

# Wall of ignorance

**Paul Letters** says his personal experiences prove Hong Kong has a long way to go to catch up with the developed world on disabled rights, and a little awareness and understanding would surely help

**H**ong Kong is one of the most advanced places in the world, but not when it comes to disability. For example, from Central to Causeway Bay, skyscrapers packed with medical clinics lack entrances with ramps. This is so absurd it's almost amusing.

A world leader in disability rights, Britain has made it a legal requirement for public buildings to provide disabled parking and toilets since 1970. Here, even schools lack disabled parking and signage (so if there is a disabled entrance, you'd never know). Places that do have disabled toilets use them, at best, as smoking rooms and often as full-to-bursting store rooms; I've waited for toilets to be decluttered everywhere, from highly regarded restaurants such as Pacific Place's Domani to Hong Kong Stadium.

For work, I was once sent to an all-day conference in a building which greeted me and my wheelchair with a flight of steps and no disabled side-entrance. I'm a reluctant but regular recipient of the "sedan chair treatment" – where, due to a lack of elevators or stair lifts, teams of obliging security personnel carry me up a flight of steps, as they did adeptly at the recent Hong Kong Wine Festival. At this conference, there was no lift – and our room was on the fourth floor. So I turned around and headed home (from Central to Sai Kung). I'm not ashamed to admit I was tearful by the time I reached home.

Any flight of stairs without a wheelchair symbol and an arrow indicating a wheelchair entrance around the corner makes the statement "No Disabled People" – as plainly as some institutions in bygone Hong Kong had signs declaring "No Chinese".

This brings me to our recent family outing, one which was supposed to make up for lost time. We had tried to visit Ocean Park once before: we weren't going to let steep slopes stop us or my wheelchair. I say "us" but my disability restricts me to sitting pretty, so, two-year-old in tow, my wife did all the heaving up Ocean Park's hillside – until the impossibly steep slopes won.

But, with my new mobility scooter, what wasn't possible now is – or should be. My "Luggie" – so-called because it's designed to collapse into a small suitcase – is slimline and acutely manoeuvrable. So, on occasions where steps are avoidable (which, for example, discounts most shops throughout Hong Kong), it's possible to



negotiate narrower pathways through offices and supermarkets than my mechanical wheelchair can manage.

Before I was born, leading developed nations introduced legal provision for the use of "invalid carriages" (now, mobility scooters) on footpaths and pavements. More than 40 years later, word has not reached parts of Hong Kong.

The most persistent of the five Ocean Park staff to stop and detain me for questioning justified this because "certain electric vehicles are not allowed entry – Segways, for example". I had to explain that people in wheelchairs can't generally use these two-wheeled electric scooters.

My family and I have been in situations before where overly officious staff have made life harder than it needs to be.

When arriving in a mechanical wheelchair at Chek Lap Kok, if you get the wrong check-in assistant, you can find yourself parked facing a wall for half an hour while you're forced to wait for a porter to shove you through the airport (Of course, there's a lack of official help until you reach check-in – but from there, shorn of luggage, we don't need help). I say "forced" because, whereas many airline staff are sensitive



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and helpful, some have told us that we are not allowed to wander around the airport without a porter escort. In that situation, we wait until the check-in staff are distracted by their next passengers and then make a run (or "wheel") for it to passport control – where security staff happily process us, without the need for a porter.

And so, at Ocean Park, we made a break for the aquarium – my crying wife walked as briskly as she could while carrying our son, and I maxed out at 6 km/h. Four out of the five nagging staff lost interest, but Ocean Park's pink-jacketed "Terminator" wouldn't give up.

I offered proof of my disability, issued by the Social Welfare Department, but the Terminator's ability to "give a damn" had never been installed. Instead, he assured us that "it will be less hassle for you to borrow one of our self-propelling wheelchairs". Less hassle? I've never punched anyone in my life, but I shaped up to.

I'm glad I didn't – not just because I have the physical power of a rain-drenched moth, but I can't imagine it would have done much to advance disabled rights. At least our four-year-old handled it with mature understatement: "He's a very bossy man".

Ocean Park had charged me full adult entry of HK\$320 to harass and then quarantine me (my family were allowed to visit the animals) until a manager eventually appeared and gave my mobility scooter the green light. I found it hard to take an apology seriously when it came from someone in a luminescent pink and yellow jacket.

At least after the event, Ocean Park didn't ignore the issue. To be in a wheel-

chair is to watch too many drivers of taxis with their "for hire" light on speed up as they pass by. But who am I to judge that they should be lifting my chair into their boot? Perhaps, in some cases, their spines are weaker than mine?

We've not tried to take my Luggie abroad yet, but it wouldn't surprise me if Chek Lap Kok turns out to be the one airport in the developed world which forbids mobility scooters, however neatly they fold up. And it's so much fun getting from the car park to the check-in desk in a mechanical wheelchair, with a small child and luggage.

In our old routine, my wife would push me, with a rucksack across my wheelchair, five metres forward and then go back to retrieve our suitcase and pull it five metres beyond where I'd be parked. All the while, our son toddled along on his own.

Ocean Park's corporate social responsibility programme does good work for the disabled. But Hong Kong needs more than corporate policies. We need progressive laws to enforce and we need individuals to be trained how to care.

Far from all the staff at Ocean Park or the airport are unenlightened, and people can make such a positive difference. The airport security guard who gave me his personal number and now pre-arranges help for us each time we travel is one such individual. In Hong Kong, we lack both a legal framework and a culture of awareness of disabled rights – but where there's humanity, there's hope.

Paul Letters is a political commentator and writer of a forthcoming second world war novel, Providence. See paulletters.com

## Support system

**Louisa Mitchell** says universities in Hong Kong need to develop a more flexible structure for the increasing diversity of students with disabilities

**T**oday, on International Day of Persons with Disabilities, we should consider the stories from this year about exceptional students with disabilities who have attained places at Hong Kong's leading universities. One example is Tsang Tsz-Kwan, a blind and deaf student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong who reads Braille with her lips.

While her situation is extreme, she is not alone. The number of students with disabilities at Hong Kong's universities is growing steadily. Research conducted for non-governmental organisations Civic Exchange and Community Business in 2011 and 2012 found 257 students with disabilities registered at the eight publicly funded universities. That has since increased to almost 400.

Although the proportion of such students is still low here, at about 0.4 per cent of all students (compared to around 7 per cent in Britain and 5 per cent in Australia), it still equates to a compound annual growth rate of 11 per cent over for the past five years. This trend looks likely to continue as students become increasingly open about declaring their disabilities, as in other developed places. Five years ago, 32 students registered their disability up-front with the Joint University Programmes Admissions System; this year, 122 did so.

There has also been a change in the proportion of disability categories. In 2011/12, around 70 per cent of students with disabilities were classified as physically handicapped, visually or hearing impaired. This year, it was 55 per cent. The proportion of students categorised as having a non-physical disability, such as those with special learning difficulties, attention deficit disorder and mental illness, has increased.

Have support services in Hong Kong kept pace with this growing diversity? Some universities are taking specific steps, such as the Hong Kong Institute of Education's recently reported HK\$100,000 expenditure on equipment and a sign-language interpreter for two deaf students. NGOs are filling gaps, particularly with regard to employment. It takes determination and optimism, as well as intellect, to make it through university with a disability and this group of individuals forms a high-quality talent pool.

Equal Opportunities Commission chairperson Dr York Chow Yat-ngok has met some university vice-chancellors to discuss support services and some have committed to take appropriate measures. The Education Bureau has injected more funds into scholarships available for tertiary students with special education needs.

But the pace of change needs to accelerate to keep up with the growing number of students with disabilities. Instead of reactive, piecemeal solutions, there needs to be an overarching commitment to develop a flexible tertiary education system to support an increasingly diverse student population on a long-term basis.

Joyce Pun Chung-sze, one of the deaf students being supported by HKIEd, was reported to have said about her study experience in Washington: "My life in the US was delightful... The school arranged everything for me. I was respected by everyone." That's what Hong Kong should be aiming for.

Louisa Mitchell is a founder of new organisation CareER (Care in Education and Recruitment), supporting higher education students with disabilities in their transition to employment in Hong Kong

## The EU can forge a new relationship with China through cultural compromise

**Lanxin Xiang** says nation's future is aligned with that of a Europe at odds with US belligerence

**T**he recent EU-China summit – the first between the European Union and the new Chinese leadership – indicates the beginning of a new, ambitious relationship. Although it has been labelled a "strategic partnership" for a decade, relations have always been on a more ad hoc basis, dealing with specific issues, mostly related to the economy and human rights. Now, finally, a clear road map has emerged in an unprecedented joint document charting bilateral co-operation through to 2020.

Trade and investment issues remain high on the agenda, and both sides have taken a big step forward by launching negotiations on an investment agreement covering protection and market access. But most notable are the tone of the dialogue and the much widened areas of co-operation, including regional security, energy and cultural exchanges.

Tremendous changes have taken place in both Europe and China over the past 10 years. In that time, bilateral relations have grown stronger. Today the EU is China's biggest economic partner, with bilateral trade in goods and services reaching almost half a trillion euros last year. As the *China Daily* notes, this has led to the creation of jobs and business opportunities for both sides. Pressing global challenges have also drawn the two closer on security issues.

President Xi Jinping (习近平) has described their relationship as two civilisations pushing for the progress of humankind. Meanwhile, Premier Li Keqiang

(李克强) said: "Any problem in China-Europe relations can be resolved as long as we increase communication and enhance understanding." This is the first time an official Chinese statement has raised EU-China relations to such a high level. It is in sharp contrast to Sino-US relations, where Beijing seems to be encountering many insurmountable problems.

The fact is that the EU and China have already become the key pillars of the international system; they do not place their trust and security in any residual



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unipolar system. With the end of the cold war, China's security concerns have shifted fundamentally, almost exclusively to the Sino-US relationship. This concern – in the form of the militarised US "pivot to Asia" – has compelled Beijing to pay close attention to the peaceful, rule-binding and multilateral EU approach to global governance.

Largely inspired by the European integration process, there has been a movement to create multilateral diplomatic and security mechanisms. For

the first time in history, there is no major geopolitical conflict on the Eurasian mainland.

It is clear that China is now drawn into a continental orientation, because its long-term strategy involves the search for a safe environment for its economic and political development. The success of this strategy may ultimately hinge on civilisational compromise between the West and China, but not on naked international power politics.

The "West" is clearly divided. On one side is a Europe that is culturally tolerant of civilisational dialogues; on the other is the US, still running an "empire of denial", which could mean an ongoing global crusade against cultural challenges from other civilisations.

After all, Europe began the cultural debate with China some 400 years ago. It was the Catholic Church that first recognised the vast potential for expanding the Christian community beyond racial boundaries. Through a process of learning the customs, languages and thought patterns of targeted societies, the Jesuits attempted to restructure the Christian order according to local systems. A debate on whether Chinese ritual practices, such as ancestor worship, were in fact compatible with Christianity preoccupied missionaries for a century, and the eventual European rejection of the Chinese value system during this so-called "rites controversy" was a defining event in the history of the West's relationship with China. It also planted the seeds of a

fundamental misunderstanding of China.

It is hard today to understand the extraordinary vehemence and bitterness surrounding this theological argument between China and the Christian world. Although it began as a theological debate, it eventually involved three popes, two Chinese emperors, hundreds of missionaries and the entire theologian faculty at the Sorbonne, the intellectual centre of the counter-reformation.

This first encounter is conveniently forgotten in the West. Hence, it falls upon the Chinese to put forward the idea of returning to the debate, which was relatively free from cultural bias and racial prejudice.

The EU also seems to have realised that its traditional approach to Asia is out of step with the continent's own trends. Asia is no longer interested in Western imports of values and institutions and the EU should abandon its efforts to transfer its own post-war solutions. Instead, it should focus on reviving the historical approach of cultural compromise and build influence on a more solid moral ground.

Lanxin Xiang, a professor at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, is currently in Washington as a senior fellow of the Transatlantic Academy at the German Marshall Fund

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## Basic values are the key to becoming a true metropolis

**Simon Haines** says Hong Kong can mature into a 'mother city'

**T**he critic Matthew Arnold, writing in 1867, seems to have foreseen the future of cities in an industrialising China. His most famous essay, *Culture and Anarchy*, written as Britain's own world-leading Industrial Revolution unfolded, warned against attaching too much value to the material development of a society while disregarding the social fabric, cultural institutions and places of humane reflection that make up civic society: those that make cities truly great, genuinely rich. Today, London is home to some of the finest galleries, museums, theatres and universities in the world. Indeed, culture is often quoted as the top reason people want to visit or live and work in Britain's capital. They seem less keen to move to Beijing: how many tourists go back for a second visit?

According to Aristotle, it's only in cities that human beings can fully become themselves. For him, a "metro-polis" was a "mother city", the true home of a people, the place that nurtures most of us.

Of course, it's very hard to get the civic balance right. The Greeks didn't: the prosperity of Athens herself, the mother city of democracy, rested heavily on slave labour. Civic dysfunction has been with us ever since. On the other hand, for all their pollution, crime and poverty, cities are where people prefer to live. As physicist Geoffrey West has shown, exponentially with their size, cities have ever higher levels of good things as well as bad. For a research centre like ours, how

much we flourish in cities, the degree and quality of our civic well-being, is a values question. And that doesn't primarily mean money values. Instead, we want to ask how much is a city or society esteemed, how much is it "valued": especially by its own citizens?

According to Confucius, its values, the virtues of its citizens, are more important to a state than its laws.

Hong Kong, is not just a "world city"; according to the Basic Law, it has retained many of the attributes of a city state, a



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real polis: not sovereign, but to a great degree autonomous, self-legislating. The collaborative making of a rule of law and thus respect for law itself (not just "rules") has helped make Hong Kong what it is. The chief executive is not just a mayor. This heightened civic, not just civil, status brings with it real responsibility. There's no reason to think the Chinese government has any objection to Hong Kong's exercising of this responsibility, within the limits of its own mini-constitution. In an unusually fractious

frame of mind, Hong Kong is heading towards an all-important milestone in 2017, when in principle its chief executive will for the first time be elected by universal suffrage. There is some scepticism about what 2017 will deliver. But just as importantly, there is a widespread sense that, for various reasons, the current executive is having trouble dealing with the city's many urgent dysfunctions: social, environmental, educational, linguistic, and cultural.

Underlying this is a feeling that Hong Kong is losing touch with itself, with what has made it a great city. This goes to basic values, not the Basic Law.

So what are those basic values, the civic virtues underlying this city's success? Thrift – not meanness or greed. Industry – not mindless workaholicism. Community well-being – not oligopoly wealth, functional or factional interest. Real, original policymaking – not just timid compliance. Reputation of all civic corruption, not just some.

In some of these respects, Hong Kong is already a beacon for the mainland. But before a world city can become a mother city, a true metropolis, it needs to finish growing up. Its own mother, China, probably wants it to.

Professor Simon Haines is director of the Research Centre for Human Values at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The centre is hosting a public forum on the value of the arts and humanities in civic society on Sunday