

...On his annual duty visit to Beijing in December 2003, Tung heard about the central people's government's deep concern about constitutional reform in Hong Kong. The leaders reminded him that the Basic Law required such reform to be 'gradual and orderly' and in line with 'the actual situation' in the city. After he left, four mainland legal experts publicized the view that any changes had to be cleared by Beijing, must not harm national interests, and had to protect Hong Kong's social stability and economic development. In Hong Kong, officials hurriedly cancelled release of the constitutional reform timetable. Beijing had slapped them down for running ahead of themselves. There would be no public consultation exercise: in January 2004, a three-man task force was assembled under Donald Tsang, and it would be consulting with Beijing first. After its first, slightly grim trip there in February, Chinese officials poured more cold water on Hong Kong's expectations by giving tighter meanings to some old phrases. 'One country, two systems' in fact meant that Hong Kong was a local region under a national government. 'Hong Kong shall enjoy a high degree of autonomy' in fact referred to a high degree of autonomy granted at the pleasure of the central government. And the 'Hong Kong people running Hong Kong' had to be patriots. None of these points were really new, but they went completely against the grain of the previous few months' pro-democracy euphoria. The question of patriots was especially pointed: many prominent members of the pro-democracy camp like Martin Lee and Emily Lau had been denounced for being unpatriotic because of their attitudes towards the Tiananmen massacre and their appearances before official bodies overseas, including the US Congress and conferences featuring pro-independence speakers in Taiwan. How could Hong Kong elect its own leaders if it didn't elect patriots? In mid-February, the communist-funded Wen Wei Po newspaper reported an unnamed senior leader in Beijing as saying that China might use the chief executive's power under the Basic Law to intervene directly and dissolve Legco should pro-democrats win control of the body. 'I have a sword, which I normally don't use,' the official said. 'Now I am being forced to use it.'

Central government representatives and allies then orchestrated a bizarre and slightly chilling united front campaign in the form of a debate on who was and was not a patriot. It started off with a China Daily editorial declaring that the subject merited discussion in order to 'detect demons.' The paper said that 'some people who are currently in positions of power do not meet the prerequisite to be rulers of Hong Kong,' and opined that only people who 'love the motherland and One Country' could be trusted with the 'security, stability and development' of the nation. Xinhua news agency carried a commentary defining a patriot as someone who: pledged allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region; loved China and Hong Kong and upheld the Basic Law and China's resumption of sovereignty; and supported 'one country, two systems' by not doing anything aimed at subverting the central government or changing the socialist system on the mainland. The chief executive, principal officials, executive and Legco members and judges should all meet these criteria, the commentary said, but 'a small number of people ... participate in or even lead political organizations aiming at opposing the leadership of the CCP and subverting the central government, using democracy as a shield.' In Beijing signing an economic agreement, Henry Tang sat with a hapless smile on his face as commerce vice-minister An Min, right next to him, ranted away about people 'who deliberately make confusing remarks, saying loving the country is not tantamount to loving the CCP. The Chinese CCP represents the Chinese people and it should also represent Hong Kong compatriots,' and then added, 'I am not saying you must love the Chinese CCP.' An later denounced not only Martin Lee but his late father, a former friend of Mao's popular premier Zhou Enlai and a Kuomintang general who fought the Japanese. In Hong Kong, Exco member and hopeful contender for future chief executive Leung Chun-ying publicly turned on Emily Lau and asked whether she supported Taiwan independence. At a meeting of Hong Kong's Chinese General Chamber of Commerce, businessman and old warhorse Tsang Hin-chi sang an old Mao-era tune No Communist Party, No New China with tears in his eyes. He specifically named Martin Lee and Szeto Wah as unpatriotic, and added that the organizers of the July 1 protests were as well. The line to take among officials and more moderate pro-Beijing figures awkwardly trying to explain the outburst of vitriol was that the national leadership had 'lost confidence' in Hong Kong (bringing to mind the old joke about the government deciding to abolish the people and appoint a new one). The campaign, with its overtones of Cultural Revolution witch hunts in which everyone had to declare loyalty or be denounced, lasted several weeks before abruptly ending. The contrast with Hu and Wen's warm public image, or China's modern, reformist face, was stark...