

Hotpot Hong Kong

Take a portion of Sevens brawn, add a spicy election (generously seasoned with scandal) and a bouquet garni of visitors and you've a full-flavoured recipe for a world city - or have you?

The government's slogan that Hong Kong is "Asia's World City" has never been more apt than today.

Over the coming hours, Hong Kong will live up to its image of an international melting pot.

The world will be in town for the final matches of the premier rugby sevens tournament on the planet.

And the news media will descend from all corners of the globe as the city elects its next leader in the most controversial of circumstances.

Also to be thrown into the mix is yesterday's arrival of Indonesian President Dr Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono on an official two-day visit.

Then there is the cortege taking the King of Tonga's body to the airport to be flown back to a nation in mourning.

King George Tupou V, 63, was taken ill suddenly last Sunday and died within hours at Queen Mary Hospital in Pok Fu Lam.

He had been due to watch the Tongan team at the Sevens.

Meanwhile, the city's police - for whom this weekend has become a logistical nightmare - were also on standby for possible protests related to the chief executive election, which has dissolved into a sorry saga of bitterness and scandal.

All in all, you have a momentous weekend  in anyone's language.

By tonight, chief executive candidates Henry Tang Ying-yen, Leung Chun-ying and Albert Ho Chun-yan will know their fate after voting is concluded at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wan Chai.

At the same time, just a few kilometres away, the Sevens tournament will be reaching its finale at the Hong Kong Stadium.

However, Hong Kong **Unison**, a non-governmental organisation which works to promote racial equality in the city, says the "melting pot" image does not run very deep.

"Many of us in Hong Kong are not even aware that the Sevens is happening this weekend," executive director Fermi Wong Wai-fun said.

"It goes to show how there is little genuine diversity in the lives of ordinary Hong Kong people's lives."

Wong said that in the eyes of the majority of Hongkongers, the supporters of the Sevens, who have descended on the city from all over the globe, may as well be from Mars.

"Those attending the Sevens are upper-middle class expatriate professionals, tourists and foreign-educated Chinese - people who are often seen as outsiders," Wong said.

"In little pockets around the city, such as in Lan Kwai Fong and business districts, we do see a lot of racial and cultural diversity, but outside of these pockets, the Hong Kong I know is still a predominantly Chinese city."

Wong also took issue with the government's catchphrase that Hong Kong is "Asia's World City", calling it "an empty slogan".

She believes that in the eyes of the government, diversity and global perspective are terms that mainly belong to the world of economics and business, and are not a true reflection of the lives of ordinary Hongkongers.

"When you look into the headquarters of a large corporation, you'll see much vibrant diversity. But this does not reach out to the other parts of the city that make up the majority of Hong Kong," she said.

Wong told a story of a Pakistani Hong Kong resident who lives in Kwai Chung.

When he went to a local cinema, the ticket seller was surprised to see him and asked: "Why are you watching a movie here?"

The cinema staff thought he should have gone to a cinema in Tsim Sha Tsui or Causeway Bay as that's where you'd normally find an expatriate rather than Kwai Chung. He encountered similar situations when he was trying to book a football practice field and only Chinese application forms were available.

"We actually don't see much acceptance of non-Chinese people outside of the expatriate pockets of the city," Wong said.

"The chief executive election is a more of a universal concern in Hong Kong. Many people who enjoy the Sevens [and live here] are likely to care about it, but I wouldn't say the same the other way around."

Briton Brian Lodwack, is retired and living in Cyprus, but this is his 23rd Hong Kong Sevens.

Despite the regularity of his visits, he had no idea the chief executive election was going on.

"I may have been here 23 times but it's only to watch the rugby," the 62-year-old said. "I've no connection with Hong Kong apart from the rugby. I'm here for that and have no interest in what goes on here locally. I'm in holiday mode - like a lot of people at the Sevens."

But not every overseas visitor was out of the political loop. Canadian Don Tallas arrived last week from Vancouver to see his son Kelly and attend the Sevens.

He admitted he didn't fully understand the internal politics of Hong Kong and couldn't name any of the candidates, but he knew the election was going on because he'd been reading about it all week.

"The impression I get is that there's a lot of mudslinging going on," the 63-year-old said.

"I know it is taking place on Sunday and things are getting heated. The longer I'm here, the

more I understand what's happening."

For Banting Wong, 25, the reason for having no interest in the Sevens was more to do with a mindset common to many Hongkongers.

"I'm just too busy, I have no time to go," the business consultant said. "Expatriates have more in common with this sport than local people, who just do not have the time to go. Our work always comes first."

And computer analyst Brian, Lee, 34, said: "My son might watch the rugby on television, while my mother of over 70, who has lived here all her life, knows this is a yearly event, but that is about it. We've more important things to deal with than rugby."

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John Carrey
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FERNI WONG, HONG KONG, CHINA

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"Many of us in Hong Kong are not even aware that the Sevens is happening this weekend!" executive director Ferni Wong Wai-fan said.

It goes to show how low there is linguistic diversity in the lives of ordinary Hong Kong people's lives.

Wong said that in the eyes of the majority of Hongkongers, the supporters of the Sevens, who have descended on the city from all over the globe, may as well be from Mars.

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