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Economy + Finance

Revival of Hong Kong retail scene underlined by modest yearly return to growth (SCMP, Feb. 2): An economic boom and rising tourist numbers resulted in Hong Kong retail sales returning to modest growth of 2.2 per cent last year, officially spelling the end of a years-long spending chill. Thomson Cheng,

chairman of the Retail Management Association, forecast a positive outlook for retail sales this year with 3-4 per cent growth, or even better at 5 per cent. But Cheng admitted that the good retail performance would also bring rising rents. Last year visitor numbers to Hong Kong rose 3.2 per cent to more than 58 million, with mainland tourists accounting for 44 million, up 3.9 per cent. Cheng predicted the number of mainland visitors would continue to rise this year due to the coming opening of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge and the high speed rail link to the mainland.

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Hong Kong trumps Singapore again to be world's freest economy for 24th year straight, US think tank says (SCMP, Feb. 3): Hong Kong was ranked the world's freest economy for the 24th straight year by the Heritage Foundation which also downplayed the risk of a Sino-US trade war. Hong Kong scored high in the four areas taken into account by the index: rule of law, government size, regulatory efficiency, and open markets. Paul Chan, Hong Kong's financial secretary, welcomed the ranking. The government would forge "closer economic and trade ties with other economies" to enhance the city's position as "an international financial, transportation and trade centre," Chan said.

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Extra land 'not enough' to solve Hong Kong's housing crisis without more subsidised homes (SCMP, Feb. 6): Increasing land supply will not be enough to solve Hong Kong's housing crisis if more subsidised flats are not built, experts said as construction work began on a major reclamation project to create space for nearly 50,000 homes. The call for more affordable housing came as the city's finance minister attended a ceremony to break ground on the HK\$20.5 billion (US\$2.62 billion) project to reclaim 130 hectares off the northern coast of Lantau Island. The first residents are scheduled to move in by 2023 or 2024.

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Close to one in five ethnic minority individuals in Hong Kong are living in poverty, government report shows (SCMP, Feb. 8): Poverty among ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong has worsened, with almost one in five people living below the breadline, according to a government report. The data showed the poverty rate among ethnic minorities hit 19.4 per cent in 2016, up from 15.8 per cent in 2011. Even after taking government subsidies or welfare allowances into account, some 36,800 ethnic minority individuals were living under the poverty line, with a poverty rate of 14.5 per cent. Hong Kong draws its poverty line at half the median monthly household income according to household size. Those living below the line are considered poor.

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'We're watching you,' regulator warns Hong Kong cryptocurrency exchanges (SCMP, Feb. 9): Hong Kong's cryptocurrency exchanges have been warned that regulators are watching them closely after investors complained of practices ranging from market manipulation to misappropriation of assets. The Securities and Futures Commission said it has sent letters to all seven digital currency platforms as well as firms attempting to raise funds through initial coin offerings (ICOs), warning that they are ready to pass cases of potential fraud to the police for investigation. Ashley Alder, the SFC's chief executive, added: "We will continue to police the market and enforce when necessary."

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Hong Kong to liberalise rules for cross-media ownership in first major broadcasting policy change in 17 years (SCMP, Feb. 20): Cross-media ownership rules in Hong Kong will finally be liberalised under proposed changes to broadcasting regulations widely viewed as outdated since they have remained unchanged for 17 years. If the suggested changes, laid out in a public consultation document by the government, are approved by the Legislative Council, newspaper owners, advertising agencies and other media companies will be able to get into the free TV, pay TV or radio broadcasting business. They had previously been banned from cross-media holdings to avoid editorial uniformity and a potential industry monopoly, but a rapidly changing media landscape and technological advances have prompted a total rethink.

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More than 60 million tourists expected in Hong Kong in 2018 as officials pin hopes on projects linking city to mainland China (SCMP, Feb. 20): More than 60 million tourists are expected to pour into Hong Kong this year, marking a 3.6 per cent uptick year on year as officials hope two cross-border links will help bring in visitors from mainland China when the projects open later this year. Tourism is regarded as one of the four pillars of Hong Kong's economy, contributing 4.7 per cent to the city's gross domestic product in 2016. But the sector's heavy reliance on mainland tourists, who comprise 76 per cent of all visitors to the city last year, has raised concerns about the sustainability of such a ratio. Tourism Board executive director Anthony Lau stressed that Hong Kong could no longer position itself solely as a shopping hub, saying changing consumer behaviour and a boom in online retailers posed

challenges to bricks-and-mortar shops.

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Four top North American universities eye Hong Kong as regional base for stem cell research

(SCMP, Feb. 26): An industry source said Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Johns Hopkins University in the United States, and Waterloo University in Canada, would like to form a consortium in Hong Kong to engage in biotechnology research and development. Another source close to the government confirmed that the four universities, which are leaders in stem cell research, had met Chief Executive Carrie Lam and expressed their interest in boosting scientific research in Hong Kong. It is understood Lam pledged to offer support to their joint project, and facilitate the setting up of their research centre at the Science Park in Sha Tin. They came up with the joint initiative after seeing the success of Sweden's Karolinska Institute in establishing a research centre at the Science Park.

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Hong Kong may renegotiate fees with Disneyland after park posts HK\$345 million loss, minister says

(SCMP, Feb. 27): Hong Kong Disneyland's financial performance has not met expectations and the government may renegotiate management fees the park charges it, the city's commerce minister Edward Yau said. The resort last week reported a loss of HK\$345 million for 2017 due to park expansion and asset depreciation. That was despite revenue of HK\$5.1 billion – the second best figure since the park opened in 2005. The government holds 53 per cent of the theme park's shares. As the park manager Hong Kong Disneyland charges the owners a management fee. The minister said he understood concerns about investing public resources in the theme park. He said the government would maintain its negotiations with Disney.

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Hong Kong condemns US plan to impose tariffs on aluminium and steel as 'discriminatory act'

(SCMP, Feb. 28): Hong Kong's government and industry players lashed out at Washington's plan to impose heavy tariffs on aluminium imports from mainland China and the city, which has been dragged into escalating Sino-US trade tensions. Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development Edward Yau slammed a proposed 23.6 per cent tariff targeting the city, saying the government had voiced its opposition to the US consul general. "The Hong Kong government disapproves of this proposed action by the US government. We consider this is a unilateral and discriminatory act which is based on unfounded allegations," Yau said. Yau said Hong Kong's export of aluminium products was about HK\$30 million (US\$3.8 million) in the first 10 months of last year, which accounted for less than 0.2 per cent of the total import of such products in the US. Raymond Yeung, a chief economist with ANZ bank, said the US decision to put Hong Kong, an independent member of the World Trade Organisation, and mainland China on the same list was to plug loopholes. "Hong Kong does not manufacture aluminium, it only re-exports the material," he said.

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Bumper tax benefits for 1.88 million Hongkongers thanks to record HK\$138 billion surplus, Paul Chan reveals in budget speech

(SCMP, Feb. 28): Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan rolled out the city's budget at the Legislative Council, delivering the administration's first formal address on fiscal policy since Chief Executive Carrie Lam kicked off her five-year term last July. Chan detailed measures to diversify Hong Kong's economy, enhance people's lives, nurture talent, increase land resources and help the poor and the elderly. With a record-breaking HK\$138 billion surplus, Chan announced a series of salary and profit tax rebates and rates waivers, which were relatively more generous compared to last year. Tax allowances were also increased. Chan expects the city to record surpluses in the next five financial years, with a "small deficit" surfacing beginning in the 2021/22 year. Fiscal reserves are estimated to reach HK\$1,223 billion by March 2023 – enough to cover 21 months of government expenditure.

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Domestic politics

Joshua Wong and other Occupy leaders nominated for Nobel Peace Prize by US congressmen

(SCMP, Feb. 2): The names of Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Alex Chow, as well as the entire campaign popularly known as the "umbrella movement", were put forward to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in Oslo by a group of 12 US congressmen. This is the first time there has been a nominee from Hong Kong. But the news is likely to cause fury in Beijing, which sees the West's support of the Hong Kong democracy movement as interference in China's domestic affairs. The submission was made "in recognition of [the trio's] peaceful efforts to bring political reform and self-determination to Hong Kong and protect the autonomy and freedom guaranteed Hong Kong in the Sino-British Joint Declaration", according to a letter by the congressmen to the committee.

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Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam hits out at US congressmen over Joshua Wong's Nobel nomination (SCMP, Feb. 3): Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam hit out at a group of American congressmen who nominated activist Joshua Wong and two allies for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying that it was "regrettable for foreign politicians to meddle with the city's affairs". China's foreign ministry urged the congressmen to "stop meddling" in the country's internal affairs, while Hong Kong's pro-establishment legislators warned that the nomination would do more harm than good. Lam said: "The Nobel Prize is an international prize respected by people around the world. It is regrettable that foreign politicians are using [it], apparently for political intervention ... and to send political messages." She said "everyone knows the nature" of Occupy as the city's courts had issued judgments on some activists.
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China 'still needs Hong Kong in its development', says No 3 leader Zhang Dejiang (SCMP, Feb. 3): Hong Kong would continue to play a crucial role as China opens up economically, the country's No 3 official said, stressing that the central government would never forget the city's "historic contribution" to the nation's development. Striking an optimistic note despite recent tensions over pro-independence movements in the city and the controversial enforcement of mainland laws in the West Kowloon high-speed train terminal, Zhang Dejiang said China needed Hong Kong and would continue to help it. "Nowadays, as the nation is going to become fully open ... Hong Kong will continue to play a vital role [in which it] is difficult to be replaced," the chief of the National People's Congress said in Beijing's Great Hall of the People. "In the nation's development, we will always need Hong Kong and [will] help the city in making accomplishments."
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Opposition to controversial national security law could become new reason for Legco election ban, Beijing adviser says (SCMP, Feb.6): The rules on who can be barred from running for Hong Kong's legislature are unclear, Lau Siu-kai, vice-chairman of The Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, acknowledged and added that even opposition to a controversial national security law might get a candidate rejected. "China has made it clear that it is losing tolerance for political forces or figures who do not respect China's constitution and Hong Kong's Basic Law to enter the local political arena and promote their advocacy – especially Hong Kong independence and separatism – in the Legislative Council." "The returning officer of course has to shoulder the responsibility [for the decision to disqualify the candidate]. But I believe the officer had to consider the stance of the Hong Kong government, and the Hong Kong government had to consider the stance of the central government, although by law the decision could be made only by the officer," he said.
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Election ban rules 'very clear', Carrie Lam insists, but says government will 'seriously consider' clarifying them if needed (SCMP, Feb. 7): Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has insisted that the current rules for disqualifying election candidates are "very clear". But the chief executive also said that "if there [was] a need to clarify the rules and the criteria by amending local legislation", the government would "seriously consider" doing so. Since last month, Hong Kong's electoral officers have banned three activists from running in the Legislative Council by-election in March on the grounds that they were not considered to be "genuinely and truly intending to uphold the Basic Law", the city's mini-constitution.
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Liaison office chief praises Hong Kong and promises to be more transparent and welcoming (SCMP, Feb. 7): Wang Zhimin, director of the central government's representative office in Hong Kong, praised Hongkongers for becoming "more reasonable and mature" and promised that his office would be more transparent and welcoming in serving them. Wang said the city had witnessed remarkable progress in the successful implementation of "one country, two systems" – Beijing's governing principle for Hong Kong. He also praised Chief Executive Carrie Lam for leading the administration. "Harmony in a family brings success to everything," he said. The liaison office's role is often seen as a controversial, with opposition pan-democrat legislators accusing it of meddling, describing it as the "Western district (where the Liaison Office is located) ruling Hong Kong".
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Anson Chan slams Hong Kong's 'naked political screening' as she receives US justice prize (SCMP, Feb. 11): The recent election ban on young Hong Kong activist Agnes Chow is no different from "naked political screening of a pro-democracy candidate", the city's former No 2 official said as she urged the international community to speak out and protect the former British colony's freedoms. Anson Chan also said China should accept that global support for Hong Kong's special position does not constitute "interference" by the West. Chan, who served as the city's chief secretary from 1993 to 2001, was speaking in the United States as she received the annual O'Connor Justice Prize for her work in advancing social justice in the city. She is the prize's fourth recipient, following former US president Jimmy Carter. A Hong Kong government spokesman hit out at Chan's remarks, saying there was no

question of any political censorship or restriction of the right to stand for elections.

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Hong Kong election officials can block candidates based on political views but must ensure clear evidence, court rules (SCMP, Feb. 14): A Hong Kong court ruled against a pro-independence activist Andy Chan in a landmark case, determining that election officials could ban candidates because of their political views but only when presented with “cogent, clear and compelling” evidence they would not uphold the Basic Law. To come to such a conclusion, returning officers must give aspirants a “reasonable opportunity” to respond to their concerns, the judge said in a ruling with legal ramifications on the recent disbarment of election candidates such as activist Joshua Wong’s comrade Agnes Chow. Andy Chan, convenor of the Hong Kong National Party, was among several aspirants banned from the 2016 Legislative Council elections because the returning officer decided he did not mean what he pledged in the declaration over the Basic Law.

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Hong Kong Bar Association laments ‘political screening’ of election candidates (SCMP, Feb. 15): Hong Kong’s newly elected Bar Association lamented the “political screening” of election candidates after the High Court ruled that civil servants seconded to the electoral authority have the power to ban those they determine will not uphold the Basic Law. It also raised concerns about the recent disqualification of student activist Agnes Chow by a returning officer from the Electoral Affairs Commission from running in the coming by-election on March 11, pointing to the same judgment stipulating that aspirants must be given a chance to defend themselves before such a determination is made. The Bar Association said it was concerned about the disbarment of an election candidate on the basis of political party association or political beliefs by a civil servant under “closed-door inquiry”.

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Hong Kong prosecutors ‘still not decided’ whether to charge CY Leung over HK\$50 million UGL deal (SCMP, Feb. 18): The Department of Justice said it had not decided whether to prosecute former Hong Kong leader Leung Chun-ying over the undeclared HK\$50 million he received from an Australian firm around the time he took office, saying reports that it had dropped the case were inaccurate. Leung’s failure to declare his deal with engineering firm UGL sparked controversy when it came to light in 2014. The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) and the Legislative Council investigated the deal for possible conflicts of interest.

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Election laws in Hong Kong to be reviewed after court upholds ban on localist candidates (SCMP, Feb. 19): A review of Hong Kong’s electoral laws will be conducted in the wake of a recent court ruling which affirmed officials’ power to ban candidates from elections because of their political views, the city’s constitutional affairs chief Patrick Nip said. He also welcomed the judgment handed down by the High Court on the election petition filed by Andy Chan, the convenor of the Hong Kong National Party, who was barred from the 2016 Legislative Council elections on the grounds that he advocated independence for the city. Nip said the requirements imposed on people running for public office or Legco were different from ones on ordinary citizens as it was crucial for those in office to uphold the mini-constitution and to pledge allegiance to the Hong Kong special administrative region.

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Calls for Hong Kong self-determination as unlawful as independence talk, senior Beijing official says (SCMP, Feb. 23): A senior Beijing official said that calls for “self-determination” were no different from the advocacy of Hong Kong independence, and the recent election bans issued by the city’s officials were totally in line with the law. Li Fei, chairman of the Basic Law Committee under China’s top legislative body, the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, made the remarks almost a month after Demosisto’s Agnes Chow was banned from contesting the Legislative Council by-election in March on the grounds of her party’s calls for self-determination. Two other aspirants were also barred after failing to convince election officers that they had changed their stance on independence. Li said talk of self-determination was in breach of the Basic Law, the city’s mini-constitution, and on par with the promotion of independence.

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Liberals in Hong Kong fear for city’s future as China falls back on strongman rule (SCMP, Feb. 27): According to state news agency Xinhua, the ruling Communist Party proposed removing from the constitution the line that states the president and vice-president “shall serve no more than two consecutive terms”, which would effectively pave the way for President Xi Jinping to stay in office beyond his second term. The proposal is to be considered by the national legislature next month. Some politicians and China watchers fear Xi’s uncompromising stance will mean an ever greater emphasis on one country rather than two systems, and upon restrictions on the rights and freedoms that Hongkongers

currently enjoy. Economists meanwhile believe it may benefit the city's economic development in the short term, assured as it would be of several key Beijing initiatives to boost its prospects.

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International relations

Britain and Canada weigh in on Hong Kong activist Agnes Chow's by-election disqualification as third candidate barred (SCMP, Feb. 2): Britain and Canada weighed in on the row over the disqualification of Hong Kong activist Agnes Chow from the city's coming legislative by-elections. A spokesman for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office said: "We are concerned by the rejection of Agnes Chow's nomination for the forthcoming Legislative Council by-election. The right to stand for election is a fundamental right enshrined in Article 26 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) and the Hong Kong Bill of Rights." On its Facebook page, the Canadian consulate in Hong Kong said: "Canada is concerned that barring candidates from standing for election because of their political beliefs is inconsistent with democratic norms which have been widely considered part of Hong Kong's system. When asked for comment, a spokeswoman for the US consulate in Hong Kong reiterated the country's support for the city's high degree of autonomy, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In response to the British statement, a Hong Kong government spokesman said Chow's disqualification was made in accordance with the law. In Beijing, Zhang Xiaoming, director of the State Council's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, also said the decision was done "in accordance with the law".

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Sweden condemns China's 'brutal' seizing of Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai and demands his release (SCMP, Feb. 6): Stockholm demanded the release of Gui Minhai and condemned Beijing over the "brutal" seizure of the Hong-Kong-based book publisher while he was in mainland China accompanied by Swedish diplomats. Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom said the "brutal intervention" against Swedish consular support for Gui last month took place "despite China's repeated assurances" that he "was free at that time". Gui, a Swedish citizen, was arrested on a train to Beijing while being assisted by two Swedish diplomats – the second time he has disappeared in murky circumstances into Chinese custody. Gui, one of five Hong Kong-based booksellers known for publishing gossipy titles about Chinese political leaders, first vanished in 2015 while on holiday in Thailand.

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37 EU politicians demand Beijing 'unconditionally' release detained Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai (SCMP, Feb. 24): Thirty-seven members of the European Parliament demanded President Xi Jinping "immediately and unconditionally" release detained Hong Kong bookseller Gui Minhai, insisting that while they valued closer ties with China, they would not sacrifice their citizens' safety. "[The members] are writing to express our strong condemnation of the arrest and continued detention of Swedish citizen Gui Minhai, and to urge you to immediately and unconditionally release him," a letter said. Earlier this month, China's Ministry of Public Security confirmed it had detained Gui. Gui was among five Hong Kong booksellers who went missing in 2015 and later turned up on the mainland at different times, claiming they had gone there voluntarily.

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Legal affairs and human rights

Five pan-democrats cleared in corruption probe over payments from media mogul Jimmy Lai (SCMP, Feb. 2): Five pan-democrats at the centre of a corruption probe over their suspected failure to declare interests after receiving donations from media tycoon Jimmy Lai have been cleared of any wrongdoing. The five are former legislative councillors Lee Cheuk-yan of the Labour Party and Alan Leong of the Civic Party; and three incumbent lawmakers: James To of the Democratic Party, Tanya Chan of the Civic Party, and non-affiliated Claudia Mo, also formerly with the Civic Party. They were accused of receiving donations from Lai and his assistant Mark Simon during 2012 to 2014, without making declarations to the Legislative Council as required.

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Appeal ruling for Hong Kong democracy activist Joshua Wong could have 'chilling effect' on social activism (SCMP, Feb. 7): A judgment delivered by Hong Kong's top court as it set free three young pro-democracy activists drew mixed reactions from legal experts, with one saying it could have a "chilling effect" on future protests, while another praised it for making clear that the law could not be applied retrospectively. The Court of Final Appeal quashed jail terms for Joshua Wong and two allies imposed by a lower appeal court on August 17 last year. The five judges said that while they agreed with the lower court's stricter sentencing guidelines for unlawful protests, it was inappropriate to apply these to the three men and impose jail time on them for storming a government complex in the run-up to the 2014 pro-democracy Occupy protests. But future protesters found guilty of unlawful assemblies involving violence, even if it was of a low degree, would likely be sent to jail. Professor Michael Davis, formerly with the University of Hong Kong's law school, said the ruling in principle should have no

negative effect on non-violent rallies in Hong Kong but it may inadvertently have a “chilling effect” on people who wanted to participate in protests. He also acknowledged concerns that authorities may use these tougher guidelines to silence political opposition. University of Hong Kong principal law lecturer Eric Cheung said a significant takeaway from this judgment was how it made clear that in a common law system like Hong Kong’s, laws could not be applied retrospectively.

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Judge quashes domestic helper’s bid for change to ‘live-in’ rule in Hong Kong (SCMP, Feb. 15):

A domestic helper lost Hong Kong’s first judicial review of the government requirement that she and 370,000 workers like her must live with their employers. “It cannot seriously be argued that the imposition of the live-in requirement would directly constitute, or give rise to, a violation of the [foreign domestic helpers’] fundamental rights,” the judge Anderson Chow wrote in a judgment. “If, after coming to work in Hong Kong, the foreign domestic helper finds it unacceptable, for any reason, to reside in his/her employer’s residence, it is well within his/her right or power to terminate the employment.”

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Right to peaceful assembly and expression in Hong Kong in decline, damning Amnesty International report finds (SCMP, Feb. 23):

Hong Kong’s human rights situation is getting worse, non-profit group Amnesty International said, claiming the city’s rights to peaceful assembly and expression have come under threat. In an annual report reviewing the human rights situation in the city last year, the organisation said authorities had taken a hard line against protesters and activists. The report also pointed out that the implementation of the city’s Public Order Ordinance had led to criticism by the UN Human Rights Committee for failing to meet international human rights laws.

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Health

Authorities to follow up on plasticiser levels found in Hong Kong cooking oil and Chinese white wine (SCMP, Feb. 3):

Health officials played down safety concerns but called for better packaging after finding levels of plasticiser in food samples that warranted follow-up measures. They said there were no health issues if normal portions of the affected food were consumed. The Centre for Food Safety collected 317 samples from about 100 types of food and tested for seven types of plasticisers. Some 98 per cent of samples contained at least one type of plasticiser. While levels of plasticisers in most of the tested food samples were low, the amount in two cooking oil samples and two Chinese white wine samples were found to be beyond the centre’s actionable levels – the point at which risk assessments and follow-up action would be taken by authorities.

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Education chief says Hong Kong school closures for pupils’ health, but parents still unhappy with sudden call (SCMP, Feb. 8):

The government announced that the Lunar New Year holiday for pupils at kindergartens, primary schools and special schools would start on Feb. 8, to prevent the spread of the flu. Kindergartens and primary schools under the English Schools Foundation would also be closed, it was announced. But some parents said the sudden change of plans had disrupted their arrangements, and complained that they had nowhere else to send their children. The Social Welfare Department said centres providing childcare and after-school programmes would stay open for those in need.

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To fill flu vaccine shortage, Hong Kong officials consider doses meant for southern hemisphere (SCMP, Feb. 13):

Hong Kong health officials could introduce flu vaccines intended for the southern hemisphere in light of the city’s flu vaccine shortage this year, with private doctors saying they had no more of the immunity-fighting substance for their patients. The possibility arose after the Department of Health already bought 44,000 extra doses of flu vaccines for a government scheme over the past three weeks. However, the shortage in the private medical sector has yet to be relieved. The Medical Association described the shortage as “acute” and said “many doctors” did not get the vaccines for their patients. Centre for Health Protection controller Dr Wong Ka-hing said the panel had agreed that doses meant for the southern hemisphere could be used to address the city’s shortage.

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Hong Kong on alert after China confirms world’s first human case of H7N4 bird flu (SCMP, Feb. 15):

Mainland China has confirmed the world’s first human case of a virulent bird flu strain, prompting Hong Kong’s Centre for Health Protection to issue an alert for the city. The centre said health authorities confirmed this month that a woman in Jiangsu province had been infected with H7N4 avian influenza. The woman was admitted to hospital on New Year’s Day and was discharged on January 22. The centre reminded Hongkongers heading to the mainland or other affected areas for the Lunar New Year to avoid visiting wet markets, live poultry markets or farms. Anybody with symptoms should notify their doctor for

prompt diagnosis and treatment, the spokesman said.

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Hong Kong's 'war on flu' rages on as hospitals brace for surge in patients after Lunar New Year break (SCMP, Feb. 19): Hong Kong's public hospitals are bracing for a rush of patients after the Lunar New Year holiday, with the official in charge declaring a "protracted war" against influenza that could last until the end of May. Hospital Authority chief executive Dr Leung Pak-yin's warned of the fight ahead as the dean of Chinese University's medical school, in separate comments, likened overcrowded public hospital wards to "wet markets" and "battlefields", after visiting one with his students. The overall occupancy rate of medical inpatient beds was 111 per cent on Feb. 18.

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Early school break pays off as flu outbreaks drop at Hong Kong institutions (SCMP, Feb. 23): Flu outbreaks at Hong Kong institutions have dropped significantly after schools closed in advance of the Lunar New Year holiday, according to health officials who called for continued vigilance as pupils return to classes in end February. Authorities closed all kindergartens, primary schools and special-needs schools from February 8 days ahead of the holiday in an effort to contain the spread of flu which has hit children hard. The step seems to have paid off, with the Centre for Health Protection saying that the number of flu outbreaks in institutions dropped from 115 involving 625 people in the week ending February 3 to just 28 affecting 151 people in the week ending February 17.

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Environment

Hongkongers appetite for reef fish 'unsustainable', study shows (SCMP, Feb. 1): Hongkongers appetite for reef fish such as grouper could mean such dishes will be gone from diners' tables in the next couple of decades, according to a new study. Environmentalists and academics warned the city, known as a "food paradise", will fail to create a sustainable trade chain and marine environment if it continues its current trading and eating pattern. The green activists also criticised the government for its "outdated" regulations on the trade of live reef fish, which allow for their import and export. The study was jointly released by the University of Hong Kong's Swire Institute of Marine Sciences, ADM Capital Foundation and the WWF Coral Triangle Programme.

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Why Hong Kong's ban on ivory trade is such a big deal (SCMP, Feb. 2): Hong Kong's Legislative Council voted to phase out the city's domestic ivory trade, hammering one of the last nails in the coffin of a historic but controversial industry. The move was welcomed by local and international conservationists, given the city's reputation as a transit and smuggling hub for illegal wildlife products, but blasted by traders and craftsmen who saw it as a clampdown on a legal, tightly regulated industry steeped in traditional Chinese culture. All licences to trade legal ivory stocks issued, extended, renewed or varied before the end of 2016 will expire by default by December 30, 2021.

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With Hong Kong struggling to meet emission targets, village leaders are keen for solar energy. But they say the government needs to offer incentives first (SCMP, Feb. 19): Hong Kong's rural patriarchs are lobbying for tax concessions and relaxed regulations on building structures for villagers who are willing to invest in cleaner – but more expensive – solar energy. Their calls come as the city struggles to meet its target of reducing carbon emissions by up to 36 per cent per capita by 2030, from 2005 levels. Local electricity generation is by far the biggest contributor, making up about 70 per cent of carbon emissions. Dr Daphne Mah, director of the Asian Energy Studies Centre at Baptist University, urged the government to follow overseas examples and offer financial help to households to promote a switch to solar power.

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Dispose e-waste with care: Hong Kong to start 'producer pays' scheme for 70,000 tonnes generated in city annually (SCMP, Feb. 23): The rules for disposing electrical and electronic appliances in Hong Kong will get stricter as a "producer pays" scheme takes effect in August to tackle the 70,000 tonnes of e-waste generated locally per year, officials said. The producer responsibility scheme, whose enabling legislation and subsidiary laws were passed in 2015 and 2016, aims to promote recycling as well as the proper disposal of electrical and electronic equipment waste. It does so by making suppliers and sellers pay for the collection, handling and disposal of old, unwanted appliances. The charges have been set at HK\$15 (US\$1.90) per item for computers, printers and scanners, HK\$45 for monitors, HK\$125 for washing machines and air-conditioning units, and HK\$165 for television sets and refrigerators. Sellers must pay the government on a quarterly basis.

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Electric car industry ‘demoralised’ by Hong Kong government policy after tax waiver capped, legislator says (SCMP, Feb. 27): Hong Kong lawmakers expressed doubts about the city’s policy on electric cars, including its prioritisation of commercial over private vehicles and limited tax incentives for buyers. The tax waivers were instrumental in helping boost the city’s private electric car fleet from just 69 in April 2011 to 10,588 by April last year. But the move by the government to cap the tax break at HK\$97,500 last year has slowed this growth. Only 110 new electric vehicles have been registered since the cap was implemented. Undersecretary for the Environment Tse Chin-wan said the government was targeting commercial electric vehicles more than private ones because the former made up 95 per cent of vehicular emissions, including of PM10 respiratory suspended particulates and nitrogen oxides. “As for the [tax waiver] arrangement, which expires on March 31, we are reviewing it with due consideration given to views and suggestions. More details will be provided in the budget on Feb. 28,” Tse said.

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Culture and education

Planners reject British school’s campus on Hong Kong waterfront (SCMP, Feb. 3): The Town Planning Board decided to uphold its previous ruling that Mount Kelly School could not use a 22,000 sq ft site at the Cheung Kei Centre in Hung Hom for five years while renovating and expanding its campus in Tsim Sha Tsui. According to the school’s development plan, a temporary campus would have enabled it to reach its enrolment target of 400 pupils by 2021, instead of having to wait until the Tsim Sha Tsui campus is completed in 2023. Without the temporary campus, the school can only admit 150 pupils in 2021, to study at the unfinished Tsim Sha Tsui site.

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Three Hong Kong universities in top 10 on Times Higher Education Asian rankings (SCMP, Feb. 7): Three Hong Kong universities are among the top 10 institutions in the region in this year’s Times Higher Education Asian University Rankings – a first for the city – but the rankings publisher warned of a widening gap between the city’s elite and second-tier universities. In the ranking, the University of Hong Kong and University of Science and Technology each rose one place to fourth and fifth, respectively. Chinese University made its debut in the top 10 after climbing four places to seventh. On average, Hong Kong’s institutions achieved a significantly higher score for research this year and the city as a whole also achieved a very high score on the international outlook pillar, according to the rankings publisher.

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Ditch ‘stressful’ competency exams for 8-year-old pupils once and for all, Hong Kong parents demand (SCMP, Feb. 8): Parents and lawmakers pressed the government to scrap the Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) notorious for stressing out Primary Three pupils and warned that they would “escalate actions” if their demands were not met, though they stopped short of saying they would boycott the assessment. Concern group Parents United of Hong Kong and lawmakers held a press conference to announce they were petitioning the government to cancel this year’s BCA and instead conduct discussions on whether to continue with the test in the long run. It was signed by 29 lawmakers from across the political spectrum, including five pro-establishment legislators such as Regina Ip of the New People’s Party and Abraham Razack of the Business and Professionals Alliance.

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Troubled West Kowloon Cultural District to seek extra HK\$11.7 billion for deficits next 15 years (SCMP, Feb. 9): Hong Kong’s multibillion-dollar West Kowloon Cultural District was called a “fiscal abyss” as its board planned to issue bonds or borrow loans to fill a funding gap of HK\$11.7 billion (US\$1.5 billion) in the face of deepening deficits for up to the next 15 years. Permanent Secretary for Home Affairs Betty Fung noted the authority would not balance its books for the next 10 to 15 years.

“But when the district’s commercial facilities such as retail, hotel and offices are running in full swing, we believe the project could generate profits,” she said.

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Chinese-language help for Hong Kong’s ethnic minority pupils lacks transparency, NGO finds (SCMP, Feb. 26): Some schools in Hong Kong that get government funding to help their ethnic minority pupils learn Chinese were lacking in transparency and accountability, an NGO said. The local advocacy group Unison called on officials to boost their monitoring to ensure funding information was available to the public and non-Chinese speaking parents of pupils. An Education Bureau spokeswoman said it was discussing with the sector how to make it easier for parents of non-Chinese-speaking pupils to choose schools for their children.

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Macau

Macau proposal to ban foreign judges on some cases would ‘dent confidence’ in Hong Kong, says legal expert (SCMP, Feb. 21): Confidence in the Hong Kong judicial system would suffer and it

would send a “very wrong message” if a controversial plan to bar non-Chinese judges in Macau from presiding at court hearings involving national security issues goes ahead, a respected legal expert has warned. Senior officials in the former Portuguese enclave are poised to put the proposal before lawmakers as early as next month, according to legal sources in the casino hub. The move has already faced criticism from senior legal professionals in Macau who described it as “unconstitutional” and stoked fresh concerns about the future of Hong Kong’s foreign judges after two of their small but significant cadre were subjected to vicious verbal attacks over rulings they made in high-profile cases. “This would be a very wrong message to send and dent confidence in one of the most successful aspects of the Hong Kong and Macau’s judiciaries since their respective handovers,” Professor Young, who is associate dean (research) at the University of Hong Kong’s faculty of law, said.

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Varia

Hong Kong bus union blames officials for fatal crash (SCMP, Feb. 11): A bus union representative has blamed the Hong Kong government for fatal crash (nineteen dead, more than 60 injured) in Tai Po, saying the accident raised again a host of issues. Wong Yu-loi of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions cited excessive hours, a shortage of qualified drivers and poor pay as long-standing problems. Chief Secretary Matthew Cheung had pledged to review the guidelines at the time, calling for tighter conditions tied to overtime. In response to the latest fatal accident, Chief Executive Carrie Lam announced an investigation committee would be formed to review the safety of the bus system.

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Hong Kong population growth hits nine-year low as more people leave city (SCMP, Feb. 14): Hong Kong saw the smallest population growth in nine years amid a surge in residents heading overseas and a persistently low birth rate, according to a government report, keeping the city on track for an ageing society with a shrinking work force. By the end of last year, the population had risen to 7.4 million, representing 0.4 per cent growth – the smallest expansion since 2008, which saw the same rate. The low growth was a result of a high number of people – 24,300 – leaving the city, compared to 6,100 in 2016, and an inflow of 5,500 the previous year.

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Press articles related to Switzerland and Swiss matters

Nestlé under fire for ‘misleading’ baby milk tactics in Hong Kong and beyond (SCMP, Feb. 2): The Swiss multinational Nestlé has been accused of violating ethical marketing codes and manipulating customers of its baby milk formulas around the world, with its supposedly misleading claims to Hong Kong consumers drawing particular scrutiny. A new report by the Changing Markets Foundation has found that Nestlé marketed its infant milk formulas as “closest to”, “inspired by” and “following the example of” human breast milk in several countries, despite a prohibition by the UN’s World Health Organisation (WHO). The company did not respond to specific questions about the new study but a Nestlé spokesperson said it supported WHO recommendations and believed that breast milk was, wherever possible, “the ideal source of nutrition for babies.”

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Calls to tighten Hong Kong regulations in wake of Nestlé baby milk fiasco (SCMP, Feb. 3): The Hong Kong government was urged to tighten oversight of how baby milk formula is advertised after an overseas advocacy group accused Nestlé of unethical marketing tactics and manipulating customers around the world. Paediatrician Dr Patricia Ip, vice chairwoman of Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative Hong Kong Association, said the local government should issue stronger and more effective regulations to crack down on misleading claims about infant formulas. Nestlé defended the integrity of its marketing. “We market these products in a responsible way at all times, and the claims made on our products are based on sound scientific evidence,” a spokeswoman said.

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