

SADNESS Joy a n x i e t y A N D HOPE

Chinese in the South Bay
have a range of
emotions concerning
Hong Kong changeover

By Carol Baker
STAFF WRITER

History is rarely made without the shedding of a tear or two. For Chinese immigrants living in the South Bay, the turnover of Hong Kong from British to communist Chinese control July 1 is of such singular significance that some say they may be moved to cry — nevermind the years they've had to prepare for it.

But to view their tears simply as sadness would be to misinterpret the complexity of emotions felt by ethnic Chinese over the long-heralded change of rule, and the uncertainty it portends.

"All the things (involved) for the Chinese people are quite complicated," said Christina Chang, president of the Chinese American Association of Southern California.

On one hand, many see the change as destiny, as Hong Kong's return to its rightful owner, which lost the island in an unjust military campaign — the Opium War pressed by Britain some 150 years ago. Then again, under British control, Hong Kong became the jewel of the Orient that, unfettered by the communist chains of the mainland, blossomed into an unrivaled financial hub.

Perhaps it is no surprise then that, for many local Chinese, sadness is as inconsequential as joy to the otherwise potent mix of feelings that surround Hong Kong's changeover.

Leo Chu, for one, will not be crying.

Hong Kong

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He plans to witness Hong Kong's turnover — ushered in by a highly ceremonial changing of arms on the island — via a satellite TV set up at Hollywood Park in Inglewood.

"It will be very somber," Chu predicted of the broadcast that's expected to draw hundreds of Chinese and Chinese-Americans to the Inglewood racetrack beginning at 6 a.m.

"I'm not looking at this as a celebration; I'm not looking at this as a political event," said Chu, a wealthy investor and part owner of the Crystal Park Hotel & Casino Development in Compton. "I'm looking at it as, this is history happening and we are looking at it happen before our eyes."

Hong Kong and the world have had 20 years to prepare for the change. The question is, what will it bring? That is what local Chinese immigrants wonder and worry about.

Most take a practical view of the reversion of Hong Kong to Chinese control, figuring the island's booming economy will prove such an asset to the mainland that the communist government would be loathe to tamper with success.

"Hopefully the outside world can make China more like Hong Kong than the other way around," said Chu, who was born in Shanghai and lived in Hong

Kong many years before becoming a U.S. citizen.

But China's track record on human rights concerns many who worry about potential government crackdowns on the freedoms Hong Kong residents now enjoy.

"But I don't think there's a panic over that," said Willie Chen, who was born in China but lived mostly in Taiwan before coming to the United States in 1968.

As with other area Chinese immigrants, Chen said most of his friends in Hong Kong are business people, those with money who could move to other countries easily if life on the island turns for the worse. "Any time they can leave," said Chen, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident. "A lot of them have U.S. citizenship already. There is no fear and they enjoy their freedom."

Attorney Tom Chan tells the story of a friend who moved to the United States from Hong Kong several years ago in anticipation of the change in government rule. He returned to Hong Kong.

"He's making so much more money there than here, why would he worry?" said Chan, a Rancho Palos Verdes resident who served as a trade adviser to the Reagan-Bush administration.

Yet the mood in Hong Kong has changed in recent years, said Carol Kwan, a Lomita resident who owns an entertainment production company that does a lot of business on the island. "I realize that people are not so happy there," Kwan said. "They're unsure."

Kwan worries about what China's takeover could bring. One of her relatives in the United States is trying to get a brother out of Hong Kong. "It's easy to say everything is fine," said Kwan, who serves on the West Basin Water Board. "But you have to look at the 6.9 million people who have to live there and can't get out.

"They would be scared," Kwan said. "They would be unhappy because they don't know what the outcome would be."

But Hong Kong Chinese with money will travel, if they have to. "I have friends in Hong Kong who are concerned with what's going to happen to them," Chan said. "But all these people already have planned, (potential) exits. They all have passports.

"And those that haven't, they don't care" about China taking over.

That's partly because the democratic freedoms under British control were limited, Chan said. They could not, for example, elect their own governor, who was appointed by the British government.

"If I'm Chinese, I'd rather be ruled by Chinese than a foreign government," Chan said. Under British rule, he said, "It's almost phony because there's no democracy in the first place."

Still, Chan said, British-controlled Hong Kong offered the Chinese a forum for freedom of expression. "It's the only place in China that you could stand up and say (what happened) in Tiananmen Square was bad."