

COMMENTHK

HK can be proud of its past and its future too

Neal Clough says there is an enormous amount to admire in the city he calls home, whose greatest asset is its people

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "The future depends on what we do in the present." I landed in Hong Kong in January 1978 on the same flight as a geotechnical engineer who had been recruited to set up, within the Hong Kong government's Public Works Department, a section to deal with slope stabilization. The priority was Mid-Levels following the Po Shan Road collapse in 1972 and there was a moratorium on any further building in the area. Over the subsequent years, territory-wide slope stabilization has been a major enterprise for what is now the Geotechnical Engineering Office (GEO).

The black rainstorm warning system was introduced after the deluge that caused the deaths of three men and two boys on May 8, 1992. One of the boys was playing in his flat and was drowned in the torrent of mud that poured into the premises and engulfed him. One of the other people who died was part of the rescue team.

Previously, there had been tragedies when hillsides became saturated with water and whole slopes became unstable and careered downward, taking with them the huts and other "temporary" homes of some of Hong Kong's most disadvantaged residents. It was the rain that caused most of the damage rather than the hurricane-force winds. The slopes became "super saturated" and the surface lost cohesion and separated, resulting in a devastating landslide. Stabilizing slopes is a major geotechnical exercise.

The rain on Sept 8 this year was at a scale far beyond the rains that caused widespread devastation previously. It could not have been foreseen and in those past years would have caused unimaginable destruction. There would have been immediate and long-term havoc. These recent rainstorms were of an intensity never witnessed before. If the conditions had been as they were when I arrived 45 years ago, when slope stabilization was in its infancy, it is inevitable that many would have died and there would



Neal Clough

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have been even greater damage.

It would be good if those who decry everything that Hong Kong does could take a moment to note the huge advances that have been made. These have continued and accelerated since 1997. It is not just slope maintenance and stabilization and the admirable work of the GEO, but also the many advances across the whole range of public services. Recent events give cause to reflect on this one aspect. We should remember the others.

Hong Kong can now be proud of its public hospital system which compares favorably with most developed economies. The major developments at Prince of Wales Hospital and Queen Mary Hospital have gone hand in hand with the advances at the medical schools at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong, both of which now attract world leaders in their fields. There is a commitment to continued improvement in the public sector. As far as private medicine is concerned, Hong Kong patients can avail themselves of the latest advances in all fields and can see the specialist of their choice within a short time span.

Hong Kong's transport system is a world leader in terms of efficiency, reliability, cost, cleanliness and speed. All of Hong Kong is connected by an integrated system that shows the advantage of public investment working together with the private sector to produce optimum service for the community. The interconnectivity of the MTR with

the metro in Shenzhen and the trunk routes in the Chinese mainland is another aspect of continuing improvement.

There are many good schools in the UK, the US, Australia and elsewhere but there are also many good schools in Hong Kong. Families that have left Hong Kong for the sake of the education offered within the state system in Britain are seemingly unaware of the problems that may befall a child who is not in the "right" catchment area. Official inspections have shown that there are many bad schools in the UK.

Recognizing the great advances in Hong Kong over the years should not be limited to criticism and comparison with others. What we are entitled to expect is some objective evaluation of what has been done that enables planning for further improvements and a better future. The inability to recognize what is good and what has improved is myopic and destructive, and until recently, pretty much the mindless preserve of a now defunct "democratic opposition". It leads to the selfishness of wanting the government to be responsible for everything and the assumption that everything must be better elsewhere. Hong Kong's strengths were well illustrated when those who had left under the hysteria orchestrated by Chris Patten before the 1997 handover came back in droves when the reality of post-handover Hong Kong became apparent. Many Hong Kong residents have a right of abode elsewhere but stay here by choice.

I count myself fortunate that I came here in 1978. Hong Kong is my home and I continue to be optimistic for its future. When Murray MacLehose was Hong Kong governor, he said that the city's greatest resource was its people; let us hope that this continues to be so and our talent pool and entrepreneurial endeavors are supported in the future by human resources from the Chinese mainland, as has been the case from the very beginning of Hong Kong.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

Attacks on Care Teams fly in the face of facts and are often biased

On social media platforms, some commentators like to develop the flesh of defamation beneath the protective skin of freedom of speech. Their followers like to select groundless accusations that support their pre-existing opinions and beliefs. Such biased searches for preferred opinions are called confirmation bias. In fact, the great swathes of information (including distorted facts and biased opinions) now available on social media seem to have seriously undermined confidence in the veracity of what people read and see.

One hardly needs reminding that more information has led to more disinformation. The aim of this article is to help readers filter facts concerning the district services and Care Teams in Hong Kong from defamatory opinions.

Sang Pu, who is notorious for his malicious criticism of China and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, moved to Taiwan after the promulgation of the National Security Law for Hong Kong in June 2020. Besides being a political commentator, he also wears another hat as the chairman of the Taiwan Hong Kong Association.

In late 2022, he maliciously portrayed the Care Teams in a defamatory light. His main argument was that the Care Teams would play a similar role to neighborhood and residential committees on the Chinese mainland, all of which report developments in their communities back to the authorities. Sang claimed that Care Teams would be exactly the same as neighborhood committees on the mainland, and that the Communist Party of China wants to introduce them into Hong Kong to help quell any efforts to promote freedom and democracy.

The above notions do not seem to be honestly held by Sang.

First, it is worth noting that the HKSAR courts have, since the establishment of the special administrative region, been advancing the frontiers of human rights adjudication (*The Judicial Construction of Hong Kong's Basic Law*, Lo Pui Yin (HKU Press, 2014)). Hong Kong people cherish freedom. Sang's conspiracy theory is so fantastically alarming that it is beyond the imagination of all fair-minded people.

Keeping a watchful eye on residents would definitely draw an angry rebuke from all sectors of the community. It's impossible to get the resentment genie back into the bottle after having released it. The conspiracy theories, such as of a so-called "surveillance scheme", which Sang and others have suggested, provide further ammunition for Western politicians to use against China.

Second, any "surveillance scheme" would come at a great cost to the legitimacy of the HKSAR government.

Third, it is what the Care Teams are actually doing that really matters. The Care Teams in two pilot districts deserve great credit for providing caring services for the needy in accordance with their plans. Other Care Teams will follow suit.

Fourth, it is highly unlikely, given the complicated composition of the Care Teams, that the government could throw a shroud of secrecy over any hidden surveillance agenda.

Finally, the radar screens of the Care Teams may have blind spots because some residents are not covered by their service plans.

Facts are sacred. Some important facts can help us understand the true nature of the Care Teams. Critics should read the following paragraphs before pointing accusing fingers at the Care Teams.

The experimental Care Teams program aims to provide social services for the needy in the city's 18 districts. It's essentially a public-private partnership which liberates the government from making a substantial financial commitment to sustain the program. Supporting the government's district-level work also enjoys a very high priority on the Care Teams' agenda.



Pearl Tsang and Kacee Ting Wong

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As announced in the 2022 Policy Address, Care Teams will be set up in the 18 districts to consolidate community resources and forces, support the government's district-level work and strengthen community networks. Care Teams will organize caring activities and assist in handling emergencies. Acting as a transmission belt, they can also help the government disseminate information to the public and relay the views of the public to the government.

The two pilot districts are the Tsuen Wan and Southern districts. Other districts will gradually set up their own Care Teams, drawing on the experiences of those in the pilot districts. The government will delineate each district into sub-districts. Currently, the Tsuen Wan district has 19 sub-districts, while the Southern district has 17. District Officers will oversee all Care Teams. The performance of respective Care Teams will be assessed with reference to key performance indicators.

An examination of the Tsuen Wan and Southern districts' Care Teams enables us to have a better grasp of their actual operations. The Tsuen Wan Care Teams have gathered community resources and lived up to the spirit of serving the community and building a caring community. Care Teams in these two districts have started providing caring services for people in need. As of the end of June, Care Teams in the Tsuen Wan and Southern districts had visited or contacted over 2,000 households with elderly members, and 1,000 other households in need, and had provided assistance based on the needs of those households.

For example, the Care Team in the Southern district visited residents of A Square, the first transitional housing in the district, to understand their needs and help them integrate into the community.

Care Teams in Tsuen Wan have, so far, provided emergency assistance on two occasions under the command of the Tsuen Wan District Office.

With regards to policy promotion, Care Teams in the Tsuen Wan and Southern districts actively promoted the government's proposal to improve governance at the district level in May. Since commencing work that month, Care Teams in the two districts have already set up at least two communications channels (including telephone, email, social media and instant messaging applications) so members of the public can contact them.

It is hoped that the above clarifications will stop defamatory narratives and rumors from dominating the marketplace of ideas.

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Human judgment still crucial in tech era

In a world on the brink of nuclear catastrophe, one man's decision altered the course of history. Stanislav Petrov, a duty officer at the command center for the Oco nuclear early-warning system, found himself facing a pivotal moment on Sept 26, 1983. The system had just reported the launch of five missiles from the United States, a situation that would typically trigger a retaliatory strike from the Soviet Union. However, Petrov's intuition and deep understanding of the system led him to question the validity of the report.

Petrov's gut feeling urged caution. With years of experience working on the Oco system, he knew it occasionally malfunctioned. Recent events, like the shooting down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by the Soviet military, made him skeptical of a surprise nuclear attack. In an act of defiance, Petrov chose to deviate from protocol and withhold the information from his superiors. Instead, he decided to observe if the system would detect any additional incoming missiles.

Minutes passed, and the system remained silent. No further missiles were reported. Petrov's hunch was correct: The initial alert had been a false alarm triggered by the sun's reflection off clouds. Had Petrov followed orders and reported the false alarm, the Soviet Union would likely have launched a devastating nuclear strike on the US, leading to a catastrophic conflict with millions of lives lost.

Petrov's extraordinary decision earned him the title "the man who saved the world". His actions serve as a stark reminder that technology, despite its advancements, is fallible. In preventing disasters, human judgment and critical thinking are indispensable. Petrov's courage and quick thinking in the face of immense pressure exemplify the power of individual agency in averting catastrophe.

In the aftermath of this pivotal event, Petrov received both praise and criticism. Some applauded his disobedience, recognizing that he acted on his conscience and made a life-or-death judgment call. Others



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condemned his insubordination, pointing out the potential implications of overriding established protocols. Nevertheless, Petrov unwaveringly maintains that he did what was right. He could not fathom launching a nuclear strike on the United States, even if the system indicated an attack.

Petrov's story resonates as a testament to the critical role of human judgment in an era of rapidly advancing technology. While technology offers immense power and potential, it also harbors the danger of unintended consequences when misused or blindly relied upon. The incident serves as a clarion call for society to recognize that technology, no matter how sophisticated, must always be complemented by thoughtful human oversight and intervention.

The 40th anniversary of Petrov's fateful decision provides an opportunity for reflection on the enduring significance of human judgment in preventing disasters. It reminds us to prioritize the reliability of our

technology and fortify it with robust safeguards to avert accidents or false alarms. Petrov's legacy implores us to embrace the responsibility of harnessing technology for the greater good while acknowledging its inherent limitations.

In an era marked by the rapid proliferation of advanced technological systems, Petrov's story casts a sobering light on the delicate balance between progress and peril. It urges us to nurture and cultivate our human capabilities for critical thinking, empathy, and discernment. In the face of ever-evolving complexities, it is the strength of our judgment that will ultimately determine the fate of our world.

The tale of Petrov's heroic actions is not merely a historical footnote; it is a timeless parable that continues to resonate today. It reminds us that even in an age dominated by algorithms and artificial intelligence, the human element remains irreplaceable. While technology can assist us in countless ways, it is our capacity to think critically and make sound decisions that distinguishes us from machines.

Petrov's story also serves as a cautionary tale. It highlights the dangers of relying too heavily on automated systems without proper checks and balances. As we continue to advance technologically, we must ensure that our creations do not outpace our ability to control them. The potential consequences of a single false alarm or a malfunctioning system should give us pause and motivate us to implement fail-safe mechanisms and rigorous testing protocols.

Ultimately, the legacy of Petrov endures as a testament to the triumph of human judgment over the fallibilities of technology. His courage in the face of uncertainty saved countless lives and prevented a catastrophic global conflict. As we navigate the complexities of our modern world, let us remember his story and the lesson it imparts: In the realm of technology, human wisdom and discernment must always prevail.

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