

...On the eve of the handover, a journalist asked Tung Chee-hwa whether marches would be allowed once he was in charge. His response was, 'Of course, it's part of the culture,' and the right of assembly has indeed remained intact. Tung's term in office saw literally hundreds of demonstrations and protests of all sizes every year. His reversal of Chris Patten's more liberal law on public assembly made little difference in practice, except to increase paperwork for the police, who have to issue a 'notice of no objection' after receiving notification of a gathering from the organizers. This is no different from the system used in many cities in western democracies. Rejections have been rare and there is no evidence that they have been based on political grounds. Even when demonstrators have gathered without the de facto permit, the police have rarely taken action except when the city's small band of colourful militants were obviously determined to get arrested. In such cases, punishment was about as light as the courts could deliver.

Freedom of religion has faced only one challenge in the post-1997 era: the Falun Gong, a group that put 'one country, two systems' to the test. Hong Kong's tradition of complete freedom of worship was not compatible with Beijing's stance that the quasi-Buddhist sect was a danger to the security of the nation (and party rule). By taking no action against the cult at all, Hong Kong's officials would either be theoretically endangering national security, or implicitly disputing the national leadership's judgement. After Hong Kong patriotic forces called for action and mounted anti-Falun Gong publicity campaigns, the city finessed the problem. Airport officials started to refuse entry to a small number of overseas Falun Gong members from time to time, provoking an outcry from the human rights lobby. Reading between the lines, it seems likely that officials discreetly talked Falun Gong representatives into keeping a low profile. Ten years after the handover, practitioners do their breathing exercises outside some central and local government premises, hand out leaflets to mainland tourists and other passers-by and attend demonstrations waving anti-CCP banners...