

# PRESS RELEASE

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**SPEECH BY GEORGE YEO,  
MINISTER FOR INFORMATION & THE ARTS AND  
SECOND MINISTER FOR TRADE & INDUSTRY,  
AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF  
THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION  
ON THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF HONG KONG  
ON MONDAY, 23 JUNE 1997 AT 7.15 PM**

I am honoured to be here to officiate at the opening of this exhibition with Ambassador Fu Xuezhong. The return of Hong Kong on 1 July 1997 to China is an historic event. It marks the final closing of a difficult chapter of history for East Asians. When China lost the Opium War and was forced to cede Hong Kong to the British in 1842, it began a long period of trials and tribulations for East Asians. For the mighty Qing Empire to be humiliated by a few British warships was an unimaginable shock to all Asians. A spell was broken. The Manchu dragon was mortally wounded. Only Japan was able to re-organise itself after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to stand up to the Western powers. Unfortunately, Japan took the imperialist road which led to the Pacific War and decades of misery for hundreds of millions of Asians.

Despite the valiant efforts of Lin Zexu, China at that time could not have avoided its fate of becoming semi-colonised. In fact, it was lucky not to have been broken up and fully colonised like much of the rest of Asia. Qing China was too conservative and too corrupt to transform itself, establish new

institutions, master science and technology, and build a modern economy. A revolution was needed. And it became the greatest revolution the world had ever seen starting from the Opium War and ending with Mao's Cultural Revolution. Even if there had been no Opium War, some other pretext would have been found to open up China and colonise her ports, if not by the British, then by other imperialist powers.

In other words, the key reason for the loss of Hong Kong to the British was not British might but Chinese weakness. This was very well presented in the recent film on the Opium War. The decades of decline of the Qing Dynasty destabilised all of Asia, creating a swirl of wars and revolutions. The result was that the Asian became a servant to the white man in his own home.

In the same way, the return of Hong Kong to China on July 1 this year reflects the resurgence of Asia and its ability now to deal with Western powers on the basis of equality. If China is still backward and mired in civil war, the coming return of Hong Kong to China would probably not take place. As it was in the last century, so it is at the end of this century. The key is our internal strength. If we are strong, we will stay free. If we are weak, we will be subjugated.

In the nature of history, when the pendulum swings, it tends to swing from one extreme to the other. The danger in the next century of the Asian resurgence is of it becoming arrogant and posing a threat to the West. If that happens, we would not have learnt from the past, but instead repeat its mistakes with tragic consequences.

China's leaders are aware of this and take pains to emphasise that an economically strong China will not be a threat to her neighbours. China is determined to become a full, responsible member of a world community of equal nations, not only of the UN but also of other organisations like the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It is partly this desire that led Deng Xiaoping to propose one-country-two-systems for Hong Kong. Under one-country-two-systems, the people of Hong Kong would govern themselves in a Special Administrative Region but on the condition that they not only love Hong Kong, they must also love China. This is a wise and creative proposal that will ensure Hong Kong's continuing growth and prosperity for many more years to come, but one which also requires tremendous self-discipline on the part of Hongkongers.

Hong Kong and Singapore share a lot in common. We share a common British colonial heritage including a tradition of fair public administration and the common law. Because of the protection of property and the rule of law, Hong Kong and Singapore have become two major trading centres in the world. Although Hong Kong and Singapore compete in some areas, our strategic relationship is marked more by co-operation than by competition. We are each other's major trading partner. Hong Kong is Singapore's fourth largest trading partner and Singapore is Hong Kong's fifth largest trading partner. We are also major investors in each other's economy. In recent years, we have built up sizeable communities in each other's city. Thus, in the last 10 years, almost 10,000 Hong Kong families have relocated to Singapore and close to 10,000 Singaporeans now live in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's prosperity is Singapore's prosperity, and Singapore's prosperity is Hong Kong's prosperity.

Two years ago, I took a helicopter ride in Hong Kong to observe the new airport development. At a height of about 1,500 feet, I could see in one circular panorama, the entire airport development - the third tunnel linking Hong Kong to Kowloon, the West Kowloon reclamation, the bridges to Lantau, the coastal expressway and, in the distance, the runway on Chek Lap Kok. It was a breathtaking view which filled me with hope for the future of Hong Kong.

The next century holds up much promise for all of East Asia. Provided we get the politics right, our economies will continue to grow and our people enjoy a much better life. The key variable is China because of its size and population. A successful benign China means a successful Hong Kong, which is good for all of us in the region.

Thus, we in Singapore are not only observers of the important event that is to take place on July 1, we are also participants in it because of our stake in the promotion of peace and prosperity in Asia and the world. This exhibition of the history and development of Hong Kong not only reminds us of the past, it also points our way into the future.

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