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Switzerland in the local press

Museum's director of M+ receives complaint from pro-Beijing camp (SCMP, March 12 + 17):

After their first press tour a week earlier, where director of M+ Suhanya Raffel confirmed that the museum will show works by outspoken Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei and art referencing the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, pro-Beijing camp has made a police complaint and demanded the resignation of the museum's director citing that M+ had collected "so-called artworks" that "spread hatred for the country". The building was designed by Swiss architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron and 12 of the 33 galleries will showcase works donated by the Uli Sigg Collection.

Switzerland approved 'burqa ban' & Indonesia trade (SCMP, March 8):

Switzerland will ban the wearing in public of burkas and other full-face coverings, after a referendum showed a narrow majority of 51.4% in favour of it. Similar bans exist in Austria, the Netherlands and France. Opponents accuse the group of promoting anti-Islamic xenophobia and only wanting to stir up sentiment against Muslims, arguing that in a free society, such dress codes should not exist. Swiss voters also narrowly approved a free trade agreement with Indonesia in a binding referendum, with lower tariffs on palm oil imports the main issue in the national debate. The vote was carried with a 51.7- 48.3 percent margin, provisional official results showed, a closer result that opinion polls had suggested.

Foreign Policy / International Relations

HK falls in Academic Freedom Index (AppleDaily, March 17):

HK has been ranked "D" in the latest Academic Freedom Index, with observers citing a national law imposed by Beijing as a factor in eroding freedoms. In a range between zero and one, HK received .348 pts in the index published by the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute last week. The index assigns a score based on freedom to research and teach, freedom of academic exchange and dissemination, institutional autonomy, campus integrity and freedom of academic and cultural expression.

G7 powers urge China to end 'oppression' against democratic activists (RTHK, March 13):

The National People's Congress on Thursday passed reforms that said that only "patriots" can run the SAR. "Such a decision strongly indicates that the authorities in mainland China are determined to eliminate dissenting voices and opinions in Hong Kong," Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States as well as the European Union said in a joint statement.

EU reports a tightening grip of Beijing on Hong Kong affairs (SCMP, March 13):

The EU's annual report describes Hong Kong's political condition as «alarming political deterioration» and a "severe erosion of autonomy, democracy and fundamental freedoms". HK government dismissed the EU's report as "biased and ungrounded political smearing" against the National Security Law and denied that Beijing is undermining the "one country, two systems".

EU office to Hong Kong and Macao expressed "great concern" (EU statement, March 1):

The EU office has called for the immediate release of those arrested who took part in primary election last July. The EU is of great concern and says that it is clear that legitimate political pluralism will no longer be tolerated in Hong Kong and will monitor the ongoing developments closely. It also urges the authorities to abide by their commitments to fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

UN says China is violating basic rights in Hong Kong (RTHK, March 1):

United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said that China is restricting basic civil and political freedoms, including in Hong Kong, in the name of national security and Covid-19 measures. "Activists, lawyers and human rights defenders – as well as some foreign nationals – face arbitrary criminal charges, detention or unfair trials," Bachelet told the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Domestic Policy / Politics

Photo exhibition opens with protest-themed entries (28 March):

An exhibition of the winning entries in the 2020 World Press Photo Contest – including five shots taken during the 2019 anti-government protests – opened its doors to the public on 28 March, a month after Baptist University abruptly refused to host the annual show over security fears. The Hong Kong photos, by Nicolas Asfour of Agence France-Presse, took first prize in the "General News, Stories" category.

Ex-lawmaker Au Nok-hin given a prison term for assaulting two police officers (RTHK, March 24):

Former lawmaker Au Nok-hin was given a nine-week prison term for assaulting two police officers with a loudhailer on 8 July 2019. The government had appealed against the 140 hours of community service he was originally given. Au was already in custody after being charged under the national security law.

Schools to be given mainland books to promote patriotism (AppleDaily, March 24):

Hong Kong primary and secondary schools will soon receive a national education textbook, titled "My Home is in China," that is published in mainland China and has been used in Xinjiang, to "create an atmosphere for learning about Chinese history and culture."

Film on 2019 protests pulled hours before commercial premiere (HKFP, March 15):

The award-winning documentary "Inside the Red Brick Wall", about Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests, was pulled hours before its first commercial screening, and after days of criticism from Beijing mouthpiece Wen Wei Po. The outlet had repeatedly condemned the screening and accused the organisers of breaching the national security law.

Those who challenge Beijing's authority are separatists (SCMP, March 3):

Former chief executive CY Leung says any autonomy Hong Kong has comes at China's discretion, adding that Hong Kong's residents have to recognise it is not an independent country like Singapore and must respect Beijing's authority.

Chinese University of HK student union resigns amid political pressure (RTHK, March 2):

The new cabinet of the student union of Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) announced its resignation, citing increased political pressure after the school cut ties with it last week. CUHK said the election platform and certain statements made by members of the cabinet might be in breach of the national security law, and that the cabinet failed to clarify "potentially unlawful statements and false allegations" and issued a statement denying that it had intimidated or isolated the student union office or any other student group.

Beijing official singles out trio for "severe punishment" (SCMP, March 2):

The head of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, Xia Baolong, called for "severe punishment" for Apple Daily founder Jimmy Lai, jailed activist Joshua Wong and former HKU legal scholar Benny Tai. Xia called the trio "the most vicious traitors" while attending a forum in Shenzhen to discuss election reforms in Hong Kong.

"There is no freedom without restraint" – new RTHK head (RTHK, March 2):

New Director of Broadcasting Patrick Li vowed to uphold editorial independence, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of RTHK "fulfilling its editorial responsibilities", adding that there is no "freedom without restraint". Li, an administrative officer, was appointed by the government to replace veteran journalist Leung Ka-wing, who left his post six months before the end of his term under "mutual consent" with the government.

47 pro-democrats charged under the National Security Law (AppleDaily, March 1):

On 28 February, police charged 47 pro-democracy politicians and activists with conspiracy to subvert state powers under the Beijing-imposed National Security Law. Those charged were among 55 people arrested in January for their involvement in the July 2020 primary elections for the LegCo elections, which were postponed. Authorities had said the primaries were an attempt to win enough seats to "paralyze the government". People who committed the offence of "subversion" of a grave nature could be sentenced to life imprisonment, or imprisonment of not less than ten years, according to the security legislation.

Economy / Finance

HK retail sales jumping 30% year on year (SCMP, March 31):

Figures released by the Census and Statistics Department on Tuesday showed retail sales totalled HK\$29.5 billion in February, 30% from the same period last year when sales hit a record low as the coronavirus pandemic began to halt global economy.

As relations with the US sour, Chinese tech firms choose HK for their IPOs (RTHK, March 29):

Last year HK has raked in an impressive US\$ 49bn in IPOs as over the last 18 months, Chinese tech firms chose to hold initial public offerings in the city, part of a drive to list closer to home as relations between Beijing and Washington sour. After raising around 6bn US\$ in a secondary listing on HK's bourse, Bilibili's opening price fell just over 6% in early trade.

Citigroup to hire up to 1'700 people & CS to triple headcount in China (SCMP, March 28):

The American bank plans to increase its technology spending, hiring as it seeks to capitalise on the rising wealth in Greater Bay Area. The bank saw an increase of 44% per cent in net new money in its Hong Kong consumer business in 2020. Credit Suisse plans to triple its headcount in China over the next three years as it moves to take full control of its mainland securities joint venture and further expand its business in China

Capital outflows to Canada at record high (RTHK, March 26):

RTHK reports that Hongkongers moved tens of billions of dollars to Canada, where thousands hope to move following Beijing's imposition of the national security law. Capital flows out of Hong Kong banks towards Canada rose to their highest levels on record in 2020, with about C\$43.6 billion (CHF 32.5 bn) in electronic funds transfers recorded by FINTRAC, Canada's anti-money laundering agency, which receives reports on transfers above C\$10'000 (CHF 13'300).

Greater Bay Area attracts HK youngsters at job fair (TheStandard, March 26):

The two-day Greater Bay Area Youth Employment Scheme Job Expo in Mong Kok, which opened with around 20 employers' booths, had attracted nearly 330 visitors as of 5pm yesterday, the Labour Department said. Young job seekers said that they are attracted by the opportunities in the mainland and that "it doesn't hurt to try" working there. A monthly salary of no less than HK\$18'000 (CHF 2'448) is on offer.

Monetary Authority insists capital outflow not caused by electoral overhaul (SCMP, March 21):

Hong Kong Monetary Authority chief executive Eddie Yue Wai-man on Sunday said the capital outflow had been prompted instead by previous "relatively large IPOs", which had seen mainland companies transferring the money they raised in Hong Kong dollars back across the border. He added that the political shake-up would not affect the city's financial standing

HK fourth in the 29th edition of Global Financial Centers Index (China Daily, 21 March):

HK moved one place up to fourth in the 29th edition of Global Financial Center Index (GFCI) published by the British think tank Z/Yen Group and China Development Institute in Shenzhen on 17th March 2021. The GFCI is compiled using 143 instrumental factors, with these quantitative measures provided by third parties including the World Bank, the Economist Intelligence Unit, the OECD and the United Nations, according to a public report released by Z/Yen Group.

Jobless rate reaches 7.2% (SCMP, March 16):

The Labour Bureau warned that the job market faces challenges due to the pandemic, as it announced that the unemployment rate rose to its highest level since 2004. The jobless rate for the three months ending in February reached 7.2%, up from 7% in the November-January period. Over 261,000 people were left without a job in the period under review. That's 8,300 more than before. As for the underemployment rate, the latest figure reached a post-SARS high of 4% (from 3.8%).

HK not on Heritage Foundation's 'world's freest economies' rankings anymore (SCMP, March 4):

Hong Kong has disappeared from the Heritage Foundation, an annual league table ranking the world's freest economies. Compilers listed it under China in what they say is a reflection of Beijing's "ultimate control" over the city. Hong Kong repeatedly led the list before it was toppled in 2020 by Singapore for the first time in 25 years. Singapore took the top spot for the second year in a row with a score of 89.7. Rounding off the top five were New Zealand, Australia, **Switzerland** and Ireland.

COVID-19 / Health & Environment**Government eases restrictions as infections fall (TheStandard, March 30):**

Officials announced plans to re-open public beaches, swimming pools and playgrounds before the Easter holiday, as they revealed that restrictions on people returning from the UK will be lifted and mandatory quarantine arrangements will be relaxed to 14 days for people from "low-risk" countries.

Hong Kong's and Macao's Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine bottle defects (SCMP, March 24, 25, 28):

On Wednesday morning the two governments suspended the use of the jab after reports of packaging defects of the two batches which was delivered to HK and Macau. Fosun Pharma is in charge of delivering the jab jointly developed by Germany's BioNTech and US-based Pfizer. The vaccines are made in Germany. However, on Sunday, Fosun Pharma informed that after an investigation into faulty packaging found no systemic errors. Hong Kong is expected to resume its BioNTech vaccination roll-out within the week. Fears mount that Hong Kong's herd immunity will be tougher to achieve.

WWF warns of city's worsening ecological footprint (RTHK, March 16):

WWF-Hong Kong warned on Tuesday that Hongkongers' consumption habits are having a growing impact on the world – and if everyone on the planet were to follow HK's example, we would need 4.4 Earths to sustain us. The green group's ecological footprint analysis measures human use of land and sea areas and the impact this is having on the environment and animals.

Covid-19 – Vaccination scheme to expand (RTHK, March 15):

From 16 March the vaccination programme will cover everyone aged 30 and above, amid a slow take-up rate. Despite having one million doses of the Chinese Sinovac jab, and 1.34 million doses of BioNTech, Hong Kong only vaccinated less than 200,000 people since 26 February.

Macao

Jobless rate remains at 2.7% (MPD, March 2):

General unemployment rate - comprising residents and non-resident workers - remained unchanged at 2.7% in the November 2020-January 2021 period.

Special Focus: Overhaul of Hong Kong's electoral system

Electoral reform approved unanimously in Beijing (SCMP, RTHK, March 1, 11, 29, 30, 31):

On the last day of this year's 'two sessions' the national legislature has approved a resolution to drastically overhaul Hong Kong's electoral system to ensure only "patriots" can rule the city, in a sweeping move critics fear will further quash opposition voices. Before the 'two sessions', Xia Baolong, the top Beijing official in charge of Hong Kong's affairs, said that those who are standing in opposition to patriots are destroyers of the 'one country, two systems' principle and that they should not be allowed to take a share of the HKSAR's political power. He added: "Not now, not ever". The National People's Congress Standing Committee on 30 March unanimously approved (167-0 vote) the most controversial and sweeping overhaul of Hong Kong's electoral system since its return to Chinese rule in 1997. Under the reform, the Election Committee (increased from 1'200 to 1'500) responsible for choosing Hong Kong's chief executive will be granted the new power to send 40 representatives to the Legislative Council, which will be expanded from 70 to 90 seats. The trade-based functional constituencies will have 30 seats, leaving the directly elected geographical constituencies with 20 seats, down from the original 35. Only corporate bodies or entities will be allowed to vote for representatives of the business, professional and social sectors. All 117 district council seats in the Election Committee will be scrapped. A new vetting committee with reportedly fewer than 10 members will ensure candidates for the chief executive, LegCo and the Election Committee pose no threat to national security.

The polls had been scheduled for September last year, but officials scrapped them, citing the pandemic. Chief Executive Carrie Lam said at the time that elections would instead be held this September. However, Legco president Andrew Leung revealed on 30 March that the next Legco elections will take place in December, and that current lawmakers will stay on in the council until then.

US, UK, AUS and CH condemn the reform (RTHK, CH gov, AU gov, March 11, 12):

The US State Department condemned Beijing's overhaul, calling it a "direct attack on Hong Kong's autonomy, its freedom, and democratic processes". It added that assault on democracy and forecast "difficult" talks with China's top diplomats next week. The UK foreign minister said the decision undermined international trust in China. In a tweet, Australia's foreign minister said the overhaul weakened Hong Kong democratic institutions. Similarly, **Switzerland** said the measure "severely limits democratic participation".

EU warns China over electoral reform imposed on Hong Kong (SCMP, March 12):

The European Union warned China it could take "additional steps" as it condemned Beijing's sweeping changes to HK's electoral system. In a statement approved by all Member States, the EU said it "regrets that the fundamental freedoms, democratic principles and the political pluralism that are central to HK's identity and prosperity are under increasing pressure by the authorities". The EU called on the Chinese and the HK authorities to "restore confidence in HK's democratic process and to end the persecution of those who promote democratic values".

US imposes new sanctions against 24 officials over HK electoral overhaul (SCMP, March 9, 17):

After a group of eight US lawmakers officially condemning Beijing's plans to overhaul HK election system, Washington has slapped financial sanctions on 24 HK and mainland Chinese officials on the eve of a high-level meeting between US Secretary of State Blinken and China's top diplomats, expanding its punitive action in retaliation for Beijing's drastic shake-up of HK's electoral system.

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