

# THE HONG KONG LINKED RATE MECHANISM

MONETARY LESSONS FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

with a Preface by John Greenwood

CHRISTOPHER L. CULP  
& STEVE H. HANKE



KSP Books



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# Structure of the Book

## A note by Prof. Steve H. Hanke

During the 1992-93 period, Prof. Culp and I wrote “The Hong Kong Linked Rate Mechanism: Monetary Lessons for Economic Development.” We did this, in part, at the suggestion of the late Sir Alan Walters – who was our colleague and collaborator at Johns Hopkins. While serving as Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s personal economic adviser, Sir Alan played a key role in the reintroduction of Hong Kong’s currency board, in 1983. We were also encouraged by the architect of Hong Kong’s currency board, John Greenwood.

Just why did John and Sir Alan encourage us? Well, at the time, I was engaged in designing currency board systems for countries in Latin America and the former Soviet Union. During the advocacy phase of my activities, many people inquired about the workings of Hong Kong’s currency board. Since there was no comprehensive piece of research on this subject available at the time, my then-student Prof. Culp and I

decided to write our own paper. Alas, we were too busy with other activities to attend to its publication.

In the years since Prof. Culp and I wrote “The Hong Kong Linked Rate Mechanism: Monetary Lessons for Economic Development,” the unpublished paper has sustained a certain degree of interest. In consequence, we have decided to publish the original 1993 paper, without amendments.

Since Hong Kong’s currency board has evolved from what it was in 1993, we have invited John Greenwood, who currently serves on the Hong Kong Monetary Authority’s Currency Board Advisory Committee, to present a brief account of the major changes that have occurred in the HKMA’s structure since we wrote our 1993 paper.

Taken together, as they should be, the Culp-Hanke and Greenwood papers provide the reader with a clearer understanding of how Hong Kong’s currency board works and how it has evolved.



# Preface

## Comments on June 1993 Version of *The Hong Kong Linked Rate Mechanism: Monetary Lessons for Economic Development*

**T**he statement at the top of page 26 (“The Hong Kong banking system was (and is) completely separate from the Exchange Fund...”) was not strictly correct when written since The Account had been introduced in July 1988 – i.e. the leading bank, HSBC, held deposits with the Exchange Fund. This acted as a reserve account for the system as a whole since HSBC operated the clearinghouse.

On pp.28-30 and p.56, you discuss cash arbitrage. I also discussed it in Asian Monetary Monitor. However, the HKMA has always been very doubtful that any such transactions ever occurred. So while cash arbitrage remains a theoretical possibility (as mentioned on p.29) it is doubtful if it ever really played any significant part in equilibrating the market rate with the official convertibility rate (7.80). As you

correctly state on p.30, interest rate arbitrage was much more important.

On p.34 there is another reference to the HKAB clearinghouse (“retains a monopoly over clearing and payments”), but it ceased to exist from December 1996 (see below).

The paper states twice that there is no deposit insurance scheme in Hong Kong, which was correct at the time of writing (pp.58 & 59). However, after extended consultation a Deposit Protection Scheme was introduced in Hong Kong in May 2004 at a level of HK\$100,000 per depositor, which – at the time -- covered approximately 84% of depositors in Hong Kong but only 16% of deposits by value. Premiums are paid by banks on a graduated scale according to each bank’s credit rating.

## **Update of Hong Kong’s Currency Board Arrangements since 1993**

Following implementation in July 1988 of “The Account” by the Exchange Fund (EF), effectively a reserve account for the banking system at the Exchange Fund enabling the monetary authority for the first time to control the monetary base, the Hong Kong monetary authorities could now control the overall level of money or liquidity in the system. Their next priority was to embark on a series of reforms aimed at improving the management of the monetary and banking systems in Hong Kong. While they aimed to maintain the currency board’s fixed exchange rate, they wanted to arm themselves with a range of tools – interest rates, control of the monetary base – that would help them to steer the market exchange rate back towards the official parity if speculators caused it to deviate too much.

## **Creation of the market for exchange funds bills and notes (EFBN), 1990-93**

The first step was to develop a deeper and more active money market. Hong Kong had always prided itself on its role as an international financial centre in Asia, but it had always felt handicapped by the fact that with continuous government budget surpluses and hardly any government borrowing, there was essentially no government debt market in Hong Kong, which in turn constrained the ability of the EF to influence liquidity in the local money markets. Equally, it meant that there was no array of high quality debt instruments that could serve as a benchmark for market participants, or enable Hong Kong's banks to manage their liquidity more efficiently. The solution was for the Exchange Fund to create its own liabilities and issue these debt instruments to the market with enough maturities to enable a quasi-Hong Kong government yield curve to be built up. Accordingly the Exchange Fund Bills program was launched in March 1990, and Notes (with longer maturities) were issued from March 1993.

## **Creation of the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) in June 1992**

This was an interim attempt by the Exchange Fund to provide greater guidance for overnight, inter-bank interest rates by offering discount and overnight deposit facilities for banks. The LAF effectively set a floor and ceiling for overnight rates, enabling the banks to make adjustments to their clearing accounts (at the still-independent clearinghouse) either by borrowing funds at the offer rate or by placing excess funds with the Exchange Fund at the bid rate. If rates moved outside the official bid-offer band, then banks would be obliged to lend or borrow with other counterparties in the banking system. The experiment did reduce volatility in inter-bank rates, but gradually became

redundant when after the HKMA introduced reserve accounts for all licensed banks at the authority in December 1996, and was explicitly downgraded by the Seven Technical Measures of September 1998 (see below).

### **Establishment of the Hong Kong monetary authority (HKMA) on April 1, 1993**

This brought together the Exchange Fund which had been responsible for the conduct of monetary policy (the traditional currency board), and the Office of the Commissioner of Banking which had been responsible for prudential supervision of the licensed banks and deposit-taking companies in Hong Kong. While the creation of the HKMA per se did not mark any departure from the existing practices – for example, the Exchange Fund Ordinance and the Banking Ordinance that governed monetary policy and banking policy respectively continued in force, and the colony's reserves were still held by the Exchange Fund – it was significant because the Chief Executive of the HKMA now became de facto the Banking Commissioner, and coordination of future policies affecting monetary policy and the banking system became feasible.

### **Creation of reserve accounts for all banks at the HKMA, December 1996**

When real time gross settlement (RTGS) for interbank clearing and settlement was introduced in December 1996, all licensed banks were required for the first time to maintain clearing balances with the HKMA instead of clearing through the independent Clearing House (which was closed down). The combined total of clearing balances at the HKMA became known as the Aggregate Balance. This formally brought Hong Kong's hitherto unusual arrangements into line with normal practice elsewhere, enabling the authorities to control the volume of funds in the

system directly through open market operations. From the standpoint of monetary theory, these changes meant that for the definition of the monetary base in Hong Kong now included (1) banknotes -- or the Certificates of Indebtedness corresponding to them -- and (2) the Aggregate Balance.

To summarize, the fundamental issue being addressed during the years 1993-98 was how to provide some degree of elasticity within the interbank settlement system -- a shock absorber for sudden inflows or outflows that would prevent interbank rates becoming too volatile -- while at the same time avoiding the provision of extended discount facilities that would undermine the currency board principle that base money should only be created in exchange for payments of US dollars to the monetary authority.

On the eve of the handover of Hong Kong to China on July 1st 1997 and immediately ahead of the onset of the Asian Financial Crisis the monetary system in Hong Kong appeared stronger than it had been at any time since 1972. The note issue was now not only fully backed by US\$, but incremental issues had to be paid for with US\$ at the official HK\$7.80 rate per US\$, and could be redeemed on the same terms. Insofar as there was a lack of convergence between the market rate and the official conversion rate for banknotes or CI's, there were now several mechanisms for the HKMA to achieve closer exchange rate convergence, for example by nudging interest rates up or down together with a range of new instruments (EFBN) that the banks could use to adjust their own positions, thus reducing the risk of interest rates unexpectedly spiking up or down. Moreover, the authority had ample foreign exchange reserves to ensure full cover for all its new liabilities.

However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98 abruptly exposed some remaining weaknesses of the Hong Kong currency board system. The crisis exposed the fundamental vulnerability of the monetary edifice that had been

constructed in the 1980's and 1990's in two important respects. First it showed clearly that no matter how high rates rose, there was little if any convergence between the market exchange rate and the official parity. Second, it showed that the system was built on altogether too narrow a base – a few hundreds of millions of HK\$ held by banks in the Aggregate Balance (the newly established reserve accounts of banks at the HKMA). This amount could easily prove too little in the case of sudden shifts in investor attitudes. To treat the first problem it would be necessary to limit the movement of the market rate on either side of the conversion rate for banknotes; to treat the second it would be necessary to provide a degree of elasticity to the Aggregate Balance by permitting discounting against assets that were themselves backed by foreign exchange. The Seven Technical Measures of September 1998 took care of the latter, but the first was only implemented in stages between 1998 and 2005.

### **The seven technical measures, September 5, 1998**

During 1997-98 a variety of measures were attempted to deal with the symptoms of the crisis, most notably the huge intervention in the stock market in August 1998 when the HKMA purchased in excess of HK\$ 118 billion (US\$15 billion) of equities to support the stock market. However, the fundamental causes of the weakness were not addressed until early the following month. The intervention in the stock market directly punished those speculators who were short the equity market, while the Seven Technical Measures introduced substantially more elasticity into the interbank market mechanism to enable it to deal more smoothly with sudden inflows or outflows.

The Seven Technical Measures demonstrated the Hong Kong government's commitment to maintaining the fixed rate currency board system. The measures comprised the following:

1. The HKMA provided a clear undertaking to all licensed banks in Hong Kong to convert Hong Kong dollars in their clearing accounts into US dollars at the fixed exchange rate of HK\$7.75 to US\$1. This explicit Convertibility Undertaking is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to the linked exchange rate system. It was the intention of the HKMA to move the rate of the Convertibility Undertaking to 7.80 when market circumstances permitted.

2. The bid rate of the Liquidity Adjustment Facility (LAF) was eliminated. As the improved efficiency of the interbank payment system had facilitated liquidity management of licensed banks, the need for the LAF deposit facility to facilitate orderly interbank market activities had fallen away.

3. The LAF was replaced by a Discount Window with the Base Rate (formerly known as the LAF Offer Rate) being determined from time to time by the HKMA. In determining the Base Rate, the HKMA undertook to ensure that interest rates were adequately responsive to capital flows while allowing excessive and destabilizing interest rate volatility to be dampened.

4. The restriction on repeated borrowing in respect of the provision of overnight Hong Kong dollar liquidity through repo transactions using Exchange Fund Bills and Notes was removed. Allowing for freer access to day-end liquidity through the use of Exchange Fund paper which was fully backed by foreign currency reserves would make Hong Kong's monetary system less susceptible to manipulation and dampen excessive interest rate volatility without departing from the discipline of the Currency Board arrangement.

5. New Exchange Fund paper (EFBN) would only be issued when there was an inflow of funds. This would

ensure that all new Exchange Fund paper would be fully backed by foreign currency reserves.

6. A schedule of discount rates was introduced, applicable for different percentage thresholds of holdings of Exchange Fund paper by the licensed banks for the purpose of accessing the Discount Window. This would ensure that the interest rate adjustment mechanism would come into operation when the Hong Kong dollar was under significant pressure.

7. The restriction on repeated borrowing in respect of repo transactions involving debt securities other than Exchange Fund paper was retained. No new issues of paper other than Exchange Fund paper would be accepted at the Discount Window. This would prevent significant liquidity being provided to licensed banks against paper not backed by foreign currency reserves.

This package of measures did several key things. First, it created a known lower-level price at which licensed banks could convert HK\$ in their clearing accounts into US\$ at the HKMA. The importance of this was that banks could now count on their ability to buy US\$ or sell HK\$ at 7.75 using their reserve or clearing balances at the HKMA. Second, it eliminated the uncertainty over the banks' ability to discount EFBN with the authority in the event that their clearing accounts became overdrawn. Third, in permitting EFBN to be used without restriction for discounting, it provided a hugely important shock absorber for Hong Kong's money markets against future episodes of large-scale selling of HK\$ currency. Banks could now draw on as much as HK\$120 billion of EFBN to act as a buffer against sudden spikes in the interbank market. Simulations conducted subsequently have suggested that if the speculative attacks of June and August 1998 had been repeated in the environment of the new discounting mechanism, overnight HIBOR rates would



have reached only about 12% and 15% respectively instead of the 15% and 23.5% that they actually reached.

Fourth, the new framework necessarily imposed a fundamental change in the operating strategy of the HKMA. It was clearly no longer feasible to intervene at some discretionary level on the weak side, given the new fixed Convertibility Undertaking (CU), although the authorities did continue to exercise discretion on the strong side. In addition, with the abolition of the LAF bid rate and the switch to a discount mechanism that was driven by the banks and priced at the market rate plus some premium, the HKMA effectively abandoned its previous attempts to steer interest rates within a specific corridor. Finally the effective freezing of the volume of issues of EFBN ended the possibility of using Exchange Fund paper to conduct active sterilization operations or to manage the money market.

### **Further refinements to the mechanism, 1999-2005**

Seven months after the successful introduction of the weak side CU, the Currency Board Sub-Committee of the HKMA (equivalent to the FOMC) proposed moving the rate upwards in steps of 1 pip per day (1/10,000 of a HK\$) from 7.7500 to 7.8000 (or 500 pips), starting on April and ending in July the following year. This finally removed the anomaly that the CU (or previously the HKMA's intervention point) differed arbitrarily from the 7.80 conversion rate for banknotes. However, the question of whether this was the optimum strategy repeatedly came up at meetings of the Currency Board Sub-Committee between October 1999 and May 2005 because the existence of a lower side CU meant that there was still uncertainty about the upper limit for the HK\$/US\$ rate, and scope for discretionary intervention by the HKMA.

Discussion centered on two issues. Should there be a strong side CU? If so, at what level should it be set? For

several years executives of the HKMA maintained the view that there should be no strong side CU, and that some “constructive ambiguity” was desirable because this would enable the authorities to impose costly surprises on speculators. Sometimes there was a transitional reason to maintain the status quo, as for example following the completion of the shift of the lower side CU from 7.75 to 7.80. However, mostly the view was expressed that if a strong side CU was set too close to the market rate, then this would undercut the operations of private foreign exchange operators, and that it was an explicit requirement of the Basic Law that Hong Kong maintain an active international foreign exchange market (Article 112).

It was not until active speculation on a revaluation of the RMB in 2003-04 that the HKMA was compelled to take action. Against a background of widening Chinese trade surpluses and strong capital inflows to Mainland China, a new strong-side CU (where the HKMA would buy US dollars from licensed banks) was set at 7.75, and the weak-side CU was to be shifted from 7.80 to 7.85. The shifting of the existing weak-side CU (where the HKMA would sell US dollars to licensed banks) was to be achieved in a gradual manner over five weeks by moving the weak-side CU by 100 pips on every Monday starting with 7.81 on 23 May 2005 until it reached 7.85 on 20 June 2005. The end result would be a symmetric band of 5 cents on either side of the 7.80 conversion rate for banknotes. This position has been maintained since May 2005 until the present day (February 2013).

## **Assessment of the reforms to the currency board, 1999-2005**

The result of the 2005-09 modifications to the framework of the currency board regime in Hong Kong was that it was now far more transparent and automatic, and less subject to

discretionary intervention. Equally important, the need for the Hong Kong authorities to use a variety of instruments to steer interest rates upward or downward in order to maintain the spot exchange rate within some undefined range disappeared altogether. There were now clear limits to the fluctuation of the spot rate on either side of the 7.80 conversion rate for banknotes. Purchases of US\$ at the strong-side CU or sales of US\$ at the weak-side CU would be triggered by the banks, not by the authority. Moreover, by limiting the possible range of exchange rate fluctuation, the strong-side and weak-side CU points would in turn indicate the limits of any potential loss to a bank or private investor who wished to conduct interest rate arbitrage transactions between HK\$ and US\$ interest rates. In combination, the implementation of these refinements in May 2005 meant that, after 22 years of experimentation, an auto-pilot was finally installed.

The combination of currency board features in force after May 2005 – a fixed rate for CIs, symmetrical CU bands on either side if it, and intra-day or overnight discounting of EFBNs by banks to smooth liquidity imbalances – are compatible both with a number of characteristic features of Hong Kong (such as the issuance of bank notes by private commercial banks, the encouragement of free capital flows and the absence of foreign exchange controls, and the existence of a vibrant foreign exchange market etc) and with the desirable theoretical features of a modern currency board system. Having been subject to careful and incremental reforms over the two preceding decades, the currency board system of Hong Kong has reached a state of development where the key features of its monetary aspects – as opposed to technological developments affecting (say) bank clearing or fund transfers -- can be expected to pause for some years.

## Macroeconomic policy after the Great Recession of 2008-09

In the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy in September 2008 and the world-wide recession that followed, US and other interest rates were lowered abruptly and steeply to the lowest levels experienced in most countries' history. This posed a major dilemma for policy makers in Hong Kong. When the Chinese economy started to recover in the summer of 2009, Hong Kong's interest rates remained anchored to US rates through the currency board mechanism. With China becoming an increasingly large influence on the Hong Kong economy, economic activity in the territory surged and asset prices boomed. Yet interest rates and monetary conditions could not be tightened - at least through the conventional mechanics of the currency board system.

The dilemma was solved, at least temporarily, by the adoption of macro-prudential measures to cool the Hong Kong economy. Thus between 2010 and February 2013 loan-to-value ratios on different categories of mortgage lending have been tightened in a series of steps, while stamp duties on property market transactions have been raised, and a range of anti-speculative measures have been introduced. As a result, bank lending to customers in Hong Kong has slowed from 30% p.a. in 2010-11 to a single digit growth rate in the second half of 2012.

The philosophy underlying the adoption of these macro-prudential measures deserves to be spelled out. The authorities take it for granted that Hong Kong can do nothing to influence US interest rates or the US or global business cycle. However, Hong Kong can limit leverage among borrowers in the territory, and since it is leverage that creates problems for policy-makers (because banks may be threatened with failure and require recapitalization, or firms may go bankrupt eliminating large numbers of jobs,

and householders may suffer negative equity or even foreclosure), the aim of policy is not to limit property and asset price movements, but to limit leveraged exposure to such asset price changes. Therefore Hong Kong's macro-prudential measures are aimed at limiting leverage amongst the banks, the non-financial corporations and households. A homeowner who is not leveraged can ride out a boom or bust, but if the householder is highly leveraged, then when the bubble bursts not only does the homeowner have a problem, but so do the banks and the authorities. In this way, Hong Kong's recent macro-prudential measures (2010-12) supplement the basic disciplines of the strengthened currency board mechanism (1999-2005).

**John Greenwood**

26 Feb, 2013

London, UK



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# Introduction

Currency boards were widely employed in colonial Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean ([Clauson, 1944](#); [Newlyn & Rowan, 1954](#); [Walters & Hanke, 1992](#)). Even though those monetary systems were successful, they<sup>1</sup> fell out of fashion, and most were replaced by central banks when colonies were granted independence. Today, currency boards operate in Hong Kong and thirteen other jurisdictions.

The search for monetary systems that will produce stability in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Latin America has led economists and politicians to advocate a return to the currency board system. (cf. [Friedman, 1991](#); [Gressel, 1989](#); [Hetzel, 1990](#); [Jordan, 1991](#); [Meltzer, 1991](#); [Osband & Villanueva, 1993](#); [Schwartz, 1992](#); [Walters, 1993](#)) For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has

<sup>1</sup> For a bibliography of proposals by Hanke and Schuler, see Hanke & Schuler ([1993b](#)).

indicated that it is considering recommending currency boards for the former Soviet Union (Hitt, 1992). Significantly, on October 6, 1992, the Foreign Operations Act was signed into law in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Under that law, the U.S. quota contribution to the IMF may be used to establish currency boards. These developments stem from the fact that currency boards have an excellent record of providing stable, convertible currencies, even during civil wars. (cf. Hanke & Schuler, 1991a; Hanke & Schuler, 1991b; Hanke & Schuler, 1991c; Hanke & Schuler, 1993b; Hanke, Jonung & Schuler, 1993).

In a currency board system, all monetary policy is fully subordinated to the maintenance of a perfectly fixed rate of exchange between the domestic currency and some foreign, "reserve" currency. A currency board's sole functions are to issue notes and coins and redeem them at the mandated, fixed exchange rate. To maintain the exchange rate link and full convertibility, a currency board is required (generally by statute) to hold 100 per cent (or greater) of its outstanding domestic currency in the reserve asset to which the domestic currency is tied.<sup>3</sup> A board generates profits (seigniorage) because it holds most of its reserves in highly liquid, interest-bearing assets denominated in the reserve currency, and its liabilities (notes and coins) pay no interest. The currency board system, therefore, places any country that uses it in a

<sup>2</sup> Public Law 102-391.

<sup>3</sup> Typically, currency boards do not engage in banking. Hence, they do not accept deposits. However, in cases where deposits in the domestic currency are accepted, they require 100 per cent reserve cover. Currency boards usually do not engage in commercial bank of financial regulation. Hence, they do not impose reserve requirement for domestic currency issued by a board is not the same as a 100 per cent reserve requirement for commercial bank, as first presented by Simon (1934).

unified currency area with its reserve currency country. (Friedman, 1968)

Currency board systems are not central banks. Indeed, they are marked by features and results that are in rather sharp contrast with typical central banks, particularly those that operate in developing countries. These distinguishing features and results include: can only supply notes and coins, fixed exchange rates, 100 per cent foreign reserves, full convertibility, an automatic (rule-bound) monetary policy, no discretionary control of the monetary base, no lender of last resort capacity, no capacity to regulate commercial banks, transparency, insulated from politics, high credibility, seigniorage from interest only (no capacity to earn seigniorage from inflationary finance), no capacity to finance government spending, and small staffs (Hanke & Walters, 1991; Hanke, Jonung & Schuler, 1993).

These features and results are found in Hong Kong, an economy that is larger than Russia's and one that has experienced the world's second-fastest real growth rate since 1965. Hong Kong's monetary system is ripe for study because so little analysis of its evolution and workings exists.

In light of the renewed interest in currency boards, an analysis and critique of Hong Kong's monetary authority, the Exchange Fund, are presented here. They provide insights for developing countries, particularly those going through the transition from socialism to capitalism. By building on the strengths and avoiding the weaknesses of Hong Kong's Exchange Fund, those countries could establish currency boards that produced stable, convertible currencies.



# 1

## The Hong Kong Linked Rate Mechanism: History and Analysis

Governments maintain a monopoly franchise over the right to create money in virtually all countries of the world, despite a noticeable lack of any *prima facie* reason why this should necessarily be so.<sup>1</sup> Buchanan (1989) and Buchanan & Brennan (1981) emphasize the need for a monetary constitution to restrain the government in its exercise of that monopoly franchise.<sup>2</sup> Without such a set of rules the government's monopoly franchise will inevitably be exploited. This exploitation is readily observed in developing countries, where most central banks create unstable, inconvertible currency; hence, currency substitution and capital flight are endemic.

<sup>1</sup> Buchanan (1989) offers a political explanation in the context of public choice theory.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the logic behind constitutional economies, see generally Gwartney & Wagner (1988) and Buchanan (1991).

Although Hong Kong's monetary system has, on balance, been quite successful, particularly when compared to monetary systems in developing countries, it lacks an explicit monetary constitution. Consequently, Hong Kong has operated with different types of monetary arrangements. The workings of each arrangement are analyzed below.

### **The pre-1974 colonial currency board regime<sup>3</sup>**

The Exchange Fund was established by the Exchange Fund Ordinance of December 6, 1935. This marked the beginning of the "sterling exchange era" in Hong Kong. During that era, Hong Kong and Great Britain were part of the same unified currency area. The sterling exchange era lasted until June 1972, when the Exchange Fund switched its reserve currency from British pounds sterling to the U.S. dollar.

During the sterling exchange era, the Hong Kong dollar (HK\$) traded at a fixed rate with sterling.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Hong Kong dollars (notes and coins) were backed 100 per cent with sterling reserves, and they were fully convertible into sterling at the official, fixed rate.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the quantity of Hong Kong dollars in circulation was solely determined by the public's demand for currency at the fixed exchange rate. The Exchange Fund was, therefore, a classical British colonial currency board.

During this period, the fixed exchange rate for the HK\$ was considered to be immutable (see Figure 1). Consequently, any commercial banking transaction which credited customers with Hong Kong dollars involved *no*

<sup>3</sup> This section relies heavily on the work of Greenwood (1982).

<sup>4</sup> Prior to that date, Hong Kong was nominally on the international silver standard. For an account of this period, see King (1991).

<sup>5</sup> For a full account of Hong Kong's experience in the sterling exchange area, see Jao (1991a).

*material foreign exchange risk vis-a-vis sterling* (Greenwood, 1982). In order to obtain HK\$ banknotes, Hong Kong commercial banks were forced to pay for them with sterling. Therefore, the process of domestic monetary expansion and contraction was determined by the net balances of sterling assets in the commercial banking sector. When the commercial banking system was a net recipient of sterling remittances, banks could either lend more Hong Kong dollars, thus expanding Hong Kong dollar deposit accounts, or purchase more currency from the Exchange Fund.<sup>6</sup> That would precipitate a monetary expansion. If the commercial banking system realized net reductions in sterling balances, the money supply process would be reversed and the money supply would contract.

The sterling exchange era for the HK\$ began to come under attack on November 18, 1967. That attack began four hours before London announced that the pound would be devalued by 14.3 per cent.<sup>7</sup> Initially, the Hong Kong government followed suit with a similar devaluation of the HK\$. However, Hong Kong's major trading partners at the time -- China, Japan, and the U.S. -- had not devalued, which meant that the HK\$ devaluation made imports more expensive. Since the Hong Kong economy was heavily dependent on imports the government reversed its initial decision and hastily revalued the HK\$ by 10 per cent on November 23, leaving a net 5.7 per cent devaluation (See Figure I.). Since most financial institutions held sterling assets against their HK\$ liabilities, the revaluation imposed a

<sup>6</sup> As will be explained below, several banks in Hong Kong have the authority to print currency. Consequently, these banks were required to buy entitlements from the Exchange Fund to print currency.

<sup>7</sup> Hong Kong had also been forced to deal with a pound devaluation in 1949.



large capital loss on the books of numerous financial institutions (Jao, 1991a).

This incident illustrated that, as sterling continued its post-war decline, British monetary instability translated into instability in Hong Kong. Consequently, in May 1968, Hong Kong began negotiations with Britain for protection. Those negotiations resulted in the "Hong Kong Dollar Bond Scheme." That allowed Hong Kong to place up to half of its official sterling reserves in HK\$-denominated bonds with seven years to maturity, up to a maximum of £150 million. The bonds could be sold exclusively for sterling, guaranteeing that any sterling devaluation would result in a gain from holding the bonds.

During the sterling exchange era, Hong Kong was not alone in fixing its exchange rate to sterling. Indeed, numerous other nations fixed their local currencies to the British pound in the Overseas Sterling Area. The Hong Kong Dollar Bond Scheme created a great uproar in many of these nations because it implied that the HK\$ could be more stable than sterling, and because it allowed Hong Kong an opportunity to diversify out of part of its sterling risk without withdrawing from the sterling area.

In response to the requests by other members of the Overseas Sterling Area to establish schemes similar to the Hong Kong Dollar Bond Scheme, the Basle Agreement was reached in September 1968. Under that agreement, the British government guaranteed (up to 90 per cent of the U.S. dollar value) the value of official sterling reserves of countries in the Overseas Sterling Area.

While the Basle agreement gave nations protection against changes in the value of sterling, it also began to destabilize the sterling area by prompting perverse lending and borrowing between monetary authorities and local financial institutions. For example, the Exchange Fund's borrowing power was raised from HK\$30 million in 1968 to

HK\$7,000 million in 1972. This greater borrowing power allowed the Exchange Fund to borrow sterling held by banks and individuals, thus counting those borrowings as "official reserves" and obtaining "insurance" against devaluations. The government, in turn, paid for these borrowings through the Exchange Fund Guarantee System, which allowed the Exchange Fund to guarantee 100 per cent loan repayment in HK\$'s, plus an "insurance premium."

When the Basle Agreement was enacted in September 1968, sterling constituted 99 per cent of Hong Kong's official reserves. By September 1971, sterling had fallen to 89 per cent. Consequently, confidence in the exchange rate link eroded. Ultimately, the increasingly unstable and weakened exchange rate link with the pound was abandoned. When the British government untied the pound from its gold parity and let it float on June 23, 1972, it also abandoned the sterling area. Hence, the HK\$ was left to fend for itself.<sup>8</sup> The HK\$ floated for only two weeks, however, before it was refixed -- this time to the U.S. dollar.

Two conditions are required for the successful operation of a currency board system (Greenwood, 1982). First, the currency board must guarantee convertibility of the home currency into the reserve currency at an absolutely fixed rate. Second, the monetary authority must not interfere with or undermine the operation of this mechanism in any way, including changing the level of the exchange rate. In June 1972, the second condition was breached when the HK\$ exchange rate with sterling was abandoned and replaced with a link to the U.S. dollar.

This action alone was not enough to immediately destabilize the system. However, when the link was shifted to the U.S. dollar, the Exchange Fund also amended its rules

<sup>8</sup> See Greenwood (1981). For an account of the demise of sterling and Bretton Woods, see Walters (1990, Chapter 3).

to allow commercial banks to pay for entitlements to issue Hong Kong dollars with *domestic credit*, rather than the reserve currency. The Fund then redeposited the proceeds of these currency sales into the domestic banking system, thus leading to a huge monetary expansion in late 1972 and 1973. At the same time, the pegged exchange rate system of Bretton Woods was on the verge of collapse, due largely to the free capital flows sent into the system by the inflationary policies of the U.S. in the 1960's. Hence, Hong Kong's inflation of 1972-75 was actually a product of events which were, in part, initiated by the operation of the Bretton Woods system (Walters, 1990).

As a result of both the excessive, discretionary policies implemented in Hong Kong in 1972 and of the instability in the Bretton Woods system, the ensuing two years were marked by instability in the foreign exchange market and a dramatic fall in the value of the HK\$ vis-a-vis the US\$ (see Figure 1). Hong Kong thus decided to float its currency in November 1974,<sup>9</sup> violating the first condition which a successful currency board must meet. In reality, though, Hong Kong's system had been undermined the instant the second condition was violated two years before.

## The floating era and Black Saturday: 1974-1983

From November 1974 until October 1983 the Hong Kong dollar floated against the U.S. dollar, with the Exchange Fund assuming a more active role in the determination of monetary policy.<sup>10</sup> The currency float, along with the 1972 institutional change which allowed commercial banks to exchange HK\$ credit for permission to issue Hong Kong dollars, allowed the Fund to take full advantage of its monopoly franchise over money creation. Greenwood (1981)

<sup>9</sup> See Greenwood (1982) for a chronicle of these events.

<sup>10</sup> See Jao (1991a).

notes, "The net result, to put it crudely, was a free float *and* a free currency issue."

The monetary authority, therefore, eliminated any purchasing power tie for the currency. By adopting the policy of redepositing proceeds from currency sales back into the banking system, it also (ironically) emasculated its own ability to affect the level of the exchange rate through open market operations. For example, under the new regime, if the Fund wished to stop the Hong Kong dollar from depreciating, it would purchase Hong Kong dollars with foreign currency on the open market. However, the new policy prompted the Fund to redeposit those HK\$'s into the banking system, where they were again lent out. Thus, there was a shift in currency ownership, but the Fund was unable to influence the monetary base (Greenwood, 1981).

To say the least, the Hong Kong dollar did not float "on a sea of tranquility" for the decade which followed the colonial currency board regime. Given the political unrest in China and Hong Kong, the HK\$ was wildly volatile over much of that time, as Figure 1 shows. This volatility reached epic proportions in late September of 1983 after the end of the fourth round of Sino-British talks on the future of Hong Kong. When it became clear that the British were planning to transfer Hong Kong's sovereignty to the People's Republic of China in 1997, financial markets and the HK\$ went into tailspins.

At the end of July 1983, the HK\$ was trading at 7.31HK\$/US\$. By Saturday, September 24th (dubbed "Black Saturday") the HK\$ had fallen to 9.55HK\$/US\$, with dealer spreads being reported as large as 10,000 basis points.<sup>11</sup> Hong Kong had been sent into a state of complete panic;

<sup>11</sup> This is not evident in Figure 1, which uses quarter-ending data only.

people began to hoard toilet paper, rice, and cooking oil in fear of impending economic chaos.<sup>12</sup>

The solution to the panic was a Stopgap Announcement made on September 25, 1983, which initiated a return to the era of the currency board, with some new twists. After some technical refinements, on October 15, 1983, the Hong Kong dollar was formally tied once again to the U.S. dollar at the rate of 7.8HK\$/US\$. The official parity has remained at that level since then.

### Cash and interest rate arbitrage: 1983-1988

From October 1983 to July 1988, Hong Kong's monetary system functioned like a colonial currency board, albeit in a sophisticated financial environment. Perhaps the easiest way to understand the operation of the system is to analyze the simplified accounts of the Exchange Fund and the banking system.<sup>13</sup> Before presenting the accounts, some institutional details are presented.

During this period, the Exchange Fund was the sole monetary authority, and was charged with ensuring the full convertibility of HK\$'s into US\$'s at the rate of 7.8HK\$/US\$. To accomplish this, the Fund was required *by ordinance* to hold 105 per cent of its HK\$ note issue in U.S. dollar reserves.

The Hong Kong banking system was (and is) completely separate from the Exchange Fund. All payments in the banking system are settled through the Hong Kong Association of Banks (HKAB) clearinghouse, which is managed by the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC). Two banks -- the HSBC and Standard Chartered Bank -- are designated as "note-issuing banks."

<sup>12</sup> For an account of these events, see Greenwood (1983a).

<sup>13</sup> This approach is due solely to the ingenuity of Greenwood. Cf. Greenwood (1988).

They alone are responsible for actually issuing Hong Kong dollar notes.<sup>14</sup>

Exhibit 1 shows a simplified version of the balance sheet for the Exchange Fund from October 1983 to July 1988. The assets of the Exchange Fund are the required foreign exchange reserves and HK\$ deposits of the Exchange Fund at the HSBC and at other banks. On the liability side of the Exchange Fund's balance sheet are coins and "Certificates of Indebtedness" (CI's). CI's are held by note-issuing banks and legally entitle them to issue one HK\$ for each CI they hold. *Only note-issuing banks are entitled to exchange the reserve currency for CI's and to print HK\$'s. Hence, only such banks have direct access to the official exchange parity.* Debt Certificates are also a liability of the Exchange Fund. They are receipts issued by the Fund to the Treasury for its fiscal account with the Fund.<sup>15</sup>

Exhibit 2 shows the simplified balance sheet of the HSBC, as manager of the HKAB clearinghouse. As an asset, the HSBC holds CI's issued by the Exchange Fund. In turn, the HSBC has corresponding HK\$ notes as a liability. In addition, the HSBC's assets include HK\$-denominated assets and foreign currency-denominated assets, which may be in the form of notes and coins, regular loans, and interbank loans. Similarly, the HSBC has liabilities denominated in both foreign and domestic currency. These include interbank borrowings, foreign exchange borrowings, and deposits

<sup>14</sup> While HK\$ notes issued by each bank trade at par with one another, they are physically distinct and advertise the bank of issue. For an overview of the Hong Kong financial system, see Freris (1991).

<sup>15</sup> The Treasury Account is just another bank account with no influence on monetary policy.

taken from other banks, the Exchange Fund, the Treasury, and the Public.<sup>16</sup>

Under this regime, the monetary base was passively and fully determined by the asset side of the Exchange Fund's balance sheet foreign exchange reserves plus domestic credit. Given the Fund's mandate to preserve the HK\$/US\$ link, the supply of Hong Kong dollars was infinitely elastic at 7.8HK\$/US\$, and the demand for HK\$, therefore, determined the quantity in circulation.

The mechanism by which the linked rate was preserved under this system was slightly different from the pre-1974 regime. To see how the new "cash arbitrage" mechanism worked, assume the HK\$ interbank rate depreciated to 7.85HK\$/US\$. A bank would then sell US\$ deposits for HK\$7.85, thus causing U.S. dollar deposits to fall and HK\$ interbank deposits to rise. That bank could then go to either note-issuing bank and buy US\$ deposits for HK\$ at the official fixed rate of 7.8HK\$/US\$. Consequently, the bank received a riskless HK\$0.05 per dollar transacted. The transaction was riskless because the exchange rate was *perfectly fixed*.

In consequence of this arbitrage, US\$ deposits rose and HK\$ currency holdings decreased. At the Fund, the opposite was true -- US\$ deposits and HK\$ currency liabilities fell. However, the private bank was then left with less HK\$ currency than before, and assuming the banks' desired currency-to-deposit ratio remained unchanged -a reasonable assumption since a bank's demand for cash is a derived demand from public requirements- the bank would then be forced to replenish its HK\$ currency holdings by decreasing

<sup>16</sup> It is not necessary to include balance sheets for the other banks in our simplified analysis, as all transactions in the banking system ultimately show up on the HSBC balance sheet because of its role as HKAB clearinghouse manager.

HK\$ lending. In this manner, a depreciated HK\$ on the interbank market prompted banks to decrease HK\$ lending, putting upward pressure on the HK\$ interbank exchange rate.<sup>17</sup>

While clear enough in theory, there are three facets of this arbitrage process that merit attention. First, it may not always be desirable for banks to conduct arbitrage transactions. While the opportunity for arbitrage exists in theory, transactions costs will drive wedges around the HK\$7.80 rate in practice. Second, the transactions may never be consummated if the banks desire a constant currency-deposit ratio.<sup>18</sup> Third, access to the conversion facility is restricted to note-issuing banks only. Consequently, the number of potential arbitrageurs is limited.<sup>19</sup> As Figure 2 shows, deviations of the HK\$ exchange rate from the official parity were quite small. However, this has not been due to the cash arbitrage process, because of the practical limitations just noted. In terms of day to day operations, the

<sup>17</sup> Note that this cash arbitrage was somewhat asymmetric. If the HK\$: interbank exchange rate appreciated rather than fell, as in the example, banks would have exchanged US\$ deposits for HK\$ currency. However, currency itself cannot be lent out, so the banks -- still facing a derived demand curve for cash -- would have been forced to wait until public demands for cash rose before the excess currency could be put into the system. As such, changes in the monetary base occurred much faster when the exchange rate fell below its official rate than when the converse occurred.

<sup>18</sup> This problem was not a major concern, though, as banks did not fear temporarily increasing their vault cash holdings if they knew the demand for currency and loans was rising.

<sup>19</sup> See Greenwood & Gressel (1988). Selgin (1989) suggests that all banks be allowed to issue notes, as long as they make those notes redeemable at the fixed rate in the reserve currency. See our discussion in Section IV of competing currency issues.



mechanism by which the linked rate was preserved can be better characterized as *interest rate arbitrage*. For example, a depreciation of the HK\$ on the spot foreign exchange market relative to the official Exchange Fund rate would induce banks to sell HK\$'s to the Fund and decrease their lending. Consequently, interbank and overnight HK\$ interest rates would rise in response. So, when the Hong Kong-U.S. interest rate differential became positive, portfolio managers would shift into HK\$-dollar-denominated assets, thus lowering the relative demand for U.S. dollars and causing the HK\$ interbank exchange rate to rise back towards the fixed parity. The opposite was true for appreciations; banks bought HK\$'s from the Fund at the official parity rate, which was lower than the spot rate, thus eventually easing interbank liquidity, lowering interest rates, and inducing a capital outflow to restore the spot rate to the fixed parity (See Figure 2.).

In practice, therefore, the 1983-1988 arbitrage system preserved all the attributes of a colonial currency board. Indeed, the arbitrage system was sufficient to preserve a fixed exchange rate. Moreover, the Exchange Fund was *not capable of affecting the level of exchange rate or the money supply, even if it wanted to*.

To appreciate this, suppose the Exchange Fund wanted to put upward pressure on the HK\$/US\$ rate by selling US\$'s for HK\$'s. Exhibits 1 and 2 show that the only avenue available to the Fund was the *asset* side of its balance sheet.<sup>20</sup> If the Fund sold foreign exchange to the HSBC, it would settle the transaction by debiting its HK\$ deposit account at the HSBC. However, the HSBC would then want to lend these funds to other banks in the system. So, a debit of the Fund's account at the HSBC would lead to a corresponding

<sup>20</sup> Recall, the amount of CI's outstanding was a fraction of foreign Exchange reserves.

HK\$ credit at some other licensed bank. The net effect of such an operation by the Fund was a change in the *composition* of deposits, but *not* their net supply. Hence, interbank liquidity, interest rates, and the exchange rate were unaffected by such moves.

## A drift towards discretion: July 1988-present

In July 1988, the Monetary Affairs Branch (MAB) of the Hong Kong Government instituted what seemed to be a simple accounting change, but that change shifted the linked rate system from one of arbitrage-enforcement towards a system that allowed for discretionary policies (see [Greenwood, 1988](#)). Another alteration, which allowed for more discretion, was made in March 1990, when the MAB began issuing debt for the account of the Exchange Fund (see [Freris, 1990](#) and [Colp, 1991a](#)). Both these changes allowed the Fund to influence monetary policy. The MAB's justification for instituting these changes was that intervention by the Fund would moderate the huge spikes in overnight interest rates that were associated with the interest rate arbitrage process. However, such short-term interest rate spikes show up primarily in overnight maturities (See Figure 2), suggesting that this variety of interest rate volatility is confined to a very small portion of the yield curve.

A cursory examination of Figure 2 reveals that, since July 1988, three-month money market rate differentials have indeed narrowed somewhat, but it has been at the expense of reducing the tightness of the exchange rate link. While the linked rate remains credibly in place, the mitigation of the market's ability to punish capital flight with huge on-shore overnight rates has clearly widened the bands of fluctuation for the HK\$ around its official parity. Since the sole objective of the currency board is to maintain the exchange rate, the MAB's decision to try and control interest rate volatility at

the expense of the exchange rate tightness was a clear deviation from the stated objectives of a currency board.

Exhibits 3 and 4 show the revised balance sheets of the Exchange Fund and the HSBC at present. The additional items on the liability side of the Exchange Fund's balance sheet are the Treasury Account, the HSBC Account (hereinafter "The Account"), and the Exchange Fund Bills. The first two items were created by the July 1988 reforms, the so-called accounting changes mentioned above.

The Account is a non-interest bearing obligation of the Fund to the HSBC, as distinct from the normal bank account of the Exchange Fund at the HSBC. It can be viewed as an open market facility (Yam, 1991). The July 1988 regulations require that The Account be maintained at a level not less than the Net Clearing Balance (NCB) of the HKAB clearinghouse; hence, the net clearing balance of the rest of the banking system. If the balance of The Account falls below the NCB or if the NCB is in debit, then the HSBC must pay a penalty interest rate on the shortfall equal to the higher of the Hong Kong Interbank Offer Rate or the Best Lending Rate (Hong Kong's prime lending rate). This gives the HSBC the incentive to maintain a balance in The Account at least equal to the NCB. Moreover, the HSBC will never wish to have more in The Account than the NCB, since it is a non-interest bearing account.

The NCB directly affects interbank liquidity, as banks with surpluses or deficits at the HKAB clearinghouse must borrow or lend in the interbank market to rectify their imbalances. As such, variations in the NCB influence interbank rates, and hence the HK\$/US\$ rate. Thus, the creation of The Account moved control over interbank liquidity from the HSBC (which previously had this control by virtue of its position as clearinghouse manager) to the Exchange Fund. This gave the Fund the capacity to intervene

directly and exert pressure on interest rates, and hence the exchange rate.

To illustrate this, suppose that the HK\$/US\$ market rate falls to HK\$7.82. The Fund may then sell US\$'s for HK\$'s on the foreign exchange market. However, unlike the pre-1988 regime, the Fund can now settle this transaction on the liability side of its balance sheet. To finance its HK\$ purchases, the Fund can merely debit The Account, reducing its liability to the HSBC by the HK\$ amount of the sale. Wishing to avoid the penalty rate, the HSBC will reduce the NCB, thus reducing the supply of Hong Kong dollars in the interbank market. This will precipitate a rise in HK\$ interbank rates, thus increasing the demand for HK\$-denominated assets. Hence, the HK\$ will strengthen against the US\$ until the divergence between the market rate and the official linked rate is eliminated.

The July 1988 changes also allow the Fund to intervene in the foreign exchange market by using the Treasury Account. By consulting Exhibits 3 and 4, it is apparent that the Government can tighten liquidity and put upward pressure on the HK\$ by using that Treasury Account. It need only transfer funds from one of its accounts at a licensed private bank to the Treasury Account, thus resulting in a debit in The Account and a credit of the Treasury Account. As long as the transaction is settled through The Account, money market liquidity will be affected ([Greenwood, 1988](#)).

By inaugurating the Exchange Fund Bills market in March of 1990, the Fund was allowed to take another pro-active step. The Bills -- obligations of the MAB on behalf of the Exchange Fund -- are a liability of the Fund. To exert an influence on the HK\$/US\$ rate, the Fund need only purchase or sell Bills. The Fund may either do this on auction day or on the secondary market ([Culp, 1991a](#)).

Assume that the Fund wants to exert upward pressure on the exchange rate by buying HK\$500 million on or just

before an auction day. It can accomplish this by settling the auction through The Account and then not "neutralizing" the sale. At an auction of, say, HK\$500 million of 91-day Bills, the Fund merely sells the Bills and debits The Account by HK\$500 million. This precipitates a tightening of interbank liquidity, higher interest rates, and a firmer HK\$.

Alternatively, the Fund may not wish to influence the exchange rate or the monetary base.<sup>21</sup> If this is the case, the Fund must redeposit the proceeds from the auction into the accounts of the Exchange Fund in the commercial banking system. Even in that case, however, the Fund may wish to influence *relative* interbank liquidity. For example, the Fund may wish to smooth a kink in the interbank yield curve. If the Fund redeposits the proceeds from the auction into the one month interbank market, then an upward kink, for example, can be smoothed without overall interbank liquidity or the exchange rate being affected.

The MAB made an even more explicit move in the direction of discretion in March 1992. It created a formal discount window, the "Liquidity Adjustment Facility" (LAF). The LAF is designed to give banks access to overnight money in exchange for collateral and a wider-than-market spread. The LAF was intended to complement the Exchange Fund Bills market by improving the ability of banks to access the interbank market late in the afternoon, after many of the larger banks have closed their dealing books.

Despite the pro-active reforms of July 1988, March 1990, and March 1992, the Fund publicly maintains that its sole mandate is the maintenance of the linked rate. Moreover, to date, the Fund has generally confined its interventions to periods of financial crises.

Without an explicit monetary constitution, though, the system in Hong Kong has introduced features that allow for

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, this seems to be the case.

limited discretion. However, the Hong Kong system should not be confused with orthodox central banking. First, while the Fund has a monopoly franchise over the creation of money, the Fund is still bound by the 7.8 HK\$/US\$ fixed exchange rate. Provided it honors its commitment to the official parity, the Fund cannot abuse its monopoly over the money creation franchise. Second, the Fund does not impose reserve requirements on banks of any kind. Local financial intermediaries do face "liquid asset" requirements, but they are relatively harmless and easy to satisfy. Third, the monetary authority does not have control over the clearing and payments mechanism or the physical issue of currency. While the Fund indirectly controls the supply of money by maintaining the exchange rate link, the HSBC and Standard Chartered retain the legal franchise over currency printing, and the HKAB clearinghouse retains a monopoly over clearing and payments. Fourth, unlike most central banks, the Fund does not engage in prudential banking regulation. That is carried out by the Banking Commissioner.



# 2

## Price Level Control, Financial Crises, and Criticisms of Currency Boards

**A**las, even though currency boards have an outstanding record of producing stable, convertible currencies,<sup>1</sup> questions remain. A combination of misunderstandings about what currency boards are, a poor grasp of the actual performance of currency board systems and faulty analytics give rise to these questions. This section addresses some of the critics' concerns.

### **Currency boards may not always lead to price level convergence**

Some critics question the claim that the price level in a currency board country will converge with that in the reserve currency country. To illustrate their point, they point to Hong Kong. Figure 3 shows the inflation differentials between Hong Kong's Consumer Price Index and Export

<sup>1</sup> See Schuler (1992a) for a review of the evidence.



Unit Value Index relative to the U.S. Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the U.S. Producer Price Index (PPI) since 1984. Recall that the HK\$ stopped floating, and the fixed exchange rate system was reinstituted in October 1983. Hence, 1984 is the starting date for the price data in Figure 3.

The data, specifically the CPI data, suggest that the critics might have a point. However, a more careful analysis shows that the critics' concerns are unfounded.

To understand the upward drift in the Hong Kong - U.S. CPI inflation differential since 1986, some background is necessary. As part of its transformation strategy, China established Special Economic Zones in South China. Fueled by direct foreign investment, manufacturing output in those zones has grown very rapidly. A great deal of that foreign investment has originated in Hong Kong. To take advantage of low labor costs available in the zones, Hong Kong has shifted much of its manufacturing to the mainland. The services required for that new manufacturing activity — banking, insurance, transport, telecommunications, etc. are supplied from Hong Kong. Consequently, with the opening of the Special Economic Zones, Hong Kong's economy has gone through a dramatic restructuring, with a decline in manufacturing, which has been shifted to the mainland, and an increase in the demand for services supplied by Hong Kong. Since the CPI includes both tradeables (manufacturing) and nontradeables (services), it is not surprising that a Hong Kong - U.S. CPI divergence has continued to grow since 1986.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>To reduce the upward pressure on the CPI, which is currently running about 13 per cent per annum and is almost entirely accounted for by inflation in nontradeables, Sir Alan Walters has recently suggested that workers from the mainland should be allowed to work in Hong Kong (Lucas, 1993). Greenwood (1991) criticizes similar, earlier proposals.

Currency boards only promise price convergence between tradeables in the currency board and reserve currency countries. Hence, price indices that include nontradeables such as the CPI, should not be used as criteria for evaluating the performance of currency boards. Instead, indices that only include tradeables should be used. When those tradeable indices are used to compare prices in Hong Kong and the U.S., the expected results are obtained (See Figure 3). With fixed exchange rates, the Law of One Price -- that the same good cannot sell for two different prices, abstracting from transactions costs -- should hold. Since the currency board guarantees that the exchange rate is the same over time between Hong Kong and the U.S., the same tradeable goods should have identical nominal prices, adjusting for transactions costs, because of *arbitrage*.<sup>3</sup> Figure 3 shows that, when properly measured, prices in Hong Kong and the U.S. do converge as the Law of One Price suggests they should.

Some who understand that the relevant measure of price convergence between a currency board country and a reserve country is that measured by the indices for tradeables (and not the CPI, which includes nontradeables) raise a related criticism of currency boards, however. They argue that a currency board country, with its fixed exchange rates, is forced to import inflation from the reserve currency country. This is, of course, true. However, it is of little practical importance. For example, The World Bank reports inflation data --more specifically, data for open inflation -- for 125 countries. If we assume that one of the three main reserve currencies -- the German mark, U.S. dollar, and Japanese yen -- would be used as reserves for a currency

<sup>3</sup> For this reason, the reserve currency should be selected in part based on the volume of trade between the home and reserve currency countries.

board country, we are left with 122 countries. Of those, only six had better inflation records than the three main reserve currency countries during the 1960-1990 period. One of those, Panama, is dollarized, and another, Singapore, operates under a modified currency board regime ([The World Bank, 1992](#)).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the adoption of currency boards in most countries -- assuming they would have chosen either the mark, U.S. dollar, or the yen as a reserve currency -- would have resulted in the importation of lower inflation than the inflation rates produced by their central banks. That would have been a good, not a bad, result.

### **A foreign currency as a reserve asset is too volatile and is inferior to a commodity standard**

Some object to the use of foreign exchange as the reserve asset because any volatility in the U.S. dollar or U.S. interest rates, for example, will be felt in Hong Kong, as well. This criticism is not compelling. Since the exchange rate link delivers interest rate convergence, there is virtually no "basis risk" associated with hedging HK\$ transactions with US\$ financial instruments, such as interest rate futures, which are some of the most highly liquid and well-developed hedge instruments in the world.<sup>5</sup> "Swap deposits," which are very popular in Hong Kong, allow investors to swap HK\$'s for

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the Singaporean system, see Lee & Jao (1982). Fieleke (1992) correctly emphasizes that the Singaporean system is more similar to central banking than a currency board.

<sup>5</sup> This may provide one explanation for why Hong Kong's own interest rate future, the Hong Kong Interbank Offered Rate futures contract, has such a small volume. Specifically, there is little demand for the Hong Kong instruments because the risk can be hedged using Eurodollar derivative products traded in Chicago, London, and Singapore, where liquidity is high and transactions costs are low (cf. Napoli, 1992).

US\$'s.<sup>6</sup> Investors can lock in the Eurodollar interest rate and then swap back into HK\$'s in the future with minimal currency risk. Such deposits allow Hong Kong investors to obtain a deposit rate that is higher than the rate offered by local banks. (Note that local deposit rates are depressed by the Hong Kong Interest Rate Agreement, which is a cartel.<sup>7</sup>)

Those who question the desirability of using a reserve currency often suggest that a commodity reserve would be preferable. However, commodity markets are, in general, far less liquid and much more volatile than currency markets.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, holding commodity inventories would deny the monetary authority of the ability to hold interest-bearing assets and extract seigniorage. Indeed, storage costs would have to be incurred. The only commodity in which seigniorage could be earned is gold. However, yields on gold loans in the London market are generally less than three per cent per annum. Consequently the seigniorage generated from a gold-backed currency board system will be less than under alternative reserve currencies (Hanke & Schuler, 1993a).

## Currency Boards are just pegged exchange rate regimes in disguise

As the newfound interest in currency boards has arisen, so has the confusion about what boards are and how they work. The most common error is one of commission. Most economists incorrectly treat currency boards with fixed

<sup>6</sup> Note that most Hong Kong institutions offer this product because they can hedge their dealer risk easily with U.S. dollar interest rate futures.

<sup>7</sup> For a good discussion of the Interest Rate Agreement, see Kroszner (1990).

<sup>8</sup> Implied option and historical volatilities on commodities are typically far in excess of currency volatilities.

exchange rates as if they were central banks with pegged rates. During a two-day conference at The World Bank in January 1992 ("Conference on Currency Substitution and Currency Boards"), for example, the error was made repeatedly by a distinguished panel. Consequently, much of the criticism leveled at currency boards is simply misplaced because it is a criticism of central banks operating with pegged exchange rates, or what are oxymoronically called "fixed but flexible" rates.

If the exchange rate regime allows for the possibility of a devaluation or revaluation in the so-called "fixed rate," *it simply cannot be referred to as fixed*. Hence the Bretton Woods agreement was and the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) of the European Monetary System is a pegged, not a fixed, exchange rate regime. In contrast, the pre-World War I gold standard was a fixed rate regime. Today, the only fixed rate systems are the currency boards whose sole function is to exchange domestic currency for a reserve currency (which is equal to 100 per cent of outstanding domestic currency) at a never-changing rate on demand (cf. [Friedman, 1968](#)).

Under the absolutely fixed exchange rate type, central banks have no discretion vis-a-vis the exchange rate. However, under the pegged type, the government or the central bank has discretion about when to be pegged and when to be flexible. Much to the dismay of the authorities, currency speculators know that this discretion exists under pegging systems. Consequently, they play on that fact for large stakes.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of monetary policy under the two systems is quite different ([Walters, 1990](#)). If the exchange rate is fixed, there can be only one monetary policy. For example, the

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description and analysis of how this type of speculative attack against the ERNI was played out in September 1992, see Goldstein, *et al.* ([1993](#)).

monetary policy of Hong Kong is determined by the Federal Reserve Board of the United States because the HK\$ is absolutely fixed to the US\$. That fix is credible because the currency board in Hong Kong must back the HK\$'s it issues by US\$ reserves of 100 per cent and must maintain full convertibility.

The superficial attraction of pegged exchange rates is obvious -- somehow the authorities think they are getting the best of both worlds, namely stability of nominal exchange rates and the flexibility to move them when tradeable goods prices and cost get out of line. (The original documents on the EMS in 1978 indicate that their authors believed that the system would give rise to an "area of stability" in exchange rates.)

However, with a pegged exchange rate type, responsibility is muddled and diffused. A pegged country can have a bit of a monetary policy, allowing the exchange rate to wander within the band, and on occasion moving the band to a new central value. Indeed. It is the equivocation of monetary policy that causes much of the trouble with the pegged system.

Even with the pegged system's troubles, such as those we witnessed with the ERM in September 1992, many argue that those troubles are worth their costs because the pegged system provides discipline. Indeed, the proponents' case for a pegged exchange rate is that it gives rise to a discipline which prevents runaway inflation and provides an effective containment of excess wage pressures. Furthermore, it is argued that fiscal reforms, again with the peg as the critical discipline, can be tackled and burgeoning budget deficits can be controlled.

If it were true that the fixed-but-flexible system gave considerable impetus to these reforms, it would be a powerful case for some sort of peg. The evidence on this proposition is, however, rather equivocal. For example, Italy

has been pegged in the ERM since 1979, and to say the least, there has been no noticable improvement in its fiscal balance, nor in its unsustainable welfare payments. Certainly since Britain joined the ERM, informally in February 1987 and formally in 1990, the fiscal position has deteriorated alarmingly. Indeed, in terms of performance on almost all indicators, the British government behaved itself far better when out than when in the ERM. Nor has membership of the ERM helped Belgium to reduce her government debt -- now much more than its GNP. As for Spain, fiscal rectitude under the ERM discipline has been as elusive as the Holy Grail. Indeed, if we look at Europe as a whole, budget deficits were on average -3.0% during the 1987-89 period. Then, after every country became firmly wedded, either formally or informally, to the ERM, the deficits steadily increased: they were -4.3%, -5.4%, and -6.7% in 1991, 1992, and 1993, respectively.

Incidentally, fixed-rate systems do promote fiscal discipline. Currency board countries do balance their fiscal accounts, or like Hong Kong, they run modest surpluses.

In the context of pegged versus fixed rate regimes, it is important to mention two recent currency reforms that have been mischaracterized as currency board reforms and, therefore, misanalyzed.<sup>10</sup> First, in early 1991, Argentina passed a convertibility law (Law 23.298). It took effect on 1 April 1991 and requires the Banco Central de la Republica Argentina to maintain an exchange rate of 10,000 Argentine australes (now redenominated as one peso) per US dollar, and to hold "freely usable reserves in gold and foreign currencies" equal to at least 100 per cent of the monetary base. (Note that the central bank may count a limited

<sup>10</sup> For a more extensive treatment, see Hanke, Jonung & Schuler (1993).

amount of Argentine government bonds payable in dollars (Bonex) as foreign reserves.)

Unlike a typical currency board system, the Argentine monetary system has limited convertibility. Permission from the central bank is required for certain current-account transactions, although currently permission is merely a formality. The executive branch of the government has the power to impose capital controls by decree, forbidding foreign investments from being converted into foreign currency for up to three years. Furthermore, institutional protection for the exchange rate and the reserve ratio is weak. The central bank cannot devalue the peso at its own discretion, but it can do so with the permission of the legislature, which it could probably obtain easily. Argentina's long history of failed currency reforms has created anxiety that the peso will be devalued by the time that the current finance minister, who conceived the convertibility law, leaves office. Finally, the Banco Central remains a lender of last resort to commercial banks. If a large commercial bank fails, the Banco Central's role as a lender of last resort may conflict with its promise to hold foreign reserves of 100 per cent of the monetary base.

Argentine interest rates are evidence of the imperfect credibility of the link of the peso to the US dollar, and of the perception that the exchange rate of the peso is pegged not fixed. Indeed, the peso has experienced the typical difficulties of a pegged exchange rate. For example, an attack on the peso by currency speculators occurred on 11 November 1992. For the first time since the convertibility law was passed, the Banco Central intervened in the foreign-exchange market, selling dollars and buying pesos with its excess foreign reserves. The Banco Central also ceased lending to banks that wished to borrow pesos to buy dollars. In reaction to the attack on the peso, interest rates on short-term peso deposits increased from 15 per cent to 85 per cent



a year, whereas interest rates on short-term dollar deposits in Argentina remained at about 7 per cent. Although the November 1991 speculative attack was an isolated incident, it is important to note that the spread between annualized three-month yields on peso deposits and Eurodollar deposits has been positive since the convertibility law was passed. For example, the average spread was 6.27 per cent during the April 1991 - January 1992 period. The higher peso interest rates reflect a perceived risk that peso will be devalued. If the Argentine setup was a currency board with fixed exchange rates, that possibility would not exist and comparable peso-dollar interest rates would tend to be the same. In reality Argentina has a central bank with a pegged exchange 'rate, which has been given enhanced credibility because of its foreign exchange reserve backing requirements.

Second, the Estonian monetary reform of 20-22 June 1992 replaced the ruble with a new currency, the Estonian kroon. It represents another pseudo currency board arrangement. The kroon is pegged to the German mark at a central rate of 8 kroons per mark. The exchange rate of the kroon is allowed to fluctuate up to 3 per cent from the central rate. The Bank of Estonia (Eesti Pank), the central bank, is required to hold gold and foreign-currency assets equal to 100 per cent of the monetary base, like the Argentine central bank.

As in Argentina, in Estonia institutional protection for the exchange rate and for the reserve ratio is weak. The central bank cannot devalue the kroon by itself, but the legislature can authorize the central bank to devalue the kroon. However, the governor of the central bank has warned that he would have to devalue the kroon if the Estonian parliament approved a high minimum wage. Unlike a currency board, the Bank of Estonia has a lender of last resort capacity and some restrictions have been placed on capital account transactions.

Estonia, like Argentina, has a central banking setup with pegged exchange rates and a foreign exchange reserve requirement to enhance the credibility of the kroon. It is not a currency board with fixed exchange rates. As evidence of that fact consider that short-term deposit rates are 30 per cent per year in Estonia and only about seven per cent in Germany, Estonia's reserve currency country.

## The Currency Board system prevents fiscal flexibility

Some critics argue that, due to their requirement of strict fixed exchange rates, currency boards eliminate the role of fiscal policy. Ironically, many of these same critics advocate the need for balanced budgets as a precondition for successful macroeconomic stabilization programs.

Under a currency board regime, government spending can be financed by taxes or the issuance of debt instruments. However, that spending cannot be financed by monetization of deficits and inflationary finance. In principle, therefore, fiscal policy can be used in currency board countries. However, as we have noted, in practice most currency board countries, such as Hong Kong, have typically balanced their budgets or run small surpluses (Culp, 1991a). This has been due in part to fiscal prudence. In other cases, it has been because the countries did not have the means to borrow from the public or abroad. In any case, the elimination of soft budget constraints by the adoption of currency boards in developing countries and countries going through the transformation from socialism to capitalism is a desirable consequence of currency boards. Indeed, that fiscal policy is constrained by currency boards is a small cost to pay for the elimination of soft budget constraints.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Hanke, Jonung & Schuler (1993). Related to this point, Chu & Feltenstein (1978) report interesting findings for Argentina. They

## The currency board system is inconsistent with a lender of last resort

Because a currency board is not a central bank and does not have the capability to act as a Lender of Last Resort (LLR), some argue that the currency board system is incapable of dealing with banking panics, financial crises, and systemic instability.

There are several alternative views of the LLR function but the classical justification for a LLR is usually attributed to Henry Thornton and Walter Bagehot.<sup>12</sup> Their views suggest that the LLR (a central bank) should precommit to lend without hesitation in serious financial panics to help prevent "contagion" effects, or situations in which problems with a small number of financial institutions may spread to otherwise sound institutions.

The alternative view is that the LLR creates serious moral hazard problems. By extending a safety net under banks, excessive risk-taking and irresponsible investment and lending are encouraged. In this manner, the LLR can actually be one of the financial system's worst enemies (Selgin, 1989).

An examination of how the Exchange Fund in Hong Kong has dealt with financial crises without relying on LLR functions demonstrates the fallacy of claims leveled at currency board systems. This examination is particularly

note the government transfers to state-owned enterprises translated one-for-one into high-powered money through central bank financing of the government deficit, while private losses were financed by the commercial banks and were not, as a general rule, rediscounted by the central bank. Hence, their data suggest that state-owned enterprise transfers were proportionately ten times as inflationary per unit of transfer as the private losses.

<sup>12</sup> For reviews, see Bordo (1990) and Humphrey (1989).

interesting in Hong Kong, where no state-sponsored deposit insurance exists. (cf. Culp, 1991b)

Since Thornton thought a key attribute of the LLR should be its ownership of the monopoly franchise to create money, it is logical to discuss the linked rate in the same context as systemic banking crises. Hence, the ability of the linked rate to withstand pressures which cause systemic instability is presented first.

Greenwood (1984, 1989) distinguishes between two types of problems which can arise to challenge the integrity of a currency board's linked rate: internal and external drain. An internal drain occurs when there is a large shift in the currency to deposit ratio. For example, such a shift would occur in a bank run or banking panic because of a large positive shock to the public's demand for currency. In that case, banks would seek to restore their previous currency-deposit ratios by selling US\$'s to the Fund for HK\$'s. This often requires borrowing US\$'s in the interbank market. The banks' attempt to restore currency-deposit ratios will put upward pressure on the HK\$ vis-à-vis the US\$. Until banks can acquire enough HK\$'s from the Fund, HK\$ interbank rates will rise sharply. This will reduce profitable lending opportunities for banks, thus leading to slower credit creation, a contraction in deposit growth, and eventually a contraction in the monetary base.<sup>13</sup>

An external drain occurs when there is a capital flight out of the Hong Kong dollar, as in the week preceding the inception of the linked rate in 1983. The quantity of deposits may not change, but US\$ holdings will rise relative to HK\$ holdings, and the HK\$ will depreciate against the US\$ in the spot market vis-à-vis the official parity. At some point, this will trigger arbitrage in which HK\$ notes are sold to the

<sup>13</sup> In the short run, it is not likely that the monetary base will change much, if at all.

Fund for US\$'s. This, in turn, will precipitate an increase in HK\$ interbank rates as interbank liquidity dries up, thus again reducing profitable lending, lowering credit-creation and deposit growth, and precipitating a contraction in the monetary base.

Hong Kong's linked rate has withstood both types of pressures without any help from the Exchange Fund. Figure 4 shows that from late December 1983 to early January 1984, an internal drain occurred. The cause of the drain was merely a large increase in public demand for cash during the Christmas holiday season. However, banks had failed to anticipate this demand in the wake of the new exchange rate link. As a result, overnight interest rates in Hong Kong rose to nearly 25 per cent (annualised), and the HK\$ went to a large premium in the interbank market relative to the official parity. Nonetheless, the linked rate mechanism held tight, arbitrage occurred, and the drain finally subsided, thus returning the exchange rate to parity.

Two examples of the internal drain have occurred since the July 1988 reforms which allowed for official interventions by the Fund in the foreign exchange market. For example, on June 5 and 6, 1989, in the wake of events in Tiananmen Square, Hong Kong residents registered their concern by making massive withdrawals from the Bank of China. The Bank of China, scrambling for currency, was forced to borrow on the interbank market, which drove annualised overnight rates up about 12 per cent. The HK\$ traded at around 7.78HIMUS\$ in the spot market, and the Exchange Fund intervened through The Account by injecting HK\$194 million. It is not clear to what extent the intervention and interest rate premium affected interbank liquidity. However, the crisis soon subsided, and so did the premiums in the foreign exchange and interbank markets. The linked rate was again preserved.

More recently, Citibank H.K. and Standard Chartered Bank experienced relatively large bank runs in the wake of the government's incompetence in handling the Bank of Credit and Commerce International affair (Culp, 1991b). The Exchange Fund intervened by injecting overnight assistance of HK\$200 million into the banking system through The Account. Moreover, both the Bank of China and the HSBC offered their full assistance to Standard Chartered and Citibank H.K., so that they could meet their liquidity demands. The runs were quelled with no lasting damage to the system.

It is worth noting, however, that the Christmas 1983 example showed that an internal drain could be dealt with *without* intervention by the Fund. It is quite likely that, in light of this, the latter two examples could also have been quelled without assistance from the Fund. Indeed, with respect to the second post-1983 example, it seems that a commitment of the Bank of China and the HSBC to support the two banks being run was far more important than the Fund's infusion of liquidity. The intervention was a one-time boost for liquidity and revealed nothing about the financial viability of the victim banks. However, the announcement of a commitment to provide liquidity by the other banks was surely construed as a testament to Citibank H.K. and Standard Chartered's viability, thus helping to halt the run.

The other type of problem which can challenge the linked rate -- an external drain -- occurred in July 1984, when political trouble in China prompted a flight out of Hong Kong dollars. Annualised overnight rates rose to nearly 28 per cent, and the HK\$ fell to roughly 7.88HK\$/US\$. The month-end exchange rate, shown on Figure 4, was still at a discount of HK\$7.84/US\$. Nonetheless, the high overnight rates were enough to quell capital flight, and the crisis subsided with no damage to the linked rate mechanism (see Figure 2).

Given the inability of Britain and Italy to withstand the pressures of the "external drain" in September 1992, it is worth mentioning once again the difference between the fixity of a currency board exchange rate link and the pseudo-fixed nature of the ERM. In the ERM, exchange rates are neither fixed nor freely floating. Rather, exchange rates are allowed to float within specified bands around declared central exchange rates. When the market exchange rate reaches its boundary, the ERM member nations' central banks must intervene, to preserve the exchange rate's central parity. This is done with both open market currency operations and shifts' in relative monetary policy. However, the realignment option of the central rates also remains viable.

Obviously, market participants are aware of the realignment option. Consequently, when a currency is perceived to be misvalued and the central banks' intervention capacities and/or commitments are limited -- such as the pound and lira vis-a-vis the mark prior to September 16, 1992 -- it is a reasonably safe bet that the intervention and interest rate weapons to defend central ERM rates will ultimately fail. After all, the more speculative pressure to which the currency is subjected, the more difficult it becomes for the central banks to preserve the pegged rate. Indeed, prior to the 1992 sterling devaluation, the Bank of England increased short term interest rates in the middle of an economic slump and reportedly spent US\$26 billion in pound purchases in a fruitless effort to prop up its sagging currency.<sup>14</sup> As noted earlier, currency boards are immune to this problem because the exchange rate is viewed

<sup>14</sup> Compare that amount with the US\$23 billion in equity which changed hands on the New York Stock Exchange on October 19, 1987, the largest trading day (measured by volume) in the history of the New York Stock Exchange.

widely as being virtually immutable.<sup>15</sup> The moment that most of the public believes the exchange rate may be changed, what was formerly an arbitrage operation is transformed instantly into foreign exchange speculation. The key to the game is the credibility of the exchange rate link, as the contrast between Hong Kong and the ERM shows.<sup>16</sup>

The linked rate performs well under pressure. It does not contribute to financial panics. Indeed, it lends stability to Hong Kong's financial system. But, how does the financial system perform, given that the Fund does not have a classical LLR capacity and Hong Kong does not have state-sponsored deposit insurance? The classical LLR function is provided by whatever institution is ultimately responsible for providing interbank liquidity. Prior to July 1988, that responsibility was held by the HSBC as manager of the HKAB clearinghouse, leading many to refer to the HSBC as Hong Kong's *de facto* central bank. In the sterling era of the Hong Kong currency board, the two note-issuing banks implicitly performed the LLR function on many occasions, most notably the Banking Crisis of 1965. In 1964, a similar panic was also averted when the Fund actually flew in large packages of foreign currency to assure the public of the convertibility guarantee. Most of the packages were returned to London unopened, as the panic was forestalled by the assurance of convertibility.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> To the extent that changes in the central rate are due to problems in the reserve currency, such as hyperinflations or the instability of the pound in the sterling exchange era, this will not be a problem. Speculative attacks cannot themselves generate hyperinflations or severe macroeconomic instability. Provided devaluations are tied explicitly to such events there is no risk of such attacks which increase the probability of devaluations.

<sup>16</sup> See Goldstein, *et al.* (1993).

<sup>17</sup> See Greenwood (1983b).



Implicit in all of this was the position of the Hong Kong government. It apparently would not allow a note-issuing bank to fail. The British Monopolies and Mergers Commissions explained in 1982 that "we were told that on occasion either at the Government's request or on its own initiative HSBC had provided funds to avert banking crises or rescue ailing companies. In the unlikely event of HSBC finding itself in difficulties, it would be the Hong Kong Government which would act as lender of last resort, using assets in the Exchange Fund."<sup>18</sup> This suggests, then, that while the Fund may not perform an explicit LLR function, Hong Kong nonetheless implicitly practices what is commonly referred to as the "Too Big to Fail" doctrine.<sup>19</sup>

In closing, the distinction between a LLR and deposit insurance merits discussion, particularly given the absence of deposit insurance in Hong Kong. The LLR exists to help deal with systemic crises, while deposit insurance exists to forestall bank runs which might, through contagion effects, result in systemic crises. Although they are separate, they are related. Hong Kong has no formal state-sponsored deposit insurance program. Consequently, Hong Kong is subject to bank runs. These runs are further motivated by the existence of "inner reserves," which are politically-created accounting "sunspots" that allow banks to partially conceal assets in their balance sheets and smooth their earnings. (Culp, 1991b; Diamond and Dybvig, 1983; Kroszner, 1990) However, the Hong Kong runs appear to provide a positive form of market discipline on banks, constraining banks from making irresponsible investment decisions.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Hong Kong

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Jao (1991b, p.49).

<sup>19</sup> Some might argue that "Too Big to Fail" itself implies that there is a LLR. For a discussion of Too Big to Fail,"see, for example, Hetzel (1991), Kaufman (1988), and Miller (1992).

<sup>20</sup> See Kaufman (1988) and Culp (1991b).

bank runs tend to fizzle out after a short duration and do not degenerate into systemic crises.

Another feature of the Hong Kong financial system acts to contain the frequent bank runs. Competing banks typically offer each other overnight liquidity assistance. For example, even though the HSBC is a competitor with other major banks, it is *not* in the interest of the HSBC to allow a systemic panic to develop. Consequently, each bank has a very strong incentive to forestall a systemic crisis by offering overnight assistance to liquidity-constrained banks. This creates an implicit form of the cross-guarantee system among the Hong Kong banks. This market discipline is a most compelling reason to believe that banks will continue to back other solvent banks in the event of liquidity crises. Moreover, they will quickly let one another fail if the bank being run is indeed insolvent.<sup>21</sup>

The informal system of cross guarantees that exists in Hong Kong could, of course, be formalized and strengthened, however. To appreciate that, consider the history of the U.S. banking system. Research has shown that the pre-1914 U.S. banking system dealt effectively with problems of system-wide panics and systemic instability, even in the absence of the Federal Reserve and a central LLR. A clearinghouse system existed. Under that system, member banks effectively cross-guaranteed one another, and in periods of serious crises, the clearinghouse became a *de facto* single firm comprised of its member banks. It provided deposit insurance and even issued its own currency as a LLR, (Calomiris, 1990; Gorton, 1985; Gorton & Mullineaux, 1987; Timberlake, 1984). Since Hong Kong already has a

<sup>21</sup> Note that the recent introduction of a discount window (the LAF) at the Exchange Fund for purposes of providing overnight liquidity was unnecessary, since that liquidity is provided by banks loaning overnight funds to each other.

clearinghouse system, it would be easy to introduce pre-1914, U.S.-type cross-guarantee schemes to Hong Kong.<sup>22</sup> All that would be necessary would be to divorce the HKAB clearinghouse from the HSBC to prevent the exercise of monopoly power.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Culp (1991h) develops this further.

<sup>23</sup> See Selgin (1988).

# 3

## The Political Calculus and a Monetary Constitution

**H**ong Kong's Exchange Fund has provided for a stable, convertible currency that has contributed to the rapid economic progress of Hong Kong. Even though the Fund does not have a formal monetary constitution, it has established a high degree of credibility with regard to the two conditions necessary for the successful currency board: the maintenance of the exchange rate link at a specified level and a commitment to non-interference with the linked rate, including any change in its level.

However, the history of the Fund suggests that changes could be made to improve the operation of the Fund. The changes, which would enhance the Fund's credibility, would eliminate the possibility for the Fund to adopt features of central banking, such as discretionary monetary policies and prudential regulation of commercial banking. These changes, which should be implemented by the adoption of a monetary constitution, are noteworthy not only for Hong

Kong, but also for those who are interested in adopting currency board systems.

The history of Hong Kong shows that the legal and institutional environment in which the Exchange Fund has operated was inadequate to prevent the Fund from sliding ever so slightly towards central banking and away from a unified currency regime. Even if the Fund has, in general, remained committed to the linked rate throughout much of its history, its tendency to adopt degrees of discretion has devalued the perceptible benefit of the currency board system -- namely, certainty and credibility. Recall that it is the credible commitment to the preservation of convertibility at the fixed rate which separates a currency board from the unsatisfactory pegged exchange rate regimes of central banks.

The appropriate means of safeguarding against such abuses is the establishment of an ironclad monetary constitution to prevent any possibility of long-run abuses. Buchanan & Brennan (1981) observe that "[r]eforms in policy to be implemented by ordinary men can only come through reforms in the rules within which they operate." In particular, such a constitution should contain several specific provisions.<sup>1</sup>

First, a currency board should have its legal seat and most of its assets in a safe haven country, such as Switzerland. That will limit the possibility of reserve asset expropriations and thus lend more stability to the exchange rate link. Protection of assets is important, even in places like Hong Kong, particularly in light of the changes in Hong Kong's sovereignty that will occur in 1997.

Second, the monetary constitution must require the currency board to adhere to the maintenance of an exchange rate link at its specified level and with full convertibility.

<sup>1</sup> See Hanke, Jonung & Schuler (1992 and 1993).

Third, the constitution should specify the exact terms of the exchange rate, including the level of the rate itself, the structure of the currency board's balance sheets (to avoid the creation of another HSBC Account), and the terms of access to the official exchange rate. With regard to the first condition, it is not critical that the rate be set at some "fundamental equilibrium" level, as long as the rate is reasonable and allows the currency board country's exports to be competitive. With regard to the last condition, it is desirable that *all banks* have *direct* access to the currency board's official exchange rate.

Moreover, the constitution could allow for changes in the official rate, provided the manner in which those changes occur is known in advance and designed only to deal with "acts of God." For example, if the reserve currency began hyperinflating, a provision should exist to either revalue the home currency vis-a-vis the hyperinflating reserve currency or to select another reserve currency (Hanke & Schuler, 1991c). However, such provisions must be carefully structured with specific predefined "trigger points" to avoid problems similar to those which arose in the wake of the Basle Agreement.

Fourth, the monetary authority should have a board of directors comprised of both domestic and foreign members who are rewarded for adherence to the currency board's constitution. For example, representatives could be paid on an annual fee plus bond basis. The value of the bond would be geared to the length of service on the board and would be paid on retirement, only if the board adhered to the currency board's constitution during the term the director served.

Fifth, appropriate attention should be paid in formulating compensation schemes for the currency board's inside management. For example, managers might have part of the pay in the form of an option portfolio written on the Hong

Kong dollar (Culp & Hanke, 1993). There are various possibilities for how such a portfolio might be structured. A simple example is to give managers a "butterfly spread." Such a portfolio of options would allow managers to collect extra income, the amount of which would vary according to the departure of the market rate from official parity.

For example, suppose the transaction cost bounds around the Hong Kong dollar suggest that it should stay within 7.7HK\$/US\$ and 7.9HK\$/US\$. Then, the managers of the currency board would each be given a portfolio of four options: one long call with a HK\$7.9 strike price, one long put with a HK\$7.7 strike, and a short call and a put each "at the money," at HK\$7.8. Then, managers would "collect option premium" on the value of their position, *as long as the rate stayed within HK\$7.7 and HK\$7.9*. Beyond that, the long call and long put would prevent managers from making a loss on the position. So, to maximize the value of their premium collected, managers would have a strong incentive to minimize Hong Kong dollar - U.S. dollar volatility. (Note also that an increase in *implied* volatility -- due perhaps to any anticipation of a change in the rate -- would also adversely affect the profitability of the compensation scheme.)

This provision is in the spirit of the compensation arrangement for the Governor of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand. With the passage of the Reserve Bank Act of December 1989, which made that central bank independent, the Governor's employment contract became contingent upon the Reserve Bank meeting prespecified inflation targets.

Finally, it is important that *a currency board need not be operated by the government*. Demsetz (1968) explains that a so-called natural monopoly may be owned and operated by a private firm in a competitive environment. Private firms could be allowed to compete for the right to control the

currency board and receive seigniorage (or part of the seigniorage) provided that they strictly met the conditions of the monetary constitution, and that they posted a performance bond.

The feasibility of such a private currency board system merits consideration, particularly in light of the work by Fama & Jensen (1983a and 1993b) on "financial mutuals." Financial mutual organizations are characterized by the fact that the residual claimholders are also the customers of the organization. In the currency board case, the commercial banking sector is the customer, and the board's sole assets are the foreign currency reserve assets.

Since there is no *prima facie* presumption that currency supply is a natural monopoly, another feature should be included in the monetary constitution, in any case: competing currencies should be allowed. (cf. Cowen & Kroszner, 1993; Dowd, 1989, 1992; Glasner, 1989; Schuler, 1992b; Selgin, 1988; White, 1989; Yeager & Greenfield, 1989). This could be accomplished in two ways. First, the monetary constitution should specify that any international currency can be used by residents of the currency board country. The threat of currency substitution would, therefore, reinforce incentives for the currency board to adhere to its constitution.

Second, multiple intranational note issues should be allowed, perhaps even by competing currency boards.<sup>2</sup> The one official currency board would be required, but the monetary constitution should not prohibit other note issues. The ultimate determination, as to whether these other internal currencies would be held, would, of course, be their stability and convertibility.

When viewed as a financial mutual, the most powerful form of discipline on the currency board is the ability of its

<sup>2</sup> See Hanke, Jonung, & Schuler (1992).



customers as residual claimholders to effectively force the liquidation of the board at any time. All the customers would have to do is redeem the board's currency for its reserve currency.

# 4

## Concluding Observations

One of the most successful monetary regimes in the world is the linked rate mechanism of Hong Kong. For most of the period since the inception of Hong Kong's linked rate, the Colony has experienced strong economic growth, vigorous trade, a relatively low rate of producer price inflation, and an atmosphere of confidence and stability in the wake of a highly uncertain political future. While not strictly a colonial currency board by the classical definition, Hong Kong is a modern analogue. With modifications -- namely, a monetary constitution -- it could be used as a model for developing countries and those going through a transformation from socialism to capitalism.

## Concluding Observations

# Exhibit

*Exhibit 1*  
Exchange Fund

Assets	Liabilities
FOREX Assets	Certificates of Indebtedness Coins
Domestic Assets: HK\$ Deposits at HSBC HK\$ Deposits at Other Banks	Debt Certificates

*Exhibit 2*  
Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC)

Assets	Liabilities
Certificates of Indebtedness	HK\$ Notes Issued
HK\$-Denominated Assets: Notes and Coins Held Loans	HK\$ Deposits from Banks Exchange Fund Treasury Public
HK\$ Interbank Loans	HK\$ Interbank Borrowings
FOREX Assets	FOREX Deposits FOREX Borrowings

*Exhibit 3*  
Exchange Fund

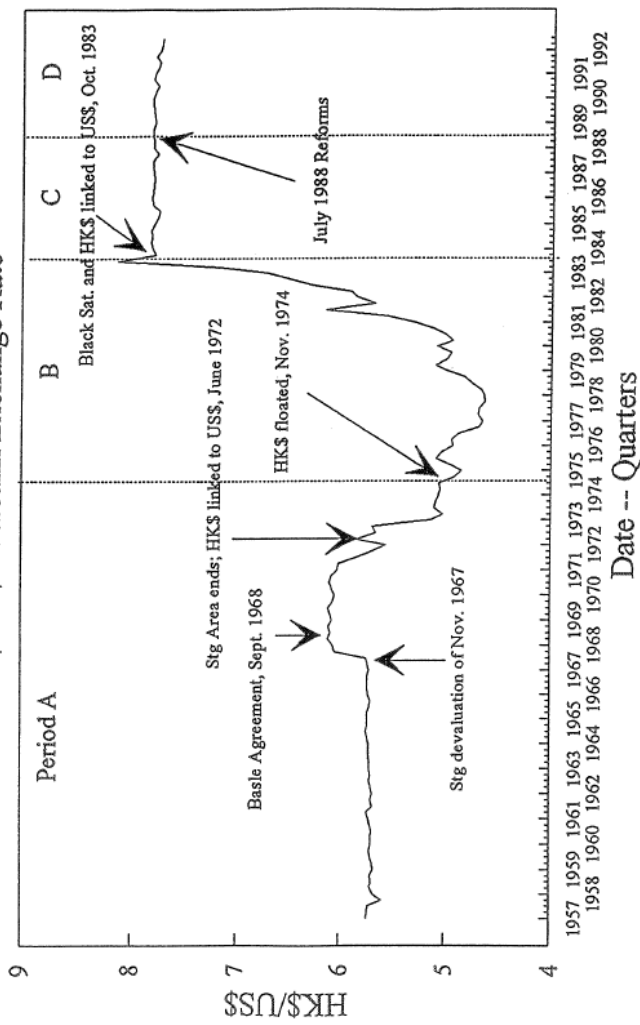
Assets	Liabilities
FOREX Assets	Certificates of Indebtedness Coins
Domestic Assets: HK\$ Deposits at HSBC HK\$ Deposits at Other Banks	Debt Certificates Treasury Account Exchange Fund Bills
	HSBC Account ("The Account")

*Exhibit 4*

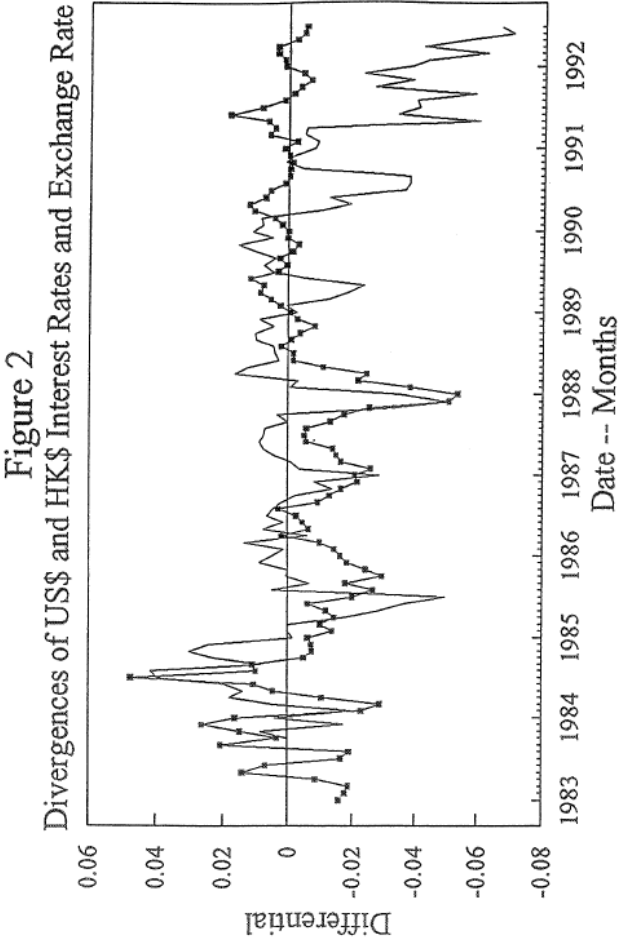
## Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC)

Assets	Liabilities
Certificates of Indebtedness	HK\$ Notes Issued
HK\$-Denominated Assets: Notes and Coins Held Loans Exchange Fund Bills	HK\$ Deposits from Banks Exchange Fund Treasury Public
HK\$ Interbank Loans	HK\$ Interbank Borrowings
FOREX Assets	FOREX Deposits FOREX Borrowings
HSBC Account at the Exchange Fund	

Figure 1  
HK\$/US\$ Interbank Exchange Rate

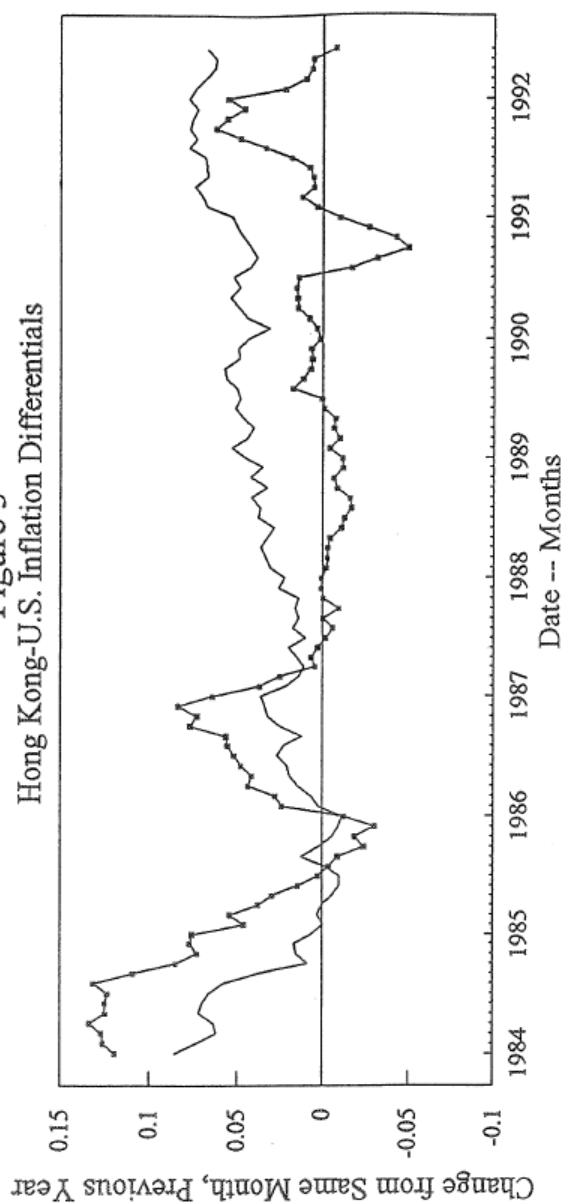


Periods A-D correspond to historical periods presented in Part II of the text  
Source: Citicorp



A negative exchange rate differential implies that the HK\$ is stronger than its official parity vis-a-vis the US\$.  
Source: Citicorp, GT Management (Asia) Limited

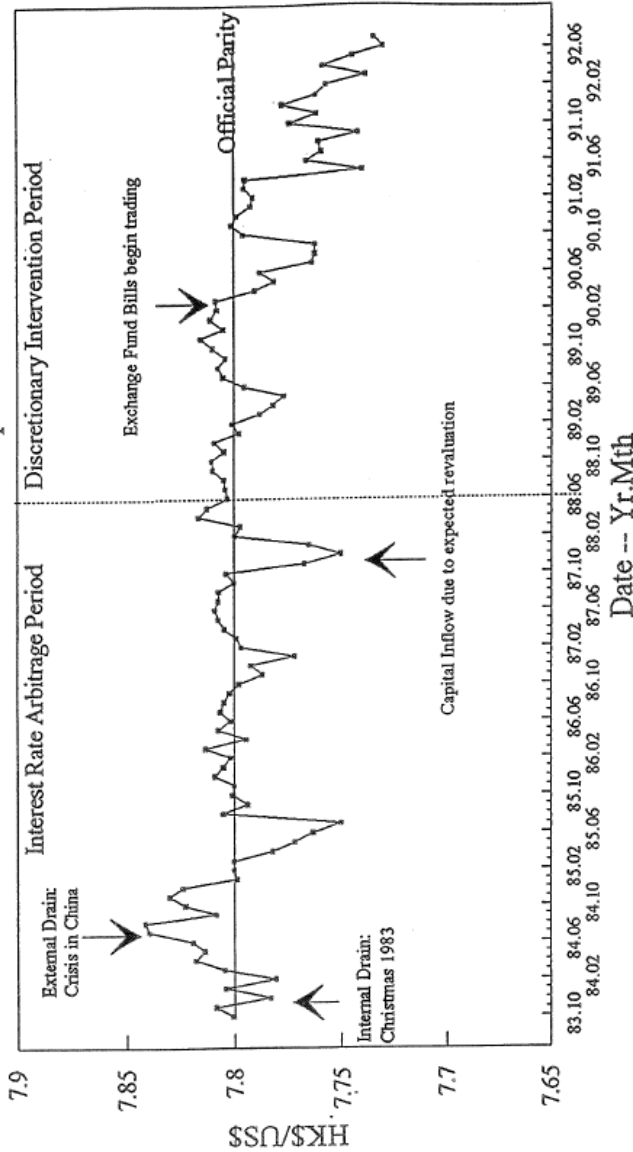
Figure 3  
Hong Kong-U.S. Inflation Differentials



NOTE: The composition of the consumer and producer price indexes in each country are not necessarily equal.  
Source: Citicorp, GT Management (Asia) Limited, International Financial Statistics



Figure 4  
HK\$/US\$: October 1983 - September 1992



Source: Citicorp, Asian Monetary Monitor staff

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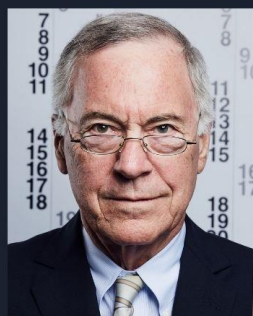






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