

## For Taiwan, the Bridge Can Lead Both Ways

By Yu-Shan Wu

Hong Kong has always been a bridge between mainland China and the outside world ever since the founding of the People's Republic. After Beijing adopted an open-door policy in the late 1970's, however, Hong Kong's role has gradually shifted from being the main joining point of China and the West to becoming the major transit site for cross-Taiwan Strait exchanges. The international bridge has become an inter-Chinese bridge.

### Hong Kong Passes Capital and Goods, and More

Owing to Taiwan's fear of direct links between the island and the Chinese mainland, indirect exchange became the *modus vivendi* of cross-Strait relationship. This was the official position espoused by the Kuomintang (KMT) in the 1990's, and then followed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that took power in 2000. The mainland, in its eagerness to engage Taiwan compatriots, also plays by these rules although not without making frequent complaints. Hong Kong is the major transit site for all the indirect transactions between Taiwan and the mainland, receiving and then sending passengers and goods in two directions, and witnessing huge sums of money flowing into companies registered in the former British colony set up for transferring it, or for keeping profits gained by Taiwan's businessmen on the mainland but not remitted home.

Besides passing goods, capital and personnel, Hong Kong also passes influence. As Prof. Zhenmin Wang wrote earlier for the *Hong Kong Journal*, one of the three reasons that Hong Kong still matters when it is no longer the only window into China is to demonstrate to Taiwan that the political formula of "one country, two systems" works.<sup>1</sup> In order to counter this impression, many Hong Kong observers in Taiwan are keen to point out the difficulties the SAR faced ever since the transfer of sovereignty in 1997. These pundits draw people's attention to the financial crisis that induced unprecedented government intervention in the market, thus tarnishing Hong Kong's *laissez faire* capitalism, the avian flu that scared the population, the right of abode dispute that brought into question the judicial independence of the Special Administrative Region, the SARS that inflicted the greatest per capita loss of human lives in Hong Kong than anywhere else in the world, the Basic Law Article 23 dispute that led to the massive July 1 protest and the postponement of the enactment of the government's proposal. They also cite the continuous massive appeal for the "twin universal suffrage" for the Chief Executive in 2007 and for the Legislative Council in 2008 and the flat denial by Beijing of such opportunities, and the resignation of the unpopular Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa and his replacement by Donald Tsang. Not much good news indeed from Hong Kong in these years. The pundits are sure that the "one country, two systems" formula has met with little success.

The very denial of anything positive about Hong Kong since the 1997 sovereignty transfer is in itself a sign that the Taiwan elite fears "one country, two systems" may

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<sup>1</sup> Zhenmin Wang, "Why Does Hong Kong Still Matter?" *Hong Kong Journal*, [www.hkjjournal.com](http://www.hkjjournal.com).

indeed appeal to their population. In order to discredit Beijing's proposal, Taiwan needs to be absolutely sure that the Hong Kong model is not worth copying, and that Taiwan shall never succumb to the mainland's pressure and suffer the same fate as the former British colony. Here Beijing's leaders may take delight in the worry and fear they have aroused in the minds of Taiwan's leaders but that is about as far as their delight can go, for the Taiwanese are genuinely disinterested in the Hong Kong model. Most are intent on keeping the status quo, or in finding equal status with the mainland in either a confederative framework, or as an outright independent country. The "one country, two systems" formula as embodied in the HKSAR arrangement thus has little positive demonstration effect, at least for now.

### **Demonstration Effect: the Other Way**

In fact, there might be a demonstration effect in the opposite direction that has thus far escaped most people's attention. Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong are three Chinese societies that have developed along different trajectories. Taiwan is by far the most democratic of all and, if democracy is to have a future in greater China, Taiwan is destined to play a role in spreading democratic values and institutions to the others. Unlike the "one country, two systems" formula that passes influence from mainland China via Hong Kong to Taiwan, the democratic demonstration effect might be exercised by Taiwan on Hong Kong, and ultimately on China proper. Is that a farfetched scenario to think of?

Democracy is contagious. When people living under authoritarian systems realize that citizens in other countries can freely express their political opinions, determine their leaders by voting and "throw the rascals out," the contrasts cannot go unnoticed. Whether those democracies really serve as referents for the local population hinges on the linkage between one's own country and the democratic exemplar. The Chinese people may notice the democratic institutions at work in Western countries, but they can be persuaded by their leaders that China has not developed to such an extent as to be ready for similar democracy, or that democratic institutions cannot function well in a Chinese cultural setting (*guoqing*). However, China has been growing by leaps and bounds for more than twenty years and is now sitting on the world's largest foreign reserves. Surely China cannot be denied democracy because it lacks development. The cultural argument, on the other hand, may be more persuasive. In this respect, whether Taiwan's democracy works means a lot. If democracy can take root in Taiwan, an ethnically Chinese society, then obviously it can also function well in mainland China.

Just as Taiwan's Hong Kong-watchers are keen to point out the defects of the "one country, two systems" formula, China's Taiwan-watchers lose no opportunity to inform the Chinese people that the "democracy" of Taiwan is marred by black and gold politics, perennial scandals, fist-fights in the Legislative Yuan and, above all, was hijacked by advocates of Taiwan independence—and thus is not worthy of envy. Beijing's portrait of Taiwan's democracy shows that the communist leadership realizes the potential demonstration effect Taiwan's system may have on the mainland, and the need to discredit it in the bud. Besides official denials, there are other factors that make Taiwan's democratic institution an unlikely role model in mainland Chinese eyes. Taiwan has been moving further and further away from the one-China principle dear to both the communists and the Nationalists, but loathed by advocates of Taiwan independence who are currently in power. The hostility between the People's Republic and the Republic of China lingers on, and the U.S. could become involved in any defense of Taiwan against a possible mainland assault, invoking the specter of Western imperialism. All these make it hard for mainland China to imagine emulating Taiwan's democratic institutions.

Here comes Hong Kong. The former British colony is increasingly linked to mainland China, thanks to growing economic integration under Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) and other measures pursued by Beijing. Thus far, Hong Kong has had economic influence but little political impact on the mainland. Its fragile political liberalism is vulnerable to pressure from Beijing. In one after another encounters, the mainland has had its way in unilaterally setting the agenda for political reform in Hong Kong, affirming the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in Beijing as the sole and supreme interpreter of the Basic Law, and dispersing high expectations of universal suffrage in Hong Kong. However, this is not the end of the story. It is only natural that Hong Kong people would demand greater autonomy and democracy in the SAR. Since Hong Kong does have multiparty electoral competition, however imperfect the electoral system, further reform toward direct elections of the Chief Executive and the Legislative Council would amount to a watershed in Hong Kong's political development, and would set the stage for much greater impact on mainland provinces, particularly those in Southern and Eastern China. The tug of war that has been going on between Beijing and Hong Kong over the pace of the SAR's political reform reflects the fear of communist leaders in creating a truly autonomous Hong Kong, one that might impact the mainland by whipping up expectations for competitive elections above the township level.

Put in a democratic spectrum, one can easily believe that Hong Kong is in the middle between the noisy nascent democracy of Taiwan and the authoritarian developmental state of mainland China. It is much easier for Hong Kong to learn from Taiwan's experience, drawing both positive and negative lessons, than for the mainland to do so. There is a natural affinity of Hong Kong's democrats toward their Taiwan counterparts, as both share the experience of fighting against an authoritarian one-party state. One would then ask the question: if Taiwan's democratic experiences can be passed to Hong Kong, and then to the nearby mainland provinces, then would we have a demonstration effect that goes in the reverse direction from that intended by the "one country, two systems" model? It would not be Hong Kong showing how Taiwan can prosper under the one-China formula, but Taiwan demonstrating to Hong Kong how democracy can be gained and exercised.

### **Two Scenarios: Green vs. Blue**

It is true that Hong Kong democrats are interested in gaining more autonomy from Beijing and have a lot to learn from Taiwan's democracy, but how the Taiwan experience can serve as a model depends on who rules the island. After the initial democratic transition, Taiwan gradually succumbed to the fatal temptation of "ethnic politics" that have plagued so many nascent democracies. The differences in provincial origins and political identities of the island's residents have been sharply exacerbated and mobilized for political purposes. The society is polarized along ethnic-ideological lines. All political issues are absorbed into fundamental ideological rivalry, with little room for rational public policy debate. Currently the social and political schism on the island boils down to whether one considers himself Chinese (or Taiwanese cum Chinese) and thus favors ultimate unification with mainland China when the conditions are ripe, or if he thinks himself to be exclusively Taiwanese, and aspires for a new statehood in the name of the Republic of Taiwan. The unificationists, or the Blues, are led by the KMT; while the independence-minded, the Greens, rally around the DPP. The KMT was able to hold on to power until 2000, when the DPP won the presidential election. This change of government has profound impact on the relationship between Taiwan and Hong Kong, and on the potential democratic demonstration effect of the Taiwan experience.

The Greens are mainly interested in distancing Taiwan from China, fostering a new Taiwanese nation and building an independent state. In this way, the Greens are leading Taiwan out of the orbit of China, away from both the mainland and Hong Kong. The cross-Strait relation is poisoned by this rivalry between two competing nationalisms. Taiwan's democracy is seen in this light as mainly conducive to separatism, hardly an institution to emulate. After all, what patriotic Chinese would advocate a system that is prone to separatism and treason? One can argue, therefore, that the Greens' independence agenda has deprived Taiwan's democracy of its potential demonstration effect on Chinese patriots and on Hong Kong democrats who do not approve of turning Taiwan into a separate nation.

This situation, however, might change. After the initial electoral fiasco, the KMT has made a quite impressive comeback under the party's charismatic new leader, Ma Ying-jeou (who was born in Hong Kong). The KMT and its pan-Blue allies now have a majority in the Legislative Yuan, controlling seventeen of twenty-three counties and cities nationwide, and Ma, as the most popular politician on the island, may well succeed Chen as president in 2008. If the Blues return to power, they would certainly pursue a different policy toward the mainland and not pursue Taiwanese independence. They are Republic of China patriots and consider all Taiwanese to be Chinese. The Blues may not favor rushing toward unification talks with Beijing, but their political stance would legitimize Taiwan's democracy in the eyes of Chinese patriots on the mainland and moderate democrats in Hong Kong. Ma displayed his considerable charm when he visited Hong Kong in 2001, and an increasingly large audience in mainland China is willing to hear what he has to say about the future of the country.

Ma is different from both Lien Chan, the recently retired KMT chairman, and James Soong, whose popularity formed the political base of the People's First Party, the KMT's junior partner. Lien and Soong were warmly received during their pathbreaking trips to the mainland in 2005. They both spoke the language of Chinese nationalism, which contrasted sharply with that of President Chen Shui-bian. However, neither of them emphasized China's need for democracy, nor did they touch on the sensitive issue of the Tienanmen crackdown of 1989. Ma, on the other hand, has attended several June Fourth memorial ceremonies and has never refrained from speaking out against the crackdown. He is for both Chinese unification and democracy, a combination that heartens patriotic democrats in both mainland China and Hong Kong.

Taiwan's democratic experience may have a demonstration effect proportionate to the rise of Ma and his dual emphasis on Chinese nationalism and democracy. By affirming his commitment to unification, Ma gets his entrance ticket into the politics of Hong Kong and mainland China. By insisting on democratic values and institutions, he may be able to advertise Taiwan's experience in front of a more receptive audience. In short, Taiwan's democracy can serve as an exemplar to the Chinese people only when it is understood as a Chinese institution, not as an instrument for breaking away from the motherland. This is why who rules Taiwan has a profound impact on the usefulness of Taiwan's democracy in greater China, including Hong Kong.

Which party will win the 2008 presidential elections in Taiwan remains to be seen. Up to then the demonstration effect in either direction, i.e. "one country, two systems" on the one hand, and Taiwan's democratic demonstration on the other hand, is weak. Hong Kong's current status as the HKSAR does not inspire Taiwan people, nor does Taiwan's ethnically-dividing, scandal-ridden democracy serve as an example for Hong Kong. Ma's political ascendancy may increase the likelihood that Taiwanese democracy will be better received in Hong Kong and on the mainland. However, the continuous rise of the

Chinese economy and the increasing magnetism of the mainland market may make the Hong Kong model more appealing to the people in Taiwan in the long run. Which demonstration effect will be stronger? Will Taiwan follow in the footsteps of Hong Kong and become another SAR, or will Hong Kong follow in Taiwan's footsteps and practise full democracy? This is a question only history can answer. We can only be sure of one thing: Hong Kong matters. It is either the springboard for the mainland's authoritarian development state to spread to Taiwan, or the base for democracy to spread to mainland China. It remains *the* bridge. ■

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