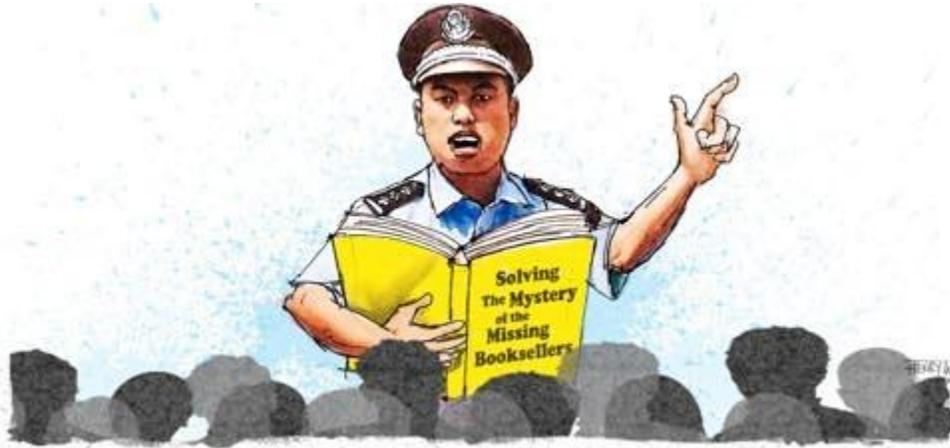


Why the case of the Hong Kong booksellers is more of a worry than China's market woes

Tom Plate says while the economy will surely recover, the same cannot be said of 'one country, two systems' unless Beijing moves to clear up the mystery

PUBLISHED : Monday, 18 January, 2016, 5:03



Beijing officials need to clean up this mystery, and ensure "one country, two systems" is seen as an example of very smart international politics. Overall, the unfolding drama of China – as viewed on this side of the Pacific, in sunny Los Angeles – has, in the past week or so, seen the vigour of its vim dimmed somewhat. My worry is not so much the mayhem of the markets and the attendant gangling neuroticism of the gigantic mainland economy. While reports in the world media have been fulsome with negative detail, the fact is that an expanding, multifaceted economy such as China's was never going to unfold as daintily as a blooming rose or as harmoniously as a Mozart symphony. It was always going to jerk this way and that – imagine an especially neurotic octopus suddenly with even with more legs than normal and a central brain system constantly struggling just to keep count of them all.



An expanding, multifaceted economy such as China's was never going to unfold as daintily as a blooming rose.

Photo: AP

Worry not excessively. China now fields smarty-pants economists as cunning and well schooled as any, anywhere. They will figure a way out, over time, especially if their political masters permit them enough time to do so and display the political guts to back them up. At the end of the day, politics does tend to trump the economists. Consider the highly political – and bizarre – story of the Causeway Bay bookstore and its missing team, including the owner. This macabre mystery rattles many nerves even more than the roiling markets.

[READ MORE: Hong Kong Chief Executive CY Leung hints there's little he can do about detained bookseller – but Stockholm demands more 'openness'](#)

Balance and perspective must be maintained until enough verifiable facts are out, and right now there are not many. Over the weekend one of the five, in Thailand, outed himself as a fugitive from mainland criminal justice and turned himself in. But what about the other four in the bookstore gang of five? That's the Hong Kong worry.



screen grab from CCTV shows one of the missing booksellers, Gui Minhai, who has allegedly turned himself in to mainland authorities over a hit-and-run accident more than a decade ago. Photo: SCMP Pictures

From China's hypersensitive viewpoint, "one country, two systems" goes out the window if and when Hong Kong morphs into a base of subversion on its southern flank. If President Xi Jinping's (习近平) internal enemies (presumably growing in number and intensity with every new corruption crackdown) are using Hong Kong to spread tawdry and demeaning rumours in order to lower the angelic glow around the boss, mainland security people will want to know every who and all the how. Until his rocked economy regains its footing, Xi might want to dial down the intensity of the ethical evangelicalism. It is not for show that Xi travels with a noticeably large security detail wherever he goes.

Until now, it has seemed unthinkable that the Xi government would regard 'one country, two systems' as anything other than canonical

Beijing does not wholly trust Hong Kong. Note that Article 23 of the mutually agreed Basic Law says: "The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region shall enact laws on its own to prohibit any act of treason, secession, sedition, subversion against the Central People's Government, or theft of state secrets, to prohibit foreign political organisations or bodies from conducting political activities in the Region, and to prohibit political organisations or bodies of the Region from establishing ties with foreign political organisations or bodies." Beijing, for its part, takes notice of the fact that, almost two decades after the historic handover, Hong Kong has not done this.

On the other hand, if the allegedly subversive bookstore gang, in whole or part, was spirited or somehow lured over the border by nefarious methods, as many in characteristically suspicious Hong Kong suspect, then this is of course a serious violation of the spirit of “one country, two systems”. Although perhaps not on the same elevated philosophical shelf as the Magna Carta, “one country, two systems” has a lot going for it; for sheer practical ingenuity, it is often underestimated. It’s also a trademark political legacy of Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), who, though he did not invent the idea, was surely its driving, principal proponent.



A Hong Kong police officer stands outside the central government’s liaison office. The case of the missing booksellers has aroused much political unease in the special administrative region. Photo: AFP

Until now, it has seemed unthinkable that the Xi government would regard “one country, two systems” as anything other than canonical. So, was the bookstore bust an instance of the “Mao” Xi at clandestine work behind the scenes; or, instead, of just some “Mission Ridiculous”, Watergate-style bozo operation designed to ingratiate provincial security agents with higher-ups? The bookstore’s shelves stocked tabloidian tomes of Clintonesque-type flings by Chinese VIPs .

At this writing, technically, based on the scant facts that exist, no law has been broken. Still, Beijing should clean up this mystery, make an example of the “Mission Ridiculous” boys (if such is the true story), and work better with Hong Kong on the vital job of making “one country, two systems” an exemplar of very smart 21st-century international politics. But Hongkongers have to accept reality: Beijing is sovereign. A famous Chinese saying applies here: “However ugly your parents are, they are still your parents.”



The election of Tsai Ing-wen, from the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, as Taiwan's president is not the best news for any unification timetable. Photo: AFP

But Beijing cannot behave as the beastly bull in the greater China shop, especially if it wants smooth sailing in Hong Kong and prays, some day, for the historic mainland docking by Taiwan. One notes that the island's pro-independence political party just nailed a smashing victory to regain power with the island's first female president. This is not the best news for any unification timetable. Unless the PRC plans an invasion, then endless patience for Taiwan as well as Hong Kong (as prickly as the wonderful territory can be) remains the smart policy approach. Exercising the force option would set back China more than any number of market corrections – and launch a thousand unfriendly new books, on sale almost everywhere.

Columnist Tom Plate, Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies, is the author of the "Giants of Asia" series