

...Tung's problems were piling up. In the winter of 1997-98, all 1.4 million chickens in Hong Kong had been slaughtered in order to eradicate an avian flu virus that could be transmitted to humans and had killed six in the city. The forthright action brought praise from public health authorities the world over, but it highlighted the risk Hong Kong faced from the mainland's unhygienic conditions and secretive officials. China refused to admit that it had a problem, and Tung was the last person to take issue with the motherland on that – or, indeed, anything. A series of errors in public hospitals caused a public outcry. A surgeon removed a small girl's fallopian tube instead of her inflamed appendix; a medical assistant put gas intended to pump up pillows into a patient's blood stream; a nurse put milk into a patient's veins rather than stomach. Cholera cases and pesticide poisonings added to the health woes. Another crisis ensued in July, when Hong Kong's new airport opened at Chek Lap Kok. The backed-up toilets, baggage handling errors, unfinished construction work and other problems in the passenger terminal were a sideshow. The cargo complex had a major systems breakdown that led to tons of seafood and other perishables being left for days to rot. Factories across the border missed deliveries of components, and even shipments of blood samples were disrupted. The cause was insufficiently trained and tested staff; but who had ordered the airport to open before everything was ready? Gossips wondered whether it was Tung, who had booked Jiang Zemin to cut the ribbon on the big day and couldn't or wouldn't change the date. Meanwhile, the government's approval rating slumped to 18% with the realization that Hong Kong's civil service had done something few had ever expected to see: it had seriously bungled a high profile project.

Another grand idea turned sour when Tung tried to introduce mother tongue teaching in most of the city's public sector schools. The colonial government had been pushing such a measure for at least 15 years for the simple reason that most Hong Kong children's English was too poor to enable them to learn subjects properly in the language. But it was a sensitive issue. In the public's eyes, an English language school was an elite one and a Chinese-medium school was a low-class one. Hong Kong parents take rankings of schools – even kindergartens – very seriously. Tung's administration decreed that a minority of schools, where the children (and teachers) could handle it, would be allowed to carry on in English, but the rest would have to switch. The day the list of chosen schools came out was a disaster. Principles, students and parents at schools that could continue teaching in English were shown on TV cheering and jumping with joy in the playgrounds. At the schools being forced to use Cantonese, parents wept. Tung was livid. The policy was driven by educational theory, not patriotism, but the proud Chinese in him must have been hurt. He must also have been suspicious: the implementation, not the policy, was at fault.

In August, things started to get really bad...