

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Professor Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post, Monday, June 5, 2017.

## Beijing should give Hong Kong some space if it wants to boost China's global credibility

Tom Plate sees 'spiritual entrepreneurship' in how communist China is maintaining control over religion instead of strangling it, and hopes it will show similar subtle adaptability over Hong Kong and 'two systems'



The Trump administration's rude slap-down of the [largely symbolic](#) Paris climate accord has stung eyes and optimism around the world. We move from having a US president known for "leading from behind", as Barack Obama's hyper-caution was termed, to one who proposes to lead by "running from reality" – as [Donald Trump's](#) approach looks to become infamously known.

But one country's embarrassment can become another's historic opportunity. When America shrinks, geopolitical space opens up. The first law of global life is that politics abhors a vacuum. Alert nations will always rush in and fill vacated space. And so in Europe, France's profile rises immeasurably under President Emmanuel Macron; in Asia, China's rises under President [Xi Jinping](#) (习近平).

Both deserved their breaks. France, which wisely and courageously opposed the US invasion of Iraq, received in return a pummelling from the George W. Bush - administration. For its independence of thinking and other virtues, it warrants respect, not scorn. China, so often the target of blanket ideological reportage from the US media, is clearly gaining in international esteem. This is not only good for China but for almost everyone. The less brutally Trumpian it is in style, the greater its potential gain.

The new Beijing is not like the old Moscow. Its appetites seem fairly logically pipe-fitted to the voracious needs of its vast populace. It is investing in infrastructure like there is no tomorrow, not invading Eastern Europe or arrogantly holding up its system as some universal model to be worshipped. (For a long time, America itself would have been better advised to go heavier on infrastructure renewal and lighter on tedious political evangelism).

At the same time, China faces problems. In America, we worry about the health of our political system; and in China, there is a comparable worry: whether its current configuration is adaptive enough to meet today's pressures and future challenges. The communist economic blueprint has been discredited, having produced more inequality, not less. And, despite President's Xi's efforts to pump vitality into the Marxist idea, at China's centre is a vacuum in belief for which a voracious nationalism alone may not compensate.

Some observers now point to a corresponding upsurge in religiosity in China. In *The New York Review of Books*, Harvard professor Roderick MacFarquhar – the venerable historian and politician scientist who is anything but a panda-hugger – gives credence to surveys that claim China has 200 million Buddhists and Taoists, 50 to 60 million Protestants, 10 million Catholics, and 20 to 25 million Muslims. Add in various other forms of worship and maybe a third of mainland Chinese “admit to a need for a faith to sustain them”, as MacFarquhar put it.

Statistical guesses about China always require caution – trust them wholly at your peril. But it's good to see evidence of what might be termed spiritual entrepreneurship, as the Chinese have pulled off such brilliant economic entrepreneurship. A wary MacFarquhar does cite a lot of government surveillance of these activities, and some harsh oversight; but what was most surprising in his essay – titled “China's Astounding Religious Revival”, a sensational review of Ian Johnson's new book *The Souls of China* – is the government's evidently considered decision to try to maintain control over religion without strangling it.

Which subtlety brings to mind the touchy subject of Hong Kong. In a similar spirit, Beijing must show it understands that it has in its tender hands not just another packed Chinese city (with all due respect to Shanghai or Wuhan and others), but indeed a special astonishment. No one can deny this, and we were reminded anew by the

International Institute for Management Development, which rates Hong Kong as “[the world’s most competitive economy](#)” – No 1 among 63 economies, including worthy competitors such as Singapore and Switzerland.

Financial Secretary Paul Chan Mo-po had every right to pound the point hard: “In light of the fierce competition in the global economic arena, we must strive to uphold our prevailing competitive edge, including the open and free market principle, the fine tradition of the rule of law, an efficient public sector and a robust institutional framework.” The above keys to success have been working well and need only to be left alone.

When Hong Kong was handed over in 1997, Beijing seemed remarkably clear-minded and even at peace with the notion that it was crucial not to kill the goose laying the golden eggs, by steadfastly adhering to “one country, two systems”. Having originated in the Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) era, very possibly from the master himself, this mature political metaphor had an almost divinely inspired feel – a holy commandment from above.

Alas, recent reports have it that Beijing wishes to tighten this or that in Hong Kong, reduce its public space, stomp on more silly protesting kids with prison and [generally loom more heavily over the city](#). All this is jarring.

Beijing should stop obsessing about sovereignty and Hong Kong. Whatever the occasional member of the UK Parliament or US Congress might blunder up, just ignore them: the issue was settled decades ago. And as Hong Kong is not remotely broken, there is no need to fix it; the more Beijing lets this widely watched and admired place do its own special thing, the more its [leadership on vital issues such as climate change](#) will carry weight and credibility internationally.

Leave well enough alone. The last thing Beijing should want to be known for practising is its own brand of rude Trumpism. It gets you nowhere.

*Loyola Marymount Professor Tom Plate has a new book out next month: [Yo-Yo Diplomacy: An American Columnist Tackles the Ups-and-Down Between China and the US](#)*

***This article appeared in the [South China Morning Post](#) print edition as: [Breathing space](#)***