private plastics processing and recycling plant is expected to start taking in discarded drink bottles and turning them into safe materials that can be used with food products next year. Alba Group, the German recycling giant tasked with running the proposed facility in Tuen Mun's EcoPark, said the plant would be the first of its scale to turn two common forms of household plastic waste into non-toxic recycled material. Edwin Lau of The Green Earth, an environmental advocacy group, said money could buy the best sorting and processing technology in the world but at the end of the day it was all about how to recover and collect the waste from the community.

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Hong Kong landfill redevelopment scheme hits setback as NGO pulls out (SCMP, Feb. 21): A government scheme to redevelop Hong Kong's closed landfills into spaces for recreational use by paying welfare groups to carry out the work has suffered another blow. Christian Family Service Centre had plans to build a community centre on Ma Yau Tong Central Landfill, but has ditched the project because of cost concerns. However, the Environmental Protection Department announced a funding agreement with another charity, Tung Wah Group of Hospitals (TWGHs), to set up a green education camp on top of Tseung Kwan O Stage 1 Landfill in Sai Kung. There are 13 closed landfills in Hong Kong restored between 1997 and 2006. The government has already converted six into spaces for public use.

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Work on huge Lantau reclamation scheme won't start until environmental safety is confirmed, senior Hong Kong official Liu Chun-san says (SCMP, Feb. 27): A controversial plan to build a cluster of artificial islands off Lantau will not start until it has been confirmed that the project does not have a detrimental environmental impact, according to Undersecretary for Development Liu Chun-san. "Only after confirming that there will be no unacceptable impact on the environment can we start construction," Liu said. "We will actively study more environmentally friendly ways of reclamation, in the hopes of doing better than what the law requires, so people do not need to worry." But Liu's response failed to impress environmentalists, including members of the Save Lantau Alliance, who said the work would damage the marine ecosystem.

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Culture and education

Record numbers from mainland China and Hong Kong apply to study in UK (SCMP, Feb. 7): Record numbers of students from mainland China and Hong Kong are applying for places at British universities, overtaking the number of applicants from Wales, according to official figures. The number of applications from China and Hong Kong rose from more than 17,000 last year to 21,000 this year. Last year there were also more than 100,000 postgraduate students from China and Hong Kong at British universities, out of nearly 350,000 full-time postgraduates.

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China moon landing scientists at Hong Kong Polytechnic University urge youngsters to join hi-tech revolution with career in manufacturing (SCMP, Feb. 18): Scientists at Hong Kong Polytechnic University involved in China's latest moon landing Chang'e 4 robotic probe have urged young people planning their futures to ride on the coattails of the city's aspirations for reindustrialisation and innovation. "If Hong Kong is able to develop its high-value-added manufacturing, we will not have to rely on other companies or countries, and can also speed up overall production times," Professor Alex Wai, PolyU's vice-president for research and development, said. PolyU was the only university from Hong Kong involved in the Chang'e mission, Wai added. Wai said PolyU had been pushing for more advanced manufacturing courses to offer its engineers, designers, scientists and technologists on campus.

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Three universities in Hong Kong make it into the top 10 (SCMP, Feb. 21): Tsinghua University in Beijing has unseated the National University of Singapore (NUS) to become the first institution in mainland China to be ranked No 1 in the Asia-Pacific region, according to a study released by Times Higher Education. Three universities in Hong Kong made it into the top 10. At No 4 was Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST). The University of Hong Kong remained in fifth place. Chinese University rose to the No 9 spot. The Asia-Pacific rankings comprised a total of 320 tertiary institutions from across 13 countries and regions, including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

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Society

Low-income households to get subsidies for digital TV sets when Hong Kong's analogue era draws to a close next year (SCMP, Feb. 12): Hong Kong will finally pull the plug on analogue television services by the end of next year, eight years after the original target date as it catches up with the global trend of going fully digital. That means some 180,000 lower-income households still dependent on their analogue TV sets will have no choice but to upgrade, while the big switch-off on December 1, 2020 is expected to free up the spectrum to meet the ever-increasing demand for high value-added mobile telecoms services. Around 160,000 of those affected households will be eligible for government subsidies to buy digital TV sets, or a set-top box to get a digital signal if they insist on holding on to their analogue TVs.

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Hong Kong's leader orders full review of monitoring system for mega bridge after late documents scandal (SCMP, Feb. 13): Hong Kong's leader has ordered a thorough review of the monitoring system for the newly opened mega bridge and gave her reassurance the world's longest sea crossing is safe after controversy surfaced over missing inspection papers. Chief Executive Carrie Lam said she had instructed transport officials, including Secretary for Transport and Housing Frank Chan and Highways Department chief Jimmy Chan, to assess construction checks and determine if there was room for improvement. China State Construction Engineering (Hong Kong), which was tasked with building an HK\$8.88 billion (US\$1.13 billion) connecting road to the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, was found to have failed to submit more than 10,000 safety documents on time.

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