

1997 exodus possible: poll

HONG Kong could face an exodus if things go badly after China recovers the territory in 1997, and many people would probably go to North America or Australia, a survey published yesterday indicates.

The opinion poll by the Hong Kong Transitions Project, a private academic research group, also found that Hong Kong people wanting independence or to remain under British influence outnumbered those wanting the territory to revert to China.

China has promised to keep Hong Kong autonomous for at least 50 years after 1997. But the poll, conducted early this year, shows that many doubt that the territory could survive the transition to Chinese sovereignty unscathed.

Forty-six per cent of the

respondents said they would try to leave if Hong Kong changed for the worse after China took over, and some 50 per cent had relatives abroad, mostly in the United States, Canada and Australia.

"If events were to turn bad in Hong Kong after 1997, it is likely that not only would millions seek to flee, other millions abroad would open their arms to receive them," the poll report said.

But the poll also found that the number who said they would stay no matter what happened after 1997 climbed to 43 per cent from 38 per cent in a similar poll a year ago.

More than 50 per cent expressed concern over personal freedoms and politics after China takes over and 10 per cent said they were very worried, the poll said.

"Generally, those who are less worried are less educated, women, older persons and those born in China," it said.

Forty-nine per cent wanted Hong Kong to have independence, remain British or become part of the Commonwealth.

But the number who support the Chinese takeover climbed to 44 per cent from 26 per cent questioned in 1991. Seven per cent didn't know.

The poll also said the Sino-British row over politics would dampen voter turnout in the 1995 elections, Hong Kong's last year under British rule.

The telephone poll of 636 people, conducted in January and February, had a margin of error of four per cent.