In the history of modern China, Hong Kong has frequently played an important role as a bridge in cross-strait political relations, providing a place and a political environment in which Beijing and Taipei could talk — often secretly — to one another.

But with relations between Mainland China and Taiwan warming quickly in recent years, and China asserting greater control over Hong Kong-Taiwan relations, that bridging role may no longer be as important, writes Hong Kong academic Yiu-chung Wong.

The change last year of the 45-year-old name of Taiwan’s de facto consular office — from the Chung Wah Travel Agency in Hong Kong to the Taipei-Hong Kong Economic and Cultural Office — was a landmark in relations between Hong Kong and Taiwan. Lai Shi-yuan, chairwoman of Taiwan’s Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) and the person in charge of its Mainland China policies, attended the name-changing ceremony.

The development was a breakthrough for negotiations between Beijing and Taipei over the past two years. Relations between Mainland China and Taiwan have greatly improved since Ma Ying-jeou became president of Taiwan in 2008 (and was re-elected to a second term earlier this year) and proposed his “no independence, no unification and no war” formula. Of particular importance also was the sealing of the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) in 2010. The individual travel scheme for mainlanders to Taiwan, meanwhile, was implemented at the beginning of 2011.

Following the thaw in cross-strait relations, ties between Hong Kong and Taiwan have also grown warmer. In contrast to the years when Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) was
in power, official contacts have become much more frequent. For the first time since the British handover in 1997, senior officials from Hong Kong and Taiwan are visiting each other’s territories in official capacities. For example, Jack-son Hu, mayor of Taichung, visited Hong Kong to attend a “forum of exchanges for two cities” in January 2009. He also held talks with John Tsang, Hong Kong’s Financial Secretary. The two sides discussed the possibility of setting up channels to facilitate trade, investment and tourism between Taichung and Hong Kong. Tsang Tak-sing, Hong Kong’s Secretary for Home Affairs, visited Taiwan in late March 2009 as honorary leader of a joint Hong Kong and Macau delegation of Buddhist Associations to attend the Second World Bud-hist Forum in Taipei. He visited a second time in September 2009, when he met Hau Lung-bin, mayor of Taipei, and expressed the hope that more exchanges on cultural activities and sports could be organized.

Numerous other visits have since taken place between Taiwanese and Hong Kong officials in recent years, as the two sides explore ways to fur-ther deepen ties, especially related to business and trade opportunities for both. However, the increasing contacts cannot hide the fact that Hong Kong, under the formula of “one country, two systems,” has lost policymaking autonomy in handling Taiwan-Hong Kong rela-tions. That decision-making power lies in Beijing. Fifteen years after the handover, Hong Kong has effectively been transformed from a political con-duit between Taiwan and the Mainland into an appendage of Beijing’s cross-strait policies. Nev-ertheless, it is valid to ask whether Hong Kong is still a bridge between Taiwan and Mainland China. Does it serve any purpose in the unification proc-ess? Does Hong Kong’s “one country, two systems” model have any showcase effect on Taiwan?

The complexities of relations between Main-land China, Taiwan and Hong Kong can be traced to the late 19th century, when Taiwan and Hong Kong became colonies of foreign powers. Japan colonized Taiwan for 50 years from 1895 to 1945, when the Republic of China (ROC), under the Kuomintang (KMT), took back the island. The end of World War II was followed by four years of civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the KMT, with the latter fleeing to Taiwan after losing the war to the Communists, who founded the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Britain’s 155-year colonization of Hong Kong, meanwhile, ended in 1997, when the 99 year-lease on the New Territories expired. In the aftermath of China’s civil war, the British colo-nial administration adopted a neutral approach towards the activities of both the CCP and KMT in Hong Kong, which became a safe haven for ref-ugees from the Mainland, particularly after the CCP seized power. The new KMT government in Taiwan was still actively conducting espionage and sabotage activities on the Mainland, and these were tolerated in Hong Kong because of the British alliance with the US in fighting Com-munism, especially following the breakout of the Korean War in June 1950.

KMT SABOTAGE AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION SPILL OVER

Nonetheless, two events forced the Hong Kong government to take measures to suppress KMT activities. One was the crash in April 1955 of an Indonesia-bound plane that was supposed to have been carrying Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to the landmark Bandung Conference of Asian and African countries. Zhou, it turned out, was not on the plane, but the 11 Chinese diplomats on board were all killed. The crash was the result of KMT sabotage activities. The second event was a day of co-ordinated attacks by pro-KMT rightists on pro-PRC union offices, shops and schools in Hong Kong on “Double Tenth National Day,” Oct. 10, 1956, the anniversary of the Wuchang Uprising that gave birth to the ROC. The Hong Kong colo-nial government put the riots down with force.

The incidents infuriated Beijing, and Zhou issued three demands to the British government: 1) Hong Kong could not be used as an anti-PRC base; 2) Activities undermining PRC authorities would not be allowed; 3) PRC personnel in Hong Kong must be protected. For the ensuing 10 years, the Hong Kong government maintained a “bal-anced approach” between the pro-KMT right-ists and pro-Beijing leftists. Celebrations on both national days — October 10 for the ROC and October 1 for the PRC — were tolerated.

In the midst of the Cultural Revolution, however, riots in 1966-1967 by pro-Beijing leftists upset the balanced approach. After Mao launched the Cul-tural Revolution in 1966, China was on the verge of chaos, and revolutionary fervour spread to Hong Kong. It was a time when Hong Kong faced severe social problems as a result of the more than two million people who flooded into the territory in the early 1960s, seeking refuge from mass fam-i-ine in China caused by natural disasters and by Mao Zedong’s ultra-leftist government policies. The Hong Kong unemployment rate was high, particularly among the young, and housing and working conditions were extremely grim.

With Mao calling on the Red Guards to over-throw the established order in China, leftist lead-ers in Hong Kong received wrong signals from Beijing. They thought that the time had come to end British colonialism in Hong Kong and thus started the uprising. The riots were crushed with extreme force by the Hong Kong colonial govern-ment, but Beijing chose not to intervene. China had already had a border war with the Soviet Union and saw it as its greatest national security threat. As a result, China began a policy of rap-portement with the West, particularly with the US, in the early 1970s. In Hong Kong, the British stabilized the situation and restored the “even-handed” policy toward the KMT and CCP.

TAking The Long View

In the early 1950s, as the CCP consolidated its control over the Mainland, Beijing had formu-lated the “take a long view and fully utilize Hong Kong” policy. Because of the intense hostility between the KMT and the CCP, Hong Kong was used as a place for clandestine contacts between the two antagonists. It is believed that in the sec-ond half of the 1950s, the PRC began to use Hong Kong as mediating place in cross-strait relations. In addition to covert contacts, several overt events demonstrated Hong Kong’s role:

1) In 1956, the CCP and KMT met in Hong Kong secretly. The following year, KMT supremo Chi-ang Kai-shek sent a secret envoy, Song Yishan, a member of the legislature, to Beijing. Song was the brother of KMT General Song Xilian, who was then in a Mainland prison. Song Yishan was well received and wrote a long report to Chiang urg-ing him to negotiate with the CCP. However, the...
One of the main points made in these speeches was:

“After 1997, Taiwan's agencies in Hong Kong can continue to operate. They can still promote the Three People's Principles and denounce the CCP ...”

In these speeches, Deng also expressed confidence that the concept of “one country, two systems” would be applied to Taiwan. For its part, Taiwan's government rejected the idea even before the handover, arguing that it could be applied to Taiwan because the ROC was a sovereign state. It is also not clear whether the authorities in Beijing themselves ever really believed that Hong Kong could provide a model for reunification with Taiwan because the ground rules for unification for each are so different. Perhaps the “showcase” theory was simply a piece of CCP propaganda.

**GRADUAL INTEGRATION IN HONG KONG**

A process of political integration with the Mainland has been taking place in Hong Kong since the handover. Loyalty to the former colonial master has been gradually reshaped to cater to the needs of the Mainland. A new socio-political order has been created to serve the interests of the new power. Given Hong Kong’s role as a center of international finance and trade, it has been paramount that the transition period not be disruptive and that political stability be maintained. In preparing for the handover, Beijing faced an uphill battle to absorb Hong Kong. It adopted the following means to ensure a peaceful transition:

1. The PRC announced that the principle of “one country, two systems” would be applied to Hong Kong after the handover.
2. The PRC negotiated a package solution with the British government to ensure a smooth transition, including the establishment of the Sino-British Liaison Group, which could remain in existence until 2000.
3. One third of the members of the Basic Law Drafting Committee were appointed from the local community in order to give them input into the drafting process. Furthermore, a Basic Law Consultative Committee composed entirely of representatives of the Hong Kong community was set up to examine the Basic Law.

The three principles that would serve as the future parameters of Hong Kong-Taiwan relations:

- KMT agencies and personnel in Hong Kong should enjoy rights similar to those of Hong Kong residents as long as they abide by local laws.
- Non-political relations such as sea and air navigation, transportation, economic and cultural relations should remain unchanged.
- Hopefully, the KMT in Hong Kong would make contributions toward the PRC’s resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong and help maintain Hong Kong’s stability and prosperity.

Nevertheless, it is valid to ask whether Hong Kong is still a bridge between Taiwan and Mainland China. Does it serve any purpose in the unification process?
locals was set up to reflect the views of the Hong Kong community.

4) Various social, business, religious and professional groups were invited to Beijing to discuss issues of the handover with senior Chinese officials. China rewarded those who were considered pro-Beijing with posts as Hong Kong Affairs and District Affairs advisors. However, threatening tactics were also used. China repeatedly warned that if there were turmoil during the transition period, China would not hesitate to take Hong Kong back by non-peaceful means earlier than agreed.

5) In December 1995, a preparatory committee headed by vice-premier Qian Qichen was set up to arrange matters related to the establishment of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), and its membership consisted of veteran officials who had worked previously under the colonial administration.

6) The Basic Law, a mini-constitution for post-handover Hong Kong, created a new political order in which the Chief Executive was elected by a “small circle” of voters who, in turn, were elected by different professional sectors, while the principal government officials were appointed by the central government in Beijing. Moreover, reinterpretations and amendments to the Basic Law are the responsibility of the National People’s Congress. Most importantly, Article 23 stipulated that the legislature of Hong Kong would have to enact laws on treason, secession, subversion, theft of state secrets and so on. Also, foreign political organizations would be prohibited from conducting political activities in Hong Kong and local political parties would not be able to establish ties with foreign organizations.

7) A garrison of 4,000 PLA soldiers replaced British army personnel based in Hong Kong, demonstrating the changeover of sovereignty.

With these moves, a post-colonial political order was created under Beijing’s control. In these new circumstances, Hong Kong’s could no longer play the same political role in cross-strait relations.

NO LONGER A NEUTRAL PLAYER
After 1997, Hong Kong could no longer be neutral. Beijing imposed strict guidelines on inter-governmental activities between Hong Kong and Taiwan. In June 1995, Vice Premier Qian, who was also foreign minister, stated the famous seven points regarding Hong Kong-Taiwan relations, which remain in effect today:

1) The existing unofficial relations between Taiwan and Hong Kong shall remain unchanged.

2) Investment and trade activities of Taiwanese residents are welcome and shall be protected by law.

3) Air and sea navigation and transport shall be conducted under the “one China” principle.

4) Taiwanese residents can enter or leave Hong Kong. They can attend schools or live in Hong Kong under Hong Kong law. Beijing shall handle and manage the issues of documents held, etc.

5) The civic groups and religious organizations of Hong Kong can maintain and develop relations with their counterparts in Taiwan under the principles of non-subordination and mutual respect.

6) Official contacts, exchanges, consultations, agreements signed and the establishment of institutions by the Hong Kong SAR and Taiwan shall be submitted to the Central People’s Government for approval or be approved by the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong SAR with the authorization of the Central People’s Government on a case-by-case basis.

7) Taiwan agencies and their personnel may stay, but they must strictly observe the Basic Law of the Hong Kong SAR and adhere to the “one China” principle, refraining from activities that would damage the peace and prosperity of Hong Kong and that do not match with the original purpose of the registration of those agencies.

The seven-point statement basically classifies all activities between Taiwan and Hong Kong into two categories, either political or official, on the one hand, or non-political or non-governmental, on the other. The most important points bearing on Taiwan’s agencies and personnel in Hong Kong are points 6 and 7, which limit their political activities. The visit by Taiwan’s then president Lee Teng-hui to the US in June 1995 caused tremendous friction in cross-strait relations. In the second half of 1995, the PRC conducted four military exercises in the coastal regions, and at the time of Taiwan’s first popular presidential election in March 1996, when Lee was re-elected, the PRC fired missiles just 30 kilometers off the coast of Taiwan. Under these circumstances, perhaps Beijing felt the need to give clearer and more concrete guidelines regarding Taiwan’s permissible activities in Hong Kong. In July 1996, Beijing announced the “six cannots” for Taiwan agencies in Hong Kong:

1) They cannot conduct activities in the name of the Republic of China.

2) They cannot engage in activities in the name of “two Chinas,” “one China, one Taiwan,” or “Taiwan independence.”

3) Taiwanese officials cannot go to Hong Kong in any official capacities and engage in political activities.

4) Taiwanese non-official organizations in Hong Kong cannot support anti-CCP activities of hostile forces.

5) Taiwanese organizations cannot engage in activities that are not stated in their original registration.

6) Taiwan’s political parties cannot go to Hong Kong to publicize and conduct political activities. It is obvious that the “six cannots” were more specific than Qian’s seven-point statement and dealt exclusively with the politics of Taiwan-Hong Kong relations. The “six cannots” spelled out the red lines and also showed that Taiwan-Hong Kong ties were entirely in the hands of Beijing. If Beijing was adamant in preserving the “one China” principle in circumscribing Taiwan’s activities in post-handover Hong Kong, Hong Kong was powerless to resist.

After the handover, Beijing seems to have adopted a two-pronged strategy in Hong Kong: hard in politics and soft in economics. Because of the “one country, two systems” concept, China has not imposed a socialist system on Hong Kong, but it certainly would not let anyone doubt its determination to shape Hong Kong’s political structure to its own liking and defend its interests whenever necessary.

AN ACTOR WITHOUT A ROLE?
Since the Hong Kong SAR government does not have policies of its own, Hong Kong-Taiwan political relations are handled on a non-institutional and very often case-by-case basis, which is mostly determined by cross-strait relations — although Hong Kong has been able to preserve a mediating role for the Mainland and Taiwan in the area of trade, investment and visits and sightseeing trips.
by Taiwanese after the handover. However, Hong Kong’s role as a political conduit has been significantly diminished. The non-institutional character of the Hong Kong SAR’s policies on Taiwan can be seen by the following events:

- The appointment of Yip Kwok-wah as a special advisor to deal with Taiwan contacts during the first term of Chief Executive Tung Chee-wah meant that Beijing intended that Hong Kong-Taiwan relations should be handled in a non-official capacity.
- The granting of visas to senior Taiwan officials for the KMT, treatment differed depending on occasions and individuals. Jackson Hu, the spokesman for the KMT, was able to come to Hong Kong when he tried to stop over on his way to the Mainland.
- Even for the KMT, treatment differed depending on occasions and individuals. Jackson Hu, the spokesman for the KMT, was able to come to Hong Kong when he tried to stop over on his way to the Mainland.
- President Ma Ying-jeou received different treatment over the course of several years before he came to power. He was rejected for a visa in 1997, but in 2001 he had a high-profile visit as Taipei mayor. Four years later, in January 2005, his visa application for Hong Kong was rejected when he was invited by The University of Hong Kong’s Journalism and Media Studies Centre to deliver a public lecture and also to attend a forum with students at the University of Science and Technology Hong Kong.
- In 2001, Chen Po-chi and Yan Sing-cheong, ministers in charge of the economy and finance in the new DPP-led government, applied for visas to attend an economic forum in Hong Kong. They were asked by the Hong Kong government to sign a statement declaring that “they would not engage in activities that would embarrass the Hong Kong government” and that they “do not represent Taiwan’s sovereignty.” The ministers refused to sign and threatened to cancel the trip. The Hong Kong government later backed down.

As usual, the Hong Kong immigration authorities did not comment on individual cases. Starting in the second term of Tung in 2002, the post of special advisor was abolished and the power to deal with Taiwan affairs was delegated to the Secretary of Constitutional Affairs in the Hong Kong government. It was not an attempt to institutionalize the communication channels between Hong Kong and Taiwan, instead the change showed that Beijing was satisfied with what the SAR government had done in handling relations with Taiwan. Senior officials in Hong Kong had demonstrated that they understood the “can dos” and “cannot dos” perfectly well. In fact, Beijing’s relations with Taipei had been tense when the DPP led Taiwan from 2000 until 2008. There was not much the Hong Kong SAR could do. Besides, it is very likely that the Department of Taiwan Affairs in the Mainland’s Liaison Office in Hong Kong had assumed a more active role during Tung’s second term.

In July 2009, Du Qinglin, vice chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference and United Front Minister, came to Hong Kong to attend the opening ceremony of the Association for Facilitating Peaceful Unification of Taiwan in China. In his speech, he still stressed the “showcase” effect of Hong Kong on Taiwan. Perhaps it is the tradition of the CCP that the ideas of supreme leaders like Deng are perennial and must be upheld at all cost. Fifteen years after the handover, the showcase theory, in my view, has completely collapsed. I doubt whether the CCP senior officials ever really believed in the theory. In fact, political integration in post-handover Hong Kong has offered a negative example to Taiwan.

Taiwan’s reaction to “one country, two systems” has been overwhelmingly negative, as revealed by surveys conducted in Taiwan over the years.