

CITY

HISTORY

Top officials bury 1978 idea to spy on civil servants

It was called 'Kafkaesque' by David Akers-Jones who was then Secretary of the New Territories

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There was a proposal to spy on civil servants which was quickly shot down and even called "Kafkaesque" in 1978, according to classified government records released in the past five years.

A confidential record from that year showed there was a suggestion that the newly formed Independent Commission Against Corruption should be able to collect pay-lists, leave rosters, postings and pictures of people in other law enforcement agencies.

You don't find many records of the '70s related to policy deliberation

STEPHANIE CHUNG, BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

Floating the idea a year after the ICAC had a major clash with the police, then Secretary for Civil Service R. G. Bridge said the proposal could prevent police complaints of "discrimination" against them.

But it was angrily turned down by bureau chiefs, with Secretary for Housing A. J. Scott writing in reply: "I little thought that you would be the one to propose that 1984 should arrive in Hong Kong rather earlier than Old Father Time would normally arrange."

David Akers-Jones, then Secretary for the New Territories, said: "The proposal has a Kaf-

kaesque ring about it which I find most disturbing."

Another 1978 record contained a feasibility study by overseas experts that concluded that Fan Lau at the southwestern end of Lantau Island was the only safe location for the city's first nuclear power plant.

The file contains no details on why officials dropped the idea, leaving one guessing whether it was because Hong Kong was later allowed to import nuclear energy from Shenzhen.

Another record of the same year detailed how police and district offices tried to trace communist influences in the New Territories after the 1967 leftist riots.

It did not reveal any groundbreaking discoveries, but found that a communist campaign in the outlying islands could have been directed from the mainland and the mainland-based South Sea Bank in Sheung Wan.

Not all the opened files revealed important information and many are routine submissions. A "Vietnamese refugees" record of 1981, for instance, had only a few pages giving a general account.

Stephanie Chung Po-yin, a history professor at Baptist University, said she noticed that records that had been made public were becoming less revealing in the past few decades.

"You don't find many records of the '70s related to policy deliberation, compared to earlier years," she said.

"More often, you find news clippings. Some have even been screened and the sensitive part taken out."

She called for an archive law to make all bureaus and departments pass on important records for preservation.

CHARITY



Joyce Samoutou-Wong and her husband Henri with their three children. The couple run an eye surgery clinic in Congo-Brazzaville. Photo: Joyce Samoutou-Wong

DOCTOR FINDS HER CALLING DEEP IN THE AFRICAN JUNGLE

Hongkonger Joyce Samoutou-Wong is full of stories from Congo-Brazzaville, where she has set up the country's first eye surgery clinic

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When Dr Joyce Samoutou-Wong is asked to share some of her experiences of working with patients in Congo-Brazzaville, she has no end of inspirational stories to tell – each one a tale of a life transformed.

The 36-year-old Hongkonger

moved to the country last year with her husband Henri, an eye surgeon and native of neighbouring Gabon, to set up the nation's first eye surgery clinic.

"Once, I went to our ward to look for a cataract patient we had operated on three days earlier. I couldn't find him anywhere, and then suddenly, I heard a voice say, 'Doctor, doctor, I'm here,'" she says, describing one such

story. "I couldn't believe it – he looked absolutely nothing like the man I had met before the operation. He had been quiet and downcast, but afterwards, he was glowing and full of life."

The couple arrived in Impfondo, a town in the northeast with a population of about 20,000, in April last year. Since officially opening in January, the clinic has performed an average of 160 eye consultations a month.

"Our eye centre is like the ultimate makeover reality show for so many of our patients. They often say to us, 'Thank you for giving me my life back,'" she says.

"My confidence, independence and dignity are restored. Many of them even look younger. The transformation extends to their families. Patients become breadwinners again. Family members can be released from care to work and to study."

Samoutou-Wong says the sense of reward she feels from her

work is invaluable, but that there is a price to pay. She, her husband and their three children left their comfortable life in Britain to start anew in a strange country. They ran the medical centre and financed their living expenses from donations by supporters.

And they found that things they had become used to obtaining easily in Britain were scarce in their region. Soy sauce and chocolate biscuits sent from abroad were "prized possessions" in Impfondo that she became reluctant to use and more inclined to keep safe.

Adapting to life in the middle of a jungle was difficult enough for a "city girl" from Hong Kong, but having to raise three children there, between the ages of two and seven, was even harder.

"I felt guilty when they asked to go out and there was no library or playground ... I tried not to think about the snakes and scorpions in our garden."

Still, the challenging natural environment did not deter them. A year on, she has seen the children adapt to their new life better

than many adults, overcoming the language barrier and making friends, and she now feels more confident about "surviving" there.

"I can never complain about our so-called hardship when I see how much we have in comparison. Fifty-four per cent of Congolese live in absolute poverty, which means that they live on less than US\$1 a day. They need help."

With an increasing number of patients, more facilities are needed at the clinic. Instead of operating out of the local hospital, they are hoping to build their own dedicated eye centre, and are in the process of training locals to run it.

"It really is very humbling to think we can play a part in making a lasting difference to people in a country where living is by no means easy. The joy and hope of our patients and families are contagious. They never cease to touch and amaze me."

Those who wish to donate to the family's project can go to www.newsightcongo.com

CITY BEAT TAMMY TAM

New free-to-air TV licences will bring variety to viewing

More channels allow for better quality political debate and that can only be good for the city

I was in Guangzhou last week, taking a taxi to meet some friends. The driver, noticing that I was from Hong Kong, started to complain.

"I used to watch Hong Kong TV programmes," he said. "You know, Guangzhou people just loved whatever was shown on Hong Kong channels. But not anymore. Now, we have hundreds of channels available here. I only watch Hong Kong news sometimes, but from time to time broadcasts are blocked because they touch on politically sensitive issues that authorities here don't like."

"Excuse me if I'm too blunt," he added. "Hong Kong TV programmes no longer appeal to me." Then he recommended I watch mainland TV dramas and told me where to get some cheap DVDs.

I couldn't help feeling embarrassed. The taxi driver was right, at least about one thing. Gone were those days when viewers in the Pearl River Delta defied officials by setting up special antennae to receive TV from this side of the border.

Meanwhile, back in Hong Kong, during the past week or so, speculation spread that the Executive Council had finally come to a consensus about handing out new free-to-air TV licences. The remaining issues are when and how many licences should be awarded to the three applicants: i-Cable Communications, PCCW and City Telecom.

Informed sources revealed

that, after careful study, the government has determined it was better to follow public sentiment which favoured competition, rather than hold up the applications and be accused of doing so for political considerations. But this won't happen as quickly as people expect because the big headache will be in picking who will be granted the first licence.

Critics have said that the decline in quality of Hong Kong TV programmes was the natural result of a lack of competition, with Television Broadcast

No one can be sure that new competitors will guarantee better quality programmes

Limited (TVB) dominating the market. TVB never accepted this argument, claiming that only by constant effort had it been able to keep its ratings high for decades.

Ironically, while many viewers keep complaining about TVB's programmes, they stay tuned to its channels. The classic joke was that even if it only showed a colour signal test pattern on all stations, TVB would still be the sure winner.

No one can be sure that new competitors in the market will guarantee better quality programmes. But certainly more licences means a proliferation of channels, which will need more content.

One dilemma facing the government is how many of the potential new programmes will touch on politics? After all, producing political talk shows or forums is more cost-effective than making dramas or variety shows. With the 2017 universal suffrage deadline rapidly approaching, it is understood that this might further intensify the already very noisy political rows in Hong Kong.

That concern had been regarded as the main reason for the delay in issuing more licences. But, the official line puts the blame for the delay on the judicial reviews filed by TVB and another free-TV operator, Asia Television, against the issuance of more free-to-air licences.

The crux of the issue is, with or without any new licences, political voices won't be weakened in the coming years, not only because universal suffrage means more debates, but also because of the fast development and penetration of new media. That is not something to be feared but rather what any government needs to face.

Quality political debates, not mere sensational quarrels, make good television, too. Maybe even something a jaded Guangzhou taxi driver might want to watch.

Queen of the Ring
Russian Thai boxing champion Anastasia Yankova has made *muaythai* into a feminine sport

Find out inside
Russia AND GREATER CHINA

Our monthly 16-page supplement also features:

- Aluminium overproduction worldwide is negatively impacting prices and forcing production cuts in Russia.
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