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Articles

From village to global city: cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong

De aldea a ciudad global: las relaciones transfronterizas entre Shenzhen y Hong Kong

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Abstract

Shenzhen's transformation has as an indispensable element its relationship with Hong Kong. This article, employing a documentary method and considering a period that began with China's opening-up and economic reform in 1979, analyzes the distinct stages of the relationship between Shenzhen and Hong Kong over 45 years. To this end, it discusses the legal framework behind a unique relationship shaped by the adoption of the "one country, two systems" concept that allowed Shenzhen to transform into an international metropolis. The findings demonstrate that the adoption of a public policy based on a medium- and long-term vision, which focused on the advantages of a single-border relationship, was a key element of this transformation. The conclusions emphasize that adopting a planning approach based on a vision of cross-border complementarity can enhance the living conditions of disadvantaged populations.

Keywords: China, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, one country two systems, cross-border relations.

Resumen

La transformación de Shenzhen tiene como elemento indispensable las relaciones transfronterizas con Hong Kong. Este artículo, con base en el método documental, analiza las distintas etapas de la relación Shenzhen-Hong Kong durante 45 años, desde el inicio del proceso de apertura y reforma económica de China en 1979. Para ello, se discute el marco legal detrás de una relación *sui generis* moldeada por la adopción del concepto de "un país, dos sistemas" que permitió a Shenzhen transformarse en una metrópoli internacional. Los hallazgos demuestran que la adopción de una política pública basada en una visión de mediano y largo plazo, que puso como centro las ventajas derivadas de una relación fronteriza única, fue una pieza

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clave de esta transformación. Finalmente, las conclusiones destacan que la adopción de una planificación basada en una visión de complementariedad transfronteriza puede mejorar las condiciones de vida de las poblaciones menos favorecidas.

Palabras clave: China, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, un país dos sistemas, relaciones transfronterizas.

Introduction, Shenzhen from a village to a global city

The history of Shenzhen is the story of the extraordinary transformation of a vast rural border region, set against the backdrop of the radical changes China has undergone as a result of its reform and economic opening-up process. In many ways, the city of Shenzhen is the product of the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy under the guidance of the Chinese state (Chen & de'Medici, 2012). In 1980, as the economic reform process began, Shenzhen was designated one of the first four special economic zones (SEZs), along with Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen (Wu et al., 2021). These zones were established to serve as experimental units for structural economic reform and as sites for learning about the importance of law and regulation in production processes that meet market demands (Stoltenberg, 1955). Shenzhen, in particular, was chosen with the dual objective of experimenting with "market forces" and serving as "China's window to the world" (Hu, 2021). In this way, Shenzhen was regarded as a capitalist laboratory created by a communist regime (Zacharias & Tang, 2010), in which the reform program was implemented gradually, through a trial-and-error model, with a medium- and long-term vision (Cable, 2017; Chen et al., 1992; Ellman, 1986).

The central government chose Shenzhen as a testing ground for China's profound economic transformations because this city shared a border with Hong Kong, which was then a British colony (Lee, 2005). Shenzhen was a rare case of a city with both international and national borders: the first border separated it from Hong Kong, and the second from the rest of China; these two borders regulated various "flows" of people, goods, information and capital in different ways and were the conditions that made its rapid urbanization possible (Huang, 2017). In short, today's Shenzhen would not exist without Hong Kong, which lies right next door (Bontje, 2019).

In 1979, when the economic reform process began, Shenzhen had a permanent population of 312 000; by 2023, this figure had risen to 17 790 000, meaning that the number of permanent residents in the city increased approximately 43-fold over 40 years (Shenzhen Municipality Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Per capita gross domestic product in 1979 was 606 yuan, while in 2023 it was 195 230 yuan (Shenzhen Municipality Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Furthermore, in 2017, Shenzhen's economy surpassed Hong Kong's in terms of gross domestic product (Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative, 2018), thereby establishing itself as a major first-rate technological and economic hub in China.

The case of Shenzhen is remarkable not only for the speed at which the city grew but also for its ability to achieve the status of an international metropolis and to be regarded as a prime location for technological innovation and the knowledge-based economy (Huang & Rohayah Sheikh Dawood, 2024). Likewise, Shenzhen gradually transformed into one of China's most important metropolises with strong international ties. In the global city ranking compiled by Loughborough University in 2024, Shenzhen was classified in the Alpha category, alongside cities such as Luxembourg, Taipei, Brussels, Zurich and San Francisco (GaWC, 2025).

Shenzhen's rise as a metropolis can be understood in the context of "China's urban revolution", a phenomenon unprecedented in human history in both its scale and the speed at which it unfolded (Freeman, 2009). In 1978, the urban population accounted for only 18%; by 2023, it had increased to 66% (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2024). This transformation has its origins in state-driven restructuring, in which the central government's vision and ambition to promote the development of urban regions were implemented through a series of strategic plans, national mandates and planning laws, thereby enabling interaction among multiple levels of government (Ye & Yang, 2018).

Nevertheless, unlike other cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing and Xi'an, Shenzhen is an "instant city" whose origins lie in the Chinese government's desire to make it a showcase for the progress the communist regime is capable of achieving under the banner of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Hu, 2021).

Thus, Shenzhen's transformation is a complex process of economic, social and spatial changes that has created an urban ecosystem with multiple actors and dynamics, evolving over time. Therefore, taking as a starting point the pioneering works of Shirk (1993), Huang (1996), Castells (1998) and Wang and Hu (2001), it is assumed that, ultimately, Shenzhen's transformation, rooted in the strategy to capitalize on its proximity to Hong Kong, is the result of a "top-down revolution"; that is, China's economic transformation and the possibility of Shenzhen's emergence constitute a specific political project, designed and controlled by the central government's leadership, which thus becomes the primary driver of economic development.

While Shenzhen's extraordinary growth can be explained within the broader context of China's transformation, this paper suggests that it represents a unique case due to its proximity to Hong Kong and the cross-border ties that have given rise to a competitive and complementary partnership, which has evolved within the framework of the "one country, two systems" policy.[1] In other words, the key to Shenzhen's transformation from a rural area into a metropolis lies in the evolution of cross-border relations shaped by a unique legal framework that enabled a singular form of interaction between the two cities.

Nevertheless, to understand Shenzhen's transformation, it is not enough to consider the geographical proximity of cities at different stages of development; rather, it is essential to consider a regime's ability to create a favorable environment that enables long-term vision and the ability to capitalize on this opportunity. Therefore, this article explores how the Chinese Communist Party's quest for legitimacy is the cornerstone

[1] "One country, two systems" is a founding policy adopted by the Chinese government to achieve the peaceful reunification of the country. Based on this principle, the Chinese government resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong on July 1, 1997. The central government strictly adheres to the *Hong Kong Basic Law*. It supports the administration of the Chief Executive and the government of the Hong Kong special administrative region in accordance with the law. The region exercises a high degree of autonomy in accordance with the law and is vested with independent executive, legislative and judicial powers. The initial proposal for this arrangement was that the previous capitalist system and way of life would remain unchanged and that most laws would continue to apply in Hong Kong (The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 2014).

explaining the design and implementation of a unique, pragmatic policy—reflecting the Chinese economic model—that enabled the successful urbanization of Shenzhen. The Communist Party needed to create a tangible demonstration of the superiority of the "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" system, and Shenzhen's transformation offered a unique opportunity.

Thus, the central objective of this paper is to relate the communist regime's quest for legitimacy to Hong Kong's historical evolution, analyzing how the regime adopted a particular vision of urban development by combining economic transition without political change with the development of urban spaces in which the market economy flourished.

To analyze the various stages of cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong, this study is organized into five sections. The first section presents the conceptual framework for the legitimacy of the Communist Party of China. Subsequently, the origins of Shenzhen are discussed within the context of China's policy of opening up and economic reform. Finally, the incorporation of Hong Kong into Chinese sovereignty is analyzed within the framework of the "one country, two systems" principle. The following section examines the phases of cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong and how these relations facilitated Shenzhen's emergence as an international metropolis. Finally, the conclusions highlight that adopting a planning approach grounded in a vision of cross-border complementarity—which has enhanced opportunities to improve Shenzhen residents' living conditions—is a key element of the regime's political legitimacy.

Political legitimacy and urban development: the backdrop to Shenzhen's transformation

Since its founding in 1949, the People's Republic of China has been a one-party regime and, except for a brief period during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party has been the sole gateway to power (Li, 2014). The success of Shenzhen's transformation as a tangible example of the Chinese development model's success is, ultimately, a success for the Communist Party itself. Similarly, Shenzhen's success serves as the foundation for the regime's legitimacy.

Nonetheless, to understand the relation between the adoption of a policy that enabled Shenzhen's transformation and the foundations of the Communist Party's legitimacy, one must consider the specific context of Chinese communism, shaped by a long historical tradition that blends political ideas inherited from Confucianism—which justified the political and social order of the Chinese world for more than two thousand five hundred years—with contemporary communist thought (Zhao, 2015). To do so, it is necessary to consider that the religious beliefs and philosophical thought of Ancient China converge in renewed ideas that provide a discursive framework for both the spirituality and the rationality of the Chinese people (Solé-Farràs, 2014).

These ideas shape politics and political power by supporting the Communist Party's vision of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics". At the same time, the Party positions itself as the guardian of Confucian concepts and uses them as yet another source of its legitimacy. In this regard, Confucius's importance extends beyond his philosophy, as his thought represents the core from which both the foundations of social organization and the various forms of political power were forged. Thus, Confucius served as the bridge through which political-philosophical thought transitioned from theocracy to naturalism, by highlighting the intrinsic importance of human beings and their relationship with others, moving away from divine mandate or sanction and promoting respect and love for humanity (Oropeza-García, 2019).

While political legitimacy is a widely debated concept with a broad foundation, it is essential to highlight the relation between morality and political legitimacy. Clearly, morality is not the only factor in understanding the construction of legitimacy, but it is undeniably a key element of this process in the Chinese context. That said, political legitimacy can be understood as the belief

> in the legitimacy of a State, in its authority to issue orders, so that orders are obeyed not simply out of self-interest, but because they are believed to have moral authority, because citizens believe they must obey (Barker, 1990, p. 11).

The basis for the legitimacy of power is in the governed people's conviction that their government—whether democratic, communist, or authoritarian—is morally right (Alagappa, 1995).

The moral values associated with legitimacy must be understood within the context of Chinese society. As Guo (2010) has pointed out, relying solely on political theories from Western civilization will leave one's overall understanding of political legitimacy in China incomplete. In the Chinese experience, traditional beliefs, regulations and values are crucial. Therefore, the importance of ethics in political discourse, the State's obligation to ensure the well-being of the people, the need for a strong State to maintain a unitary system of government, and the cultivation of political and social harmony through consensus-building, mutual agreement and individual sacrifice continue to shape the Chinese political system and the foundations that underpin it (Guo, 2010, p. 2).

Although these ideas are also present in the works of Western philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, what makes Chinese political thought unique is its grounding in political legitimacy rooted in moral superiority. Consequently, ideas such as the Mandate of Heaven, Filial Piety, harmony as a result of a hierarchical social order, the cyclical view of history, the rise and fall of dynasties due to the moral weakness of emperors and the Sinocentric view of the world are fundamental in the particular context of Chinese civilization (Chu, 2013). The crucial aspect of morality is the presence of a benevolent government, characterized by rulers who must be compassionate toward the people (Chu, 2013).

The paradigmatic view of legitimacy has traditionally emphasized a normative order and the moral responsibilities of its leaders. The State's responsibility—mutually recognized by both the State and society—toward the well-being of the Chinese people provides the basis for the regime's legitimacy. Bureaucratic morality is as vital as the State's moral commitment. Therefore, the regime's legitimacy will endure as long as the moral commitment is maintained (Tong, 2011).

The people's favorable perception of their leaders is a critical element of the Chinese government's legitimacy, whose defining feature must be not only its effectiveness in managing state affairs but also its moral capacity (Guo, 2010). Therefore, from the Chinese perspective, moral superiority enables material superiority. Moreover, the progress in the way of life of the Chinese people, as expressed in the urban revolution and the rise of cities like Shenzhen that seek to offer better living conditions for their residents, is possible not only because of the "technical" capacity of the rulers but also because of their moral superiority.

Finally, China's contemporary history demonstrates how successful the Communist Party has been in maintaining its hold on power and overcoming mistakes made at various points in history (Li, 2014). As explored in the following sections, the introduction of an economic opening-up policy to overcome a stagnant economy, the recovery of Hong Kong and the high degree of respect for its autonomy and the transformation of Shenzhen into an international metropolis are presented as a policy of rectification by officials who are not only technically capable but also morally superior.

Shenzhen and its transformation in the context of China's economic reform and opening-up policy

December 1978 marked a turning point in China's contemporary history when, during the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party, it was decided to implement comprehensive reforms to promote economic development by attracting foreign direct investment and fostering innovation (Im, 2014). Furthermore, it was announced that the policy focus would shift away from the ideological emphasis on "class struggle" that had characterized the previous decade and instead center on achieving economic growth (Bhardwaj, 1992).

Deng Xiaoping, the Communist Party's supreme leader, recognized that the greatest threats to China were underdevelopment, slow economic growth rates and technological backwardness relative to its Asian neighbors—such as South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore—and to developed countries like the United States and Japan (Harding, 1987). From a broader perspective, the intention was to advance along the path of growth and development by driving China's modernization in four sectors: industry, agriculture, armed forces and science and technology (Hsü, 2000). To this end, one of the first steps was the establishment of the SEZs (Tantri, 2013).

Unlike other contemporary processes of economic liberalization and reform, the Chinese process originated in a crisis of political legitimacy (Bléjer et al., 1991), stemming from the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution, which officially ended in 1976 with Mao Zedong's death (Fenby, 2008). Over the next three years, as a new leadership took shape, the Communist Party leadership deliberated on the path forward and considered options ranging from the continuation of a centralized, Stalinist-style economic policy to a simultaneous process of economic and political modernization that would eventually lead to the adoption of a liberal democratic system (Yang, 2024). Ultimately, the reformist faction led by Deng Xiaoping prevailed, promoting a model of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that would allow for the adoption of market-economy principles under the guidance of the Chinese State (Vogel, 2011).

This vision entailed profound economic reform without adopting the West's liberal political system (Zheng, 1999). As Deng pointed out at the outset of the reform process, the fundamental requirement for carrying out modernization was to uphold the Party's Four Cardinal Principles, both ideologically and politically. These principles were to uphold the socialist path, defend the dictatorship of the proletariat, uphold the leadership of the Communist Party and uphold Marxism-Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong (Cheek, 2016).

In this context, it was essential for the Communist Party leadership to ensure that a series of economic reforms were implemented in "controlled spaces"; thus, the SEZs would serve as testing grounds for the novel concept of "state capitalism" (Chu, 1987). Chinese reformers knew it was impossible to modernize the entire country simultaneously and uniformly; not only because of the size of the population or the vastness of the territory, but also due to the lack of infrastructure to connect the country to the international market, as well as the absence of private enterprises, a business class and a skilled workforce (Lemus-Delgado & Balderrama, 2010). Therefore, a key decision was to limit the territorial scope of the reforms to create a testing ground for an entirely new phenomenon (López Villafañe, 2012).

In short, the SEZs were characterized by well-developed public services, such as water and electricity supply, compared to other regions of the country. Furthermore, because these SEZs were administered directly by provincial authorities, they fostered a favorable climate for foreign investment by providing bureaucratic flexibility in key decision-making. Similarly, the SEZs granted companies preferential treatment regarding taxes and land use. Furthermore, manufactured goods were intended for export and the SEZs operated similarly to a free-market economy. Finally, unlike in the rest of China, foreign companies were permitted to invest in joint ventures with Chinese citizens in these zones (Yeung, 2015).

When the Communist Party leadership announced the creation of a new municipality called Shenzhen in March 1979, the area was largely a little-known rural and fishing community within Baoan County, part of Guangdong Province, located on China's southern coast at the mouth of the Pearl River. The goal was to develop the area to capitalize on its proximity to Hong Kong, as part of a broader plan to boost the country's southeastern regions (Chen et al., 2003).

Moreover, Shenzhen was not a major city in the 1970s; therefore, the political and economic risks of allowing the municipality to experiment with market forces seemed manageable, so that if the reform failed, it would not significantly harm the national economy or tarnish the reputation of the ruling elite (Ye & Yang, 2018). In August 1980, a bolder step was taken when the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress issued the *Regulations on Special Economic Zones in Guangdong Province* and set aside 327.5 square kilometers of the city's total area for the construction of the largest of China's first four special economic zones (Chen et al., 2003).

Beyond this national context, Guangdong Province—particularly along its border with Hong Kong, where the new Shenzhen SEZ was established—faced unique challenges, as it served as the boundary between mainland China and Hong Kong. By 1979, Hong Kong was still a British colony, and the Sino-British Joint Declaration of 1984 (Declaración Conjunta Sino-Británica de 1984)—which established the conditions under which Hong Kong would return to China—had not yet been signed (Summers, 2018). Since the triumph of the 1949 Revolution, Hong Kong had become a destination for illegal migrants from mainland China seeking better living conditions, escaping violence, famine and political unrest, or establishing a stable base for future migration to a third country (Liu & Lam, 2022).

Famine and economic hardship in mainland China triggered several waves of migration. Between 1976 and 1981 alone, an estimated 400 000 Chinese immigrants entered Hong Kong (Wong, 2007). For Deng, this situation could not be ignored and stemmed from the low standard of living, particularly the vast disparity between mainland China and Hong Kong. Consequently, he urged provincial leaders to resolve the problem by developing the local economy and improving the quality of life for Guangdong residents (Yitao & Zhiguo, 2014).

Shenzhen's success exceeded most people's expectations. The initial projection, made in 1981 by officials at the Shenzhen Planning Bureau, estimated that the SEZ's population would reach 400 000 by 1990 and one million by 2000—figures that were actually reached in 1985 and 1989, respectively (Shen, 2018). In 1992, when Deng undertook his famous Southern Tour and visited Shenzhen, he recalled how, in 1984, much of the city consisted of rice paddies, ponds, narrow paths and low-rise houses. When he returned to Shenzhen years later, the streets were lined with mid-rise buildings, and some of the taller structures featured mirrored glass, a symbol of modernity. Deng remarked: "Eight years have passed, and Shenzhen is developing at a breakneck pace. It exceeds my expectations" (Chatwin, 2024).

This extraordinary transformation can only be understood by considering the possibilities arising from the dual-border phenomenon, as framed by the "one country, two systems" principle, which is discussed in the following section.

Cross-border relations under the "one country, two systems" policy

Cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong are shaped by the unique circumstances arising from Hong Kong's political transition. After more than 150 years as a British colony, it became a special administrative region of China (Lee, 2005). The British Colony of Hong Kong comprised three parts: Hong Kong Island, the Kowloon Peninsula and the New Territories. Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula were ceded in perpetuity to the British Crown in 1842 and 1860, respectively, as a result of China's defeat in the First and Second Opium Wars (Dillon, 2010), while the New Territories were ceded for a period of 99 years beginning in 1898 (Li, 2000). Hong Kong's transition to British colonial rule represented one of the greatest humiliations for China in the 19th century (Chan, 1996).

In September 1982, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher visited Beijing to ascertain China's intentions regarding Hong Kong after 1997, when the lease of the New Territories was set to expire (Anguiano, 2001). Thatcher's initial proposal was to maintain the *status quo*; however, Deng's response was firm, stating that China would not accept the Hong Kong territories being administered by the British Crown after 1997 (Ku, 1990).

Thatcher's visit set in motion two years of talks that culminated in a bilateral agreement signed in September 1984 by Thatcher and Zhao Ziyang, who was then serving as China's prime minister (Anguiano, 1997). With this agreement, Hong Kong returned to China (Anguiano, 1997). Thus, the Communist Party leadership completed the first step toward its overarching goal of regaining sovereignty over the historic Chinese territory (Anguiano, 2001).

Thus, on July 1, 1997, China resumed exercising sovereignty over Hong Kong under the "one country, two systems" principle (Garver, 2016). This principle embodied a flexible formula designed by the Communist Party leadership to reintegrate Hong Kong into China while allowing the territory to maintain a high degree of autonomy.

The underlying idea was that two distinct political and economic systems could coexist within China; thus, this principle ensured that China's socialist system and policies would not be implemented in the former British colony and that Hong Kong's previous system and way of life would remain unchanged for the next fifty years (Yip, 2015). The original premise of the "one country, two systems" principle was not initially conceived for the return of Hong Kong; in fact, Deng first used this phrase in January 1982 to summarize the nine principles he proposed for Taiwan's return to China and thereby achieve the peaceful reunification of the country (Lo, 2014).

To accommodate the coexistence of two different systems, in December 1982 the National People's Congress adopted a new constitution, which, in article 31, permitted the creation of special administrative regions—a political solution designed to facilitate the reintegration not only of Hong Kong, but also of Macao and Taiwan (Martí Sánchez, 2012). This article established that, if necessary, the State could establish special administrative regions, which would have to be prescribed by a law enacted by the National People's Congress after considering "specific conditions" (The State Council. The People's Republic of China, 2019).

Two years later, Chinese and British government officials signed a joint declaration stating, among other things, that China would resume sovereignty over the entire territory of Hong Kong as of July 1, 1997. Furthermore, it specified that Hong Kong would become a special administrative region under the authority of the central government of the People's Republic of China. The declaration also stipulated that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region would have its own legislative, executive and judicial powers, while existing laws would remain largely unchanged.

Furthermore, unlike during the colonial era, when the highest authority was a governor appointed by the British Crown, the declaration established that this authority would rest with the chief executive, whom the central government would appoint based on the results of local elections or referendums and that the legislature would be formed through elections. Finally, the declaration specified that Hong Kong would preserve its economic and social system, which guaranteed certain rights to Hong Kong citizens, such as the right to freedom of religion, expression and the press; the right of assembly, association and strike; and unrestricted respect for private property (Declaración Conjunta Sino-Británica, 1984).

The principles of the Joint Declaration were enshrined in the *Basic Law*, which has constitutional status; that is, it serves as an inviolable constitutional charter designed to ensure social stability and economic development in Hong Kong. The *Basic Law* stipulates Hong Kong's sovereignty and legal status, as well as specifying the permissible scope of authority and the interrelationship between the central Chinese and local Hong Kong authorities; it establishes the political system; delineates the roles of the executive, legislative and judicial branches; sets forth the evolution of the electoral system; and defines the rights and obligations of Hong Kong residents (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2025).

The significance of Shenzhen's proximity to Hong Kong lies in the fact that after Hong Kong was returned to China—while maintaining a political and economic model distinct from that of Shenzhen at the time—the opportunities to "learn from Hong Kong's experience", "experiment with market forces" and "serve as the gateway from China to the world and from the world to China", fostered a unique cross-border interaction. Hong Kong served as a base for attracting international companies seeking to enter China, and Shenzhen was originally Hong Kong's supply hub for products manufactured by a disciplined, cost-effective workforce, a phenomenon characterized by the concept of "the store in front, the factory in back" (Shen, 2018). At the same time, the incentives granted to Shenzhen by the Chinese central government when it became one of the first four SEZs enabled it to become a major magnet for labor from across China, fueling its exponential growth and turning it into a major hub for internal migration.

Nevertheless, the most striking development is Shenzhen's transformation from a labor supplier and manufacturing hub into a global city and the epicenter of innovation in China, thereby evolving from Hong Kong's apprentice to its rival. Shenzhen has thus become a successful model in the effort to rebalance the economy so that it relies less on exogenous growth—based on the export of low-cost, labor-intensive manufactured goods—and relies more on endogenous growth through domestic investments focused on higher value-added production, skilled labor and domestic consumption (Carter, 2010).

The following section discusses the importance of Hong Kong in driving Shenzhen's development and the evolution of cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong within the framework of a medium- and long-term policy implemented by the Chinese government, in order to understand these profound transformations.

The evolution of cross-border relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong

It is no coincidence that Shenzhen was selected as one of China's first SEZs, given its shared border with Hong Kong, which enabled its gradual evolution from a village to a global city, as shown in Table 1. In the years following World War II, the political structure and stability provided by the colonial government drove vigorous economic development in the Hong Kong territory, and the colony's economic success enabled the flourishing of an educated, prosperous and vibrant community (Ku, 1990).

Under colonial rule, Hong Kong evolved from a territory characterized by fishing villages into a cosmopolitan city by the end of the 20th century, enjoying one of the highest standards of living in the Asia-Pacific region. It combined an open and liberal society with a dynamic market economy, though it lacked a fully democratic government (Chan, 1996). From its inception, Hong Kong occupied a strategic position connecting China with the outside world, serving as the most important springboard for Chinese diasporas and as a gateway to China for those interested in the country, whether as a new frontier for colonial expansion, as a vast market, or as an outlet for global outsourcing of low-cost manufacturing (Chan & Lin, 2008).

Hong Kong, considered one of the "Four Little Dragons" among East Asia's highly developed economies, began industrializing in the 1950s (Vogel, 1991). Hong Kong played a pivotal role not only in Shenzhen's transformation but also in the success of China's economic reforms. Between 1979 and 1995, two-thirds of foreign direct investment into China came from Hong Kong; thus, Hong Kong became the most important source of investment, capital, technology, knowledge of international trends and entrepreneurial dynamism and culture (Rosales, 2020).

In addition, Hong Kong shared its experience with industrialization, and many Hong Kong businesspeople relocated their industries—including those involved in the manufacture of clothing, plastics, toys and electronics—to Shenzhen, while also investing heavily in factory construction in that SEZ (Roberts, 2012).

Table 1. Significant events and plans in Shenzhen's history

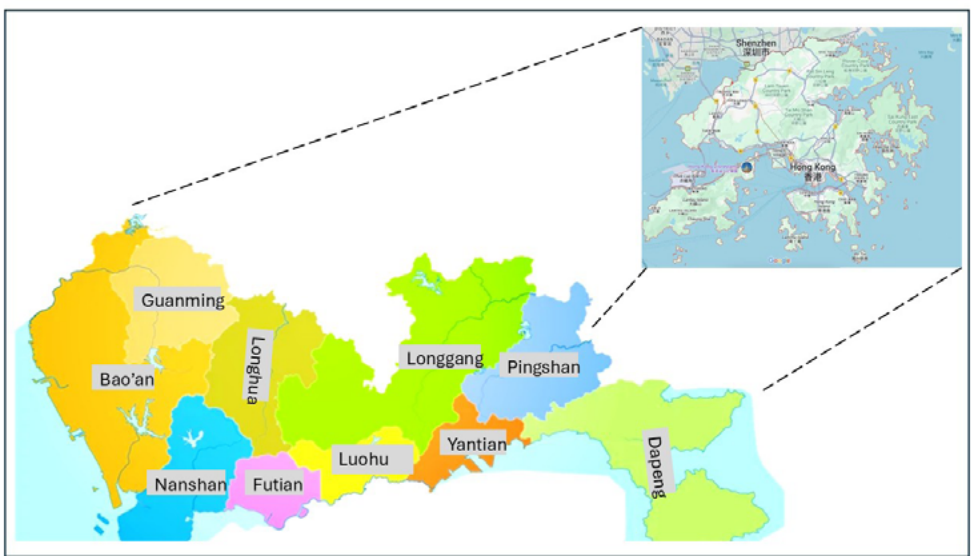
Year	Significant plans and events
1978	Launch of the economic reform and opening-up program
1979	Establishment of the city of Shenzhen in Bao'an County
1980	Shenzhen is designated an SEZ; implementation of a pilot program on the labor contract system and preparation of the first draft of the "Shenzhen Master Plan"
1982	Presentation of the First Master Plan for the Shenzhen SEZ
1983	Establishment of the first full-time institution of higher education in Shenzhen (Shenzhen University)
1985	Presentation of Shenzhen's Second Master Plan
1987	Enactment of the first "Provisional Regulations for Promoting the Establishment of Private Technology Companies by Scientific and Technical Personnel", which allows for the establishment of private high-tech companies such as Huawei
1990	Establishment of the Shenzhen Stock Exchange
1991	Presentation of the 10-Year Socioeconomic Development Plan
1992	Abolition of Bao'an County and establishment of Bao'an and Longgang Districts to accelerate urbanization, industrialization and modernization in rural Shenzhen
1998	Enactment of Shenzhen Municipality's Urban Planning Regulations
1999	Establishment of the Shenzhen Urban Planning Board
2000	Approval of the Third Master Plan by the Council of State
2004	Presentation of the "Shenzhen 2030: Development Strategy" Urban Master Plan
2006	Compilation of the Fourth Master Plan (2010-2020), highlighting the three hierarchical levels: municipal, district and regional
2010	Approval of the "Comprehensive Development Plan for the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Qianhai Modern Service Industry Cooperation Zone". Launch of the next phase of urban planning, known as the "Shenzhen Development Strategy 2040"
2014	Approval of the first National Independent Innovation Demonstration Zone. Establishment of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen) by the Ministry of Education
2016	Launch of the Shenzhen-Hong Kong Stock Connect, a major milestone in the two-way opening of China's capital market
2017	Implementation of the "Ten Action Plans" to build a globally competitive "City of Innovation"
2019	Publication of the "Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area Development Plan" to promote the development of the Greater Bay Area. Implementation of the "Regulations on the Protection of Intellectual Property Rights in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone". Publication of the "Shenzhen National High-Tech Zone Expansion Plan" to build world-class technology parks
2020	Promulgation of the "Implementation Plan for the Pilot Program on Comprehensive Reform to Build a Pilot Demonstration Zone for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in Shenzhen (2020-2025)"
2021	Publication of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development. Presentation of the "Shenzhen Comprehensive Territorial Plan (2021-2035)," which defines Shenzhen's role as a national economic hub, a modern maritime city, an international transportation hub and a global innovation hub
2025	Speeding up the construction of 798 key projects in Shenzhen with a total investment of 3.15 trillion yuan ($434 billion), including 238 aimed at modernizing industries, 292 focused on improving people's well-being and 268 related to infrastructure. The city aims to become a global leader in the low-altitude economy by significantly increasing takeoff and landing facilities and 5G-A base stations, along with the launch of the Smart Integrated Lower Airspace System (SILAS). At the same time, investments are planned for ecological corridors, greenways, parks and improvements in healthcare

Source: created by the author based on Quattrone and Chen (2023) and Shenzhen Government Online (2025)

Based on Hu's (2021) proposal regarding the evolution of Shenzhen and considering four major urban master plans for this SEZ (1986, 1996, 2010 and 2021), four distinct stages are proposed regarding the way in which Hong Kong has been a key factor in the planning and development of Shenzhen, beginning with the region's emergence as an SEZ. These stages are dependence, learning, collaboration and integration. Clearly, the nature of Hong Kong as a determining factor in Shenzhen's planning and its impacts have changed over time. These changes stem from the transformation of Shenzhen-Hong Kong relations and the development paths each metropolis has taken. Furthermore, the distinct characteristics of each stage do not imply a direct progressive order, nor do they imply that the characteristics of each new stage replace those of the previous ones. Therefore, it can be established that these stages have coexisted across different periods, and what distinguishes each period is the significance that the defining attributes of each stage acquire at a specific historical moment.

The background to these phases can be found in the document "1982: Master Plan for the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone". The provision of infrastructure was the primary concern during the initial phase of urban development in the early 1980s. This plan proposed a polycentric urban structure comprising the centers of Nantou, Luohu-Shangbu and Shatoujiao, which would be connected by a major arterial road, the Shennan Highway. Thus, the city began to develop following a polycentric pattern (Mao et al., 2008; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Hong Kong and the districts of Shenzhen



Source: created by the author based on Google Maps and the Shenzhen Tourism Bureau

The first stage is that of *dependency*. During this stage, the spatial structure organized along Hong Kong's land and sea borders was established. Consequently, Shenzhen's connections with Hong Kong shaped the design of the spaces and the urban structure that would support them. Priority was given to the development of the Luohu district, located in southeastern Shenzhen, right on the border with Hong Kong, due to its proximity to Hong Kong and the presence of a customs port there. This period coincides with Deng's vision, which held that SEZs should serve as "windows" to China (Xiaoyun, 2017).

This vision had a strong impact on Shenzhen's initial planning and development phase. For Shenzhen's planners, this SEZ was to serve as the "window" that would first open onto Hong Kong and subsequently onto the world through Hong Kong. Consequently, the 1986 plan was strongly oriented toward capitalizing on the opportunities offered by Hong Kong, which by then was already a global metropolis and a leading financial center. Shenzhen's manufacturing economy and its early steps in real estate development were primarily linked to Hong Kong's image.

The second stage is the *learning* stage. During this stage, as Hong Kong's factories relocated primarily to the Pearl River Delta region, Shenzhen's economic base remained industrial and played a critical role in complementing Hong Kong's post-industrial economy. The learning stage was reflected in the 1996 master plan. This plan established the vision of Shenzhen as a "modern international metropolis". In this context, Shenzhen-Hong Kong linkages were considered a fundamental element in achieving this vision. This plan established three dimensions of the linkages between the two regions.

The first dimension reflected the Communist Party's central mandate to strengthen the "one country, two systems" principle. Consequently, Shenzhen was tasked with laying the structural groundwork to ensure Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. The 1996 plan, for the first time in Shenzhen's planning history, explicitly outlined Shenzhen's role in implementing the "one country, two systems" principle, thereby contributing to national unification. The second dimension involved strengthening the land, sea and air infrastructure connecting the two cities, linking Hong Kong to mainland China via Shenzhen. Finally, the third dimension promoted economic complementarity through interdependence among Hong Kong, the Pearl River Delta region and mainland China. Given its status as an international financial and commercial hub, Hong Kong would facilitate foreign direct investment. Each of these dimensions was also presented as a way to learn from Hong Kong's experience.

The *cooperation* phase marked the first time a horizontal partnership was established between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Concepts such as co-development and co-construction were introduced. According to the 2010 master plan, Shenzhen's primary role was to serve as a national support platform for Hong Kong's prosperity and stability. The radical change was that this platform was conceived as an international center for finance, trade and maritime transport, co-developed with Hong Kong under the "one country, two systems" framework. To this end, a plan was proposed to strengthen Shenzhen-Hong Kong cooperation. The intention was that the two cities could build a "world-class metropolitan area".

The seven areas identified in the Master Plan for strengthening cooperation between Shenzhen and Hong Kong were finance, innovation, business services, airports, cross-border connections, joint cross-border development and ecological and environmental protection and management. This collaboration was rooted in Shenzhen's aspiration to become an international metropolis whose development was based on a knowledge economy. Hong Kong served as a model precisely because it was an international metropolis driven by a knowledge-based economy.

The final stage of *integration* reflects, on the one hand, Shenzhen's success in transforming itself into an international metropolis and, on the other, Hong Kong's loss of centrality. This loss of centrality has been a gradual process stemming from the successes achieved by the modernization program. As China grew dramatically and other cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou gained international prestige and surpassed Hong Kong in economic size, the former British colony lost its relevance as a "window to the world".

This phase is reflected in the 2021 master plan, which states that Shenzhen will evolve from a SEZ into a national innovation city, a modern maritime center and an international transportation hub, with key objectives of becoming a global economic center by 2025, a modern international metropolis by 2035 and a world-class advanced city by 2050. From a cross-border perspective, the most significant aspect of this plan is the status and nature of relations between Shenzhen and Hong Kong under the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) initiative.

The GBA project aims to establish a region with strong economic dynamism that can play a significant global role by fostering intra-regional economic ties, streamlining border procedures between mainland China and the Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao and developing infrastructure that facilitates regional integration (Murphy, 2025). The plan for the GBA project is to create a world-class urban cluster and remove the barriers that hinder the free movement of goods and resources, even though Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao belong to different administrative regions and customs zones, thereby achieving the level of collaboration and operational efficiency necessary for the integrated development of the GBA (Yu, 2019).

Shenzhen and Hong Kong share a strategic vision of regional integration, innovation and sustainable development. Shenzhen's urban plan reinforces its role as a center for technological innovation and aligns with the GBA project's goal of becoming a global hub for science and technology. Shenzhen's master plan not only addresses local needs but also serves as a key component of the GBA's architecture, contributing elements that help establish this region as one of the most dynamic and innovative in Asia.

Conclusions

The rise of Shenzhen as an "instant city" can only be explained by considering the historical context in which two unique, simultaneous processes converged. On the one hand, Shenzhen is the result of the communist regime's political will to maintain its legitimacy through gradual economic modernization that would eventually raise the standard of living for Chinese citizens. Shenzhen was meant to serve as an example of the political elite's ability to implement changes that would improve the harsh living conditions experienced during the first thirty years of communist China's existence.

On the other hand, Hong Kong's transition was pivotal. The city ceased to be part of a colonial regime and became part of China under a different system that included certain privileges and freedoms. The rapid transformation of Shenzhen—which, in the span of a generation, completely changed from an agricultural village into a megalopolis—was made possible largely by the combination of these two factors. For these reasons, the Shenzhen phenomenon is not replicable.

Nevertheless, it is possible to draw three key lessons from Shenzhen's experience that help rethink cross-border relations, particularly for cities with different levels of development that share a common border. The first key element is the regime's political will to implement the necessary changes, despite the inherent risks involved in any transformation process. China's central authorities, even during a period of political upheaval such as the early years of reform, had the determination to experiment, take steps backward and move forward with a reform program that addressed domestic needs and was not a mere imitation of foreign models of economic development.

Mistakes and excesses were committed along the way, but in the end, political will made it possible for Shenzhen to become a metropolis. This political will stemmed from the need to establish legitimacy following the years before economic reform, during which China had been mired in social chaos and economic stagnation. Therefore, the regime's survival depended on demonstrating the rulers' superiority through concrete actions to improve the quality of life for millions of peasants. One way to do this was to promote urbanization, with Shenzhen as a prime example.

The second element is the adoption of a medium- and long-term vision. While Shenzhen's master plans are also political tools that serve to justify the communist regime's ideological vision, it is undeniable that their medium- and long-term approach allows for gradual progress toward achieving ambitious goals. As this paper has shown, the plans adapt to new realities, adopting a long-term vision can instill greater confidence in decision-makers to implement them, while also projecting certainty and creating conditions for the various economic and social actors who have participated in Shenzhen's development.

Nonetheless, the ability to plan and sustain medium- and long-term projects stems precisely from the regime's own legitimacy, which is not based on winning elections or on transfers of power resulting from a competitive electoral process in which citizens endorse their leaders, but rather on the leaders' ability to design plans, implement them and assess their success.

Finally, the third element calls for envisioning cross-border relations as dynamic rather than static, aiming to move from a model of subordination and imitation by the less-developed border city to a more horizontal approach, ideally based on complementarity. This element introduces a perspective that calls for envisioning different futures in which relations of dependency and subordination result from historical circumstances that can and must change over time, to improve the living conditions of disadvantaged populations. This vision responds to the ruler's moral duty to improve citizens' living conditions. Furthermore, under the logic of traditional Chinese political legitimacy, better living conditions will be achieved only if leaders are morally superior.

The various stages of Shenzhen's development that have led it to become an international city—one that is currently focused on evolving into a hub of innovation based on a knowledge economy—best illustrate how these three factors contribute to major transformations. These factors form the overarching framework that has enabled millions of people to experience changes in their own lives by opening up new horizons and providing opportunities for Shenzhen's residents to become protagonists in a story that would not be possible without the dynamic link of Shenzhen's cross-border relations with Hong Kong. Furthermore, this would not be possible without a unique political model that offers a distinct approach to understanding legitimacy and seeking its realization.

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