

New Hong Kong government shows off its gifts from China

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Hong Kong's new rulers Tuesday proudly showed off a glittering collection of gifts presented by China to symbolically herald the resumption of its rule in the territory.

A giant golden bauhinia flower -- the symbol of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, born just hours earlier -- took pride of place among the gifts from 31 Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and cities.

The gold-sprayed "Forever Blooming Bauhinia" was given to Hong Kong's new Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and China's Foreign Minister Qian Qichen by China's central government, after the midnight handover ceremony from British rule.

The 150 centimeter (60 inch) open flower "represents unity with the Chinese motherland" and the continued "flourishing and prosperity of Hong Kong," according to the Chinese-language label on the exhibit.

A hall in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the scene of Monday night's glittering handover ceremony, was Tuesday given over to the display of the often lavish and highly ornate gifts.

Most striking was a giant, intricately carved, 2.3 tonne jade dragonboat -- complete with flapping stone sails and rigging -- mounted on a giant ball.

The gift, from the neighboring Chinese boom province of Guangdong, was called "Have a good trip" in Chinese, a reference to Hong Kong's passage into Chinese sovereignty.

"I'm so proud to be here and to be able to see the gift from my province to our brothers in Hong Kong," said Anni Lo, 36, from the provincial capital Guangzhou. "It shows the excellence of our craftsmen," she added.

Beset Chinese local officials in town for the handover queued up to be photographed alongside the contributions of their areas.

Others were less impressed by the array of handicraft carpets, tableaux, giant medallions, sculptures and even a scale wooden model of a Buddhist pagoda in Shanxi province.

"It's very carefully and expertly done, but it's just too glitzy and garish to be my taste at all," an American who viewed the collection said.

The resounding symbols of the exhibits -- made from brass, copper, wood, fibreglass, marble, canvas and jade -- were unity and the act of embracing.

The gifts were stored in an upstairs room of the convention centre as many were simply too heavy to hand over at Monday's ceremony attended by Britain's Prince Charles and Prime Minister Tony Blair and by Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Premier Li Peng, government officials said.

"Due to the large number and size of the gifts, some weigh between 1,000 and 3,000 kilogrammes (2,200 to 6,600 pounds), individual presentations were not possible during the celebration ceremony," a spokesman said.

Instead the gifts were shown on a video monitor and guests later filed upstairs to view them, she added.

The official, who requested anonymity, added that the collection may later be displayed permanently in Government House, which until Monday was the official residence of Britain's 28 governors, including Chris Patten who sailed away from the territory shortly after midnight.

"It's not sure yet, but the idea has been mooted that Government House would be an excellent location for the items," she said.

Tung has said he will not live in the colonial mansion which China has said is a symbol of the shame and humiliation of foreign rule here.

Other items included an "Auspicious Twist" -- a fibreglass loop of colours from Chongqing province -- two giant floral urns from the city of Beijing and a gilded sculpture representing the handover from Hebei province.

The sculpture, 155 centimeters (62 inches) tall, intended to be one centimeter for each year of colonial rule -- in fact Britain was here for 156 years -- featured a swathe of golden dragons representing the Chinese nation.

In the centre, a glass paper weight-like orb featuring a Hong Kong skyline is perched on a spout of artificial water symbolising the support the unified China will give to its wealthy new acquisition.