Memorable reign of the ‘King of Macau’, Stanley Ho

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Under his imaginative plan, the two cities would become the “Switzerland” of Asia, turning them into symbols of peace.

A Post article from 1989 on Stanley’s Ho post-handover vision for Hong Kong and Macau. Photo: SCMP

Although the project never took off, it showed how much of a visionary Ho was.

It also demonstrated he was no ordinary businessman, but a canny political operator with a broad understanding of the world that helped him successfully navigate the changes taking place in Macau, while building an empire that has survived multiple administrations.

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“He was always a Chinese patriot – and he served many times as a bridge between the interests of Macau and even of the Portuguese authorities’ interests with China,” said Jorge Neto Valente, head of the Macau Lawyers Association and a former lawmaker.

Although Ho’s role as an interlocutor between the two sides of the border was rarely publicised, he was involved in the discussions about the Basic Law – Macau’s mini-constitution – before the city’s handover to China in 1999, which came two years after Hong Kong’s return.

Ho was a member of the Basic Law Consultative Committee of Hong Kong and a vice-chairman of the Macau Basic Law Drafting Committee.

“He discreetly maintained his contacts with the Chinese authorities,” said Valente, who worked on several occasions with Ho.

“And he was heard on issues that involved the local economy and politics during the drafting of the [Macau] Basic Law. He had a great and sharp understanding on many issues and was rarely wrong.”
The proposal to bring the UN headquarters to the neighbouring cities was seen as testament to Ho’s political understanding of the region.

“The June 4 incident [the Tiananmen crackdown] has shattered local confidence [in Hong Kong and Macau] and this crisis could be fully resolved if China announced in the near future the decision to lease Hong Kong and Macau to the UN after they revert to China,” Ho said at the time.

“My proposal could boost China’s international image and freeze or even stop Hong Kong’s serious brain drain.”

The casino tycoon pledged to help fund the plan if approval could be obtained from the UN, Britain and China. But despite the backing of prominent figures in Hong Kong, Ho’s proposal did not materialise.

In the late 1960s, Ho shared his plan during a dinner with Liang Weilin, then director of Xinhua news agency’s Hong Kong branch, which was China’s de facto embassy in the city under British rule.

Several Hong Kong tycoons, including Li Ka-shing and Henry Fok Ying-tung, were also present at the gathering. But, according to Ho, Liang just smiled after he floated the idea.

Despite Ho’s close relations with Beijing officials, he was also able to court the Portuguese authorities in Macau and the local community.

“He was often heard by the [Portuguese] governors of Macau. In many of the most crucial decisions for the city, his opinion was very important,” lawyer Valente said.

“But he would not brag about it … He would not come out and share the content of those meetings.”

Stanley Ho (right) pictured in 1990 celebrating the promulgation of Hong Kong’s Basic Law with Zhou Nan (centre), director of the local branch of the New China News Agency (now Xinhua);
Valente noted that Ho turned down plenty of opportunities to enter politics. “He never wanted to take a position in the local politics – he preferred to have a discreet [political] participation and continue doing what he knew the best, which was creating wealth, not just for him, but also for the city and the region.”

Miguel de Senna Fernandes, lawyer and president of the Macanese Association, also said that Ho – who had investments in Portugal – showed “great ability” in dealing with both the Chinese and Portuguese authorities.

“In fact, he was always a good friend of the Portuguese. Many of his projects even took Portuguese names,” Fernandes said.

“He was a first nature businessman, a visionary, who was able to convince the authorities of how credible his ambition was.

“And he managed to transform Macau and revolutionise the gambling industry.”

Ho held onto a four-decade monopoly until the liberalisation of the industry in 2002. But even after that, Ho’s firm – Sociedade de Jogos de Macau (SJM), which was created in 2001, and a subsidiary of one-time gaming monopoly Sociedade de Turismo e Diversoes de Macau (STDM) – continued to grow.

SJM is still the largest casino operator in Macau by number of venues, with 22.

Former SJM executive director Rui Cunha also noted that Ho worked with a number of administrations in some of the region’s major projects, such as the city’s airport and the Macau Cultural Centre.

“[Ho] was a person of good character, friendly and respectful, and a good communicator with an extraordinary intellectual capacity,” Cunha said.
His ability to build consensus was probably one of his greatest secrets for success, lawyer Valente said. “He knew how to adapt to all the circumstances and changes that happened over the past decades. That’s why he was able to maintain good relations with authorities in China, Macau and Portugal.”

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