The Pearl River Delta Megacity
Will it be the death of Hong Kong?

The Pearl River Delta is slowly growing into a single colossal megapolis. And as controversy reigns over the continued urban development into the HKSAR's northeastern territories, we dissect the future of the extravagant sprawling metropolis and see how its emergence will affect—and perhaps eventually kill—Hong Kong. By Samuel Lai
Two hundred years ago, only three percent of the world’s population lived in cities. Today, more than half of all the people on the planet are urban dwellers, leading some to claim that this is the ‘century of cities’. As developing megacities expand magnificently in both size and population, their perimeters blur, merging into one another, giving rise to endlessly interconnected chains of urban zones which have simply been dubbed ‘megacities’. It is a phenomenon of our time – and one, perhaps, which is most incredibly exhibited right here on our doorstep, right across the border in the Pearl River Delta.

It wasn’t that long ago that the PRD was a humble, rural place. Back in 1978, it was a geographical size larger than Denmark, occupying only 0.45 percent of the area of China. However, since then, it has seen some of the most rapid urban expansion in human history. In a little more than 30 years, it has become the heart of the thriving Chinese economy, embodying – for better or worse – the Mainland’s emergence as a global power – the factories, the incredible pace and scale of development, the sheer number of people – and accounting for nearly one-tenth of the entire country’s economy. During that time, its urbanisation rate increased dramatically from 28 percent to 83 percent, making it one of the most densely urbanised regions in China. And in coming years, these already extravagant figures are only going to rise… sharply.

In 2008, the Chinese government unleashed a plan to merge the Pearl River Delta’s nine cities – consisting of Shenzhen, Dongguan and Huizhou in the east, Zhuhai, Zhongshan and Jiangmen in the west, and Guangzhou, Foshan and Zhaoqing in the centre – into a single megalopolis. Essentially, the blueprint proposes a spending of near RMB2 trillion on more than 150 major infrastructure improvements to forge a colossal network of transportation, water, energy supply and telecommunications.

And, indeed, the plan projects some quite mind-blowing statistics for the Pearl River Delta, enabling a so-called ‘barrier-free circulation’ of public services. Inhabitants of the megalopolis will be able to attend school or stay at hospitals with a household registration system, a person’s entitlement to public services such as healthcare, education and pensions is tied to his or her place of birth. But in the next few years, all these barricades will be abolished in the Pearl River Delta, enabling a so-called ‘barrier-free circulation’ of public services.

However, the plan involves more than just infrastructure. For now, due to China’s household registration system, a person’s entitlement to public services such as healthcare, education and pensions is tied to his or her place of birth. But in the next few years, all these barricades will be abolished in the Pearl River Delta, enabling a so-called ‘barrier-free circulation’ of public services. Inhabitants of the megalopolis will be able to attend school or stay at hospitals with a household registration system, a person’s entitlement to public services such as healthcare, education and pensions is tied to his or her place of birth. But in the next few years, all these barricades will be abolished in the Pearl River Delta, enabling a so-called ‘barrier-free circulation’ of public services.

The rise of the PRD

Since the Open Door Policy was implemented in 1978, the centres of the Pearl River Delta have seen astonishing rises in population, from mere rural villages to sprawling, urban centres. Here’s how dramatic the upswing has been…

![Illustration by Jeroen Brulez](image)
Over the last decade, the ties between Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta have developed drastically, perhaps best demonstrated by the tremendous increase in cross-border traffic. In 2013, the 11 control points along the Hong Kong-Mainland border saw a daily average of 562,400 cross in both directions—a mammoth increase from 377,200 in 2001. Cross-border commuting has become a relatively common phenomenon, with government statistics showing that a total of more than 99,000 Hong Kong and Pearl River Delta residents cross the border at least four times a week for work. And the ease and convenience of travel has naturally followed (perhaps, as has also been demonstrated, with measures such as the Octopus, Lingnan Pass—a card similar to the HK-specific Octopus card), but allowing Hong Kong travelers to conveniently ‘beat’ the way from the SAR to cities around the Pearl River Delta region.

In addition, there are several significant pieces of infrastructure being built in Hong Kong, further increasing the connectivity of the city to the North and West, bringing us into the Pearl River Delta’s ‘one-hour living zone’. Most notably, the controversial 12km Hong Kong Express Rail Link, with its terminus in West Kowloon, will reduce the travel time between Hong Kong and Guangzhou to more than 40 minutes. However, the development which has attracted the most concern from the SAR to cities around the Pearl River Delta is the Construction of a rail link to Macau or Zhuhai, down to about 30 minutes. Will cut the driving time from Hong Kong to Macau or Zhuhai to about 30 minutes. The bridge will connect to the new towns with an expressway that links up the southern part of the Pearl River Delta. “It is a logical move,” says Chan Kin-man, an urban planner and member of the Anti-forced Integration Group. He points out that, according to the government’s official documents, the trans-border traffic forecast figures are based on the assumption that Shenzhen residents can travel to Hong Kong without a visa permit. “If Mainlanders can come and go freely in Hong Kong, this in effect cancels the border between Hong Kong and Shenzhen.”

The idea is to create a ‘one-hour-living zone’ encompassing the entire Pearl River Delta and the surrounding areas. Hong Kong has been the Chief Executive CY Leung’s executive since the Frontier Closed Area. Last year, in an interview with South China Daily, Leung suggested that some 250km of the restricted border area adjacent to Shenzhen’s border area might become a special zone where Mainlanders could enter without a visa or permit. The former border zone between Hong Kong and Shenzhen would be able to, according to his vision, take advantage of the Pearl River Delta’s development and become a thriving commercial district.

Recently, the issue has been re-energized with the controversy surrounding the northeast territories development—plans to create three new towns in the far reaches of the HRB region very close to the Frontier Closed Region. The government has repeatedly stated that the development plan is not designed to merge Hong Kong with Shenzhen and only aims to resolve our city’s housing problem. However, the geographical proximity of the towns to the restricted border area has led to concerns that the Chief Executive’s proposed visa-free zone may quickly spread to the entire northeastern region.

There has been a lot of discussion in the recent months about whether or not this area should be part of the one-hour city plan. Most of the people I talked to would vote in favor of keeping the border closed. But those who support the plan think it would be good for business and make it easier to travel. Others think it would be good for people who want to live in the area.

The view from the street

We ask some Hong Kongers their views on the impending megacity.

Charlotte, 21
West, moving from England to here, it’s already like living in a mega city. For workers [the mega city] is a good idea, and you don’t have to live there if you don’t want to. But for people who already live near there, having that put upon them, they probably won’t see that as a good idea.

Sharon, 25
I have a negative opinion of the plan. I think each of the provinces have their own unique points, but if you merge them together, people may not be able to get used to other people’s customs, their way of thinking...there will be a lot of conflicts. I don’t like that. Hong Kong is very special. If you merge [those cities] together, Hong Kong will lose its uniqueness and competitiveness, and other cities like Singapore or the Indian cities will get better than Hong Kong.

Steve, 35
I think it’s a good thing. Hong Kong would have more business and a more developed commercial district.

Derek, 24
I am neutral about it. Maybe for the economic situation, here is the future of Hong Kong; we’ll be merging with these Mainland cities. But the culture difference, the way of thinking is quite a big difference between us and the Mainlander. I think the citizens cannot stop this happening—it will happen anyway, we can’t stop it.

Gill, 24
They already have a good network of transport around there...I don’t think [a mega city] will happen in 10 years. It depends how it affects me. Like if more people are free to move around, if Mainland people can come here and steal our jobs, then maybe I would have a problem with it. If the market gets better, it might make more business opportunities, then it wouldn’t be that bad thing.
If it is a matter of life or death?

In such an economic centre as Hong Kong, the PRD megacity’s influence on our economy seems a natural place to start. Even with the rapid emergence of the Mainland over the last 30 years, Hong Kong remains a financial stronghold of China. However, isn’t it, according to some, a foregone conclusion that Hong Kong will remain as the power centre of a future PRD megacity?

“If Hong Kong’s economy can be devised through a strong regional vision of collaboration with the Pearl River Delta, it can capitalise on its comparative strength and increase overall efficiency and prosperity by optimising resources of the entire region,” says Professor Chan Man-hung of the China Business Centre at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. “After years of indulging in mostly sporadic activities in the bubble economy, now is the chance for Hong Kong to re-emerge in something more practical through economic integration with the Pearl River Delta. But Hong Kong will decline and be marginalised as Guangzhou and Shenzhen strive to overtake us.”

Dr Pang Zhou, assistant chief research officer at the One Country Two Systems Research Institute, is slightly more optimistic. “As the internationalisation of the RMB continues to move forward, Hong Kong still has an unparalleled role to play as an offshore RMB centre,” says Zhou.

He adds that Hong Kong still has a certain edge with institutional advantages, making it hard for any Mainland cities to replace it. Moreover, Hong Kong would also act as a role model for the new mega Experimental Zones in Guangdong, especially the Qianhai District (so-called as ‘Manhattan’ of the Pearl River Delta), which aims to push the economy forward in terms of finance, logistics and information technology.

Some experts also see Hong Kong’s integration into the PRD megacity as an opportunity to address issues that the city is not able to resolve unilaterally. “There are certain problems in Hong Kong that cannot be solved unless we integrate with the Pearl River Delta and formulate policies on a regional basis,” says City University’s Professor Yep. “For instance, emissions from the Mainland account for more than one third of our air pollution. No matter how much we do to clean up our part, we cannot hope to see clear blue skies unless we devise a comprehensive clean air policy with the cities on the north.”

He gives another example of the quality control of our water supply, indicating that, with almost 70 percent of Hong Kong’s fresh water supply imported from Dongjiang, the Hong Kong government must participate in the monitoring process of the water quality together with the Guangdong government.

Environmental and economic questions are one thing. But perhaps the bigger concern for Hong Kongers, is the prospect of being influenced by the other way: rather than being influenced, we flourish in our city,” he says.

The mass migration has declined and been marginalised as Guangzhou and Shenzhen strive to overtake us.”

And indeed, some, like renowned poet Liu Wai-wong, see the need to influence flowing the other way: rather than being influenced, he suggests that Hong Kongers will be the ones influencing.

“When Mainland tourists come to Hong Kong, they can observe the values and inner workings of a relatively more liberal society and bring these experiences back to Mainland,” says Liu. “If we are strong enough in our own cultural immunity, why can’t we digest what the Mainlanders bring us and make them a part of us?”

We often forget that Hong Kong has always been an immigrant city,” says renowned author, Chan Koon-chung. “Many of us are descendants of Mainlanders who escaped to Hong Kong during China’s political turmoil during the Great Famine and Cultural Revolution. In fact, I am an immigrant from the Mainland myself!”

City University’s Yep agrees, suggesting that diversity is one of Hong Kong’s greatest strengths – and something that would be bolstered by an increasingly diverse society. “A city always improves by absorbing talents from different places. Hong Kong’s flexible and open society has allowed many Mainland immigrants to thrive and flourish in our city,” he says.

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