

Business-driven think tank reasserts Hong Kong's role as China's global connector by telling 'city's story'

Better Hong Kong Foundation to hold meetings in Middle East and Europe next month to promote greater international understanding between East and West

The international business and financial centre of Hong Kong is known globally as the historic gateway between mainland China and the rest of the world.

Against an increasingly complicated geopolitical landscape, the city must reassert its role as a "connector" and continue to support the country's economic growth, Ronnie Chan, chairman of property developer Hang Lung Properties, and executive committee chairman of the non-profit think tank, Better Hong Kong Foundation, says.

News headlines in recent years would have made many people think that rising tensions between China and the United States began with the trade war in 2018 under the administration of then-US president Donald Trump, which led to tariffs on about US\$550 billion of Chinese goods and US\$185 billion of US goods. But the seeds of the nations' geopolitical rivalry may have been sown decades ago.

"There's no doubt Trump exacerbated the problem greatly, but it didn't start there," he says. "America's hostility against China was about 30 years in the making."

Chan believes the real cause of Sino-US tensions has been America's continuing determination, both politically and militarily, to maintain its global dominance and ensure no rival superpower could emerge in the world.

The Western media have also played no small role in shaping global sentiments about China during past decades. In the years leading up to Britain's 1997 handover of Hong Kong to China – despite the principle of "one country, two systems", which promised it the autonomy to continue its capitalist system and ways of life – there were many gloomy public and media predictions about the city's future. One such report was *Fortune* magazine's June 1995 article titled "The Death of Hong Kong".

Such negative sentiments inspired the launch of the foundation, with its mission to help build greater international understanding between the East and West by facilitating communication between Hong Kong, mainland China and the global community.

"There was a lot of apprehension about what may come after 1997," Chan says. "Not a single Hong Kong business entity initiated



The non-profit think tank Better Hong Kong Foundation will resume visits abroad of its high-profile delegation next month to help encourage communication between Hong Kong, mainland China and the global community. Photo SCMP/ Edmond So

a celebration of the city's return to the motherland. So, 21 business leaders got together – and that was how [in 1995] the Better Hong Kong Foundation started."

Over the years, membership of the privately funded organisation has grown, and now includes many of the city's prominent entrepreneurs and leading professionals. It has achieved many successes in setting the record straight and telling the "Hong Kong story".

The foundation frequently organises visits by high-level delegations abroad, including the US, Israel, Turkey and Russia. Lately, more focus has been shifted to regions such as Europe and the Middle East, where there is a more positive attitude towards China.

"I have never had so many Israeli, United Arab Emirati and Saudi Arabian friends wondering about doing business in China and elsewhere in Asia as I do now," Chan says. "I know what they're after and it's a real opportunity."

The Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to its international visits between 2020 and the start of this year, but now the world is

emerging from the crisis and reopening, the foundation is resuming its relationship-building efforts.

Next month, a Better Hong Kong Foundation will send a delegation to the Middle East and Europe, visiting the cities of Riyadh and Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia, France's capital, Paris, and Germany's capital, Berlin. The trip will include attending the Global Solutions Summit, an annual international conference that since 2017 has brought together experts from think tanks, research organisations, governance bodies, the private sector and civil society to discuss international issues and policies.

Members of the foundation are able to help build relationships in ways that the government may be unable to achieve.

"With state-to-state diplomacy, you have no choice but to listen to the person who is talking because they will be the head of state or a government official," Chan says.

"But person-to-person diplomacy is the exact opposite. People don't have to talk to you. And you have to gain their trust: you have to

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Ronnie Chan, executive committee chairman, Better Hong Kong Foundation

make friends. Then the good thing is you can say a lot to friends, and we pay much closer attention to what our friends say."

Members of the foundation also play host to political and economic leaders when they visit Hong Kong, to facilitate exchanges between leaders in the city, mainland China and the West.

The foundation established its first journalism programme in 2006, which now annually invites up to eight American journalists to visit mainland China and Hong Kong to enhance the US media's understanding of how "one country, two systems" works.

In 2007, a delegation from the foundation visited the US, with the itinerary including a meeting with a *Fortune* journalist. Candid conversations resulted in the publishing of an article titled "Oops! Hong Kong is Hardly Dead", which concluded that "the city is thriving more than ever".

That same year, the foundation also began to help train the next generation of "Hong Kong ambassadors" by organising its annual Hong Kong Cup Diplomatic Knowledge Contest, which aims to raise young students' interest in international affairs and their knowledge of China's foreign policy.

As a think tank, the foundation also plays an important role in shaping policy. Its annual "China Urban Competitiveness Report" provides the government and the community with valuable insights into developing and maintaining Hong Kong's competitiveness across the region.

The foundation is also at the forefront in promoting Hong Kong as a key player in the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative – the central government's trade initiative to link economies into a China-centred trading network – and Southern China's Greater Bay Area development zone.

In 1997, the year of the handover, China's gross domestic product was reportedly US\$961.6 billion; in 2021, it was estimated to be US\$17.73 trillion. Although the country has long since opened its doors to foreign direct investment, with international flights connected to its airports nationwide, the foundation believes Hong Kong still has a role to play as a major connector.

"Our position as a business connector has been evolving over the past 30 years as mainland China changes," Chan says. "But as the world changes, you may be losing certain advantages in some areas, but new ones can emerge, and there will always be opportunities.

"I believe that in my lifetime, Hong Kong will still have a tremendous advantage – and will continue to shine as a business and financial centre of China."



Ronnie Chan (fourth from left), executive committee chairman of the Better Hong Kong Foundation, shares his thoughts on China-United States relations during a meeting of the foundation's delegation in the US in 2017. Photo: Better Hong Kong Foundation



Members of the Better Hong Kong Foundation at a dinner held in Hong Kong last year to discuss the think tank's future plans. Photo: Better Hong Kong Foundation

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