

Opinion
Hu Chao

Huanggang Port points to the future of Greater Bay Area travel

Beyond faster clearance, the new Hong Kong-Shenzhen crossing shows that borders are evolving, flexible systems, not just physical structures

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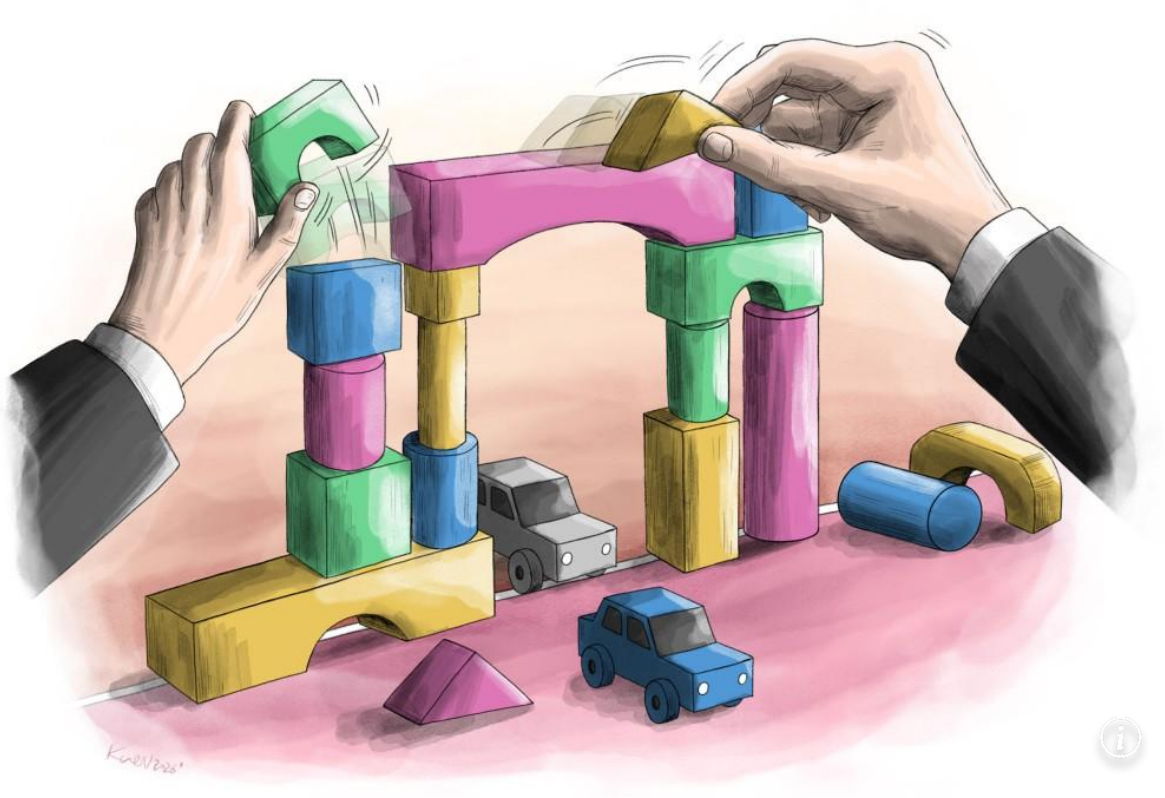

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Published: 9:30am, 18 Aug 2026

The much-anticipated revamped Huanggang Port, expected to open later this year, should be seen as more than a story about faster clearance. Its deeper significance lies in a question that deserves wider discussion: if border functions can be redesigned, where should border control actually operate?

Living in the Greater Bay Area, where people and businesses move across administrative boundaries every day, I have watched the

meaning of borders change. A border is no longer simply a line separating two places. It is also a system of procedures, facilities and decisions that shapes how people, vehicles and goods move.

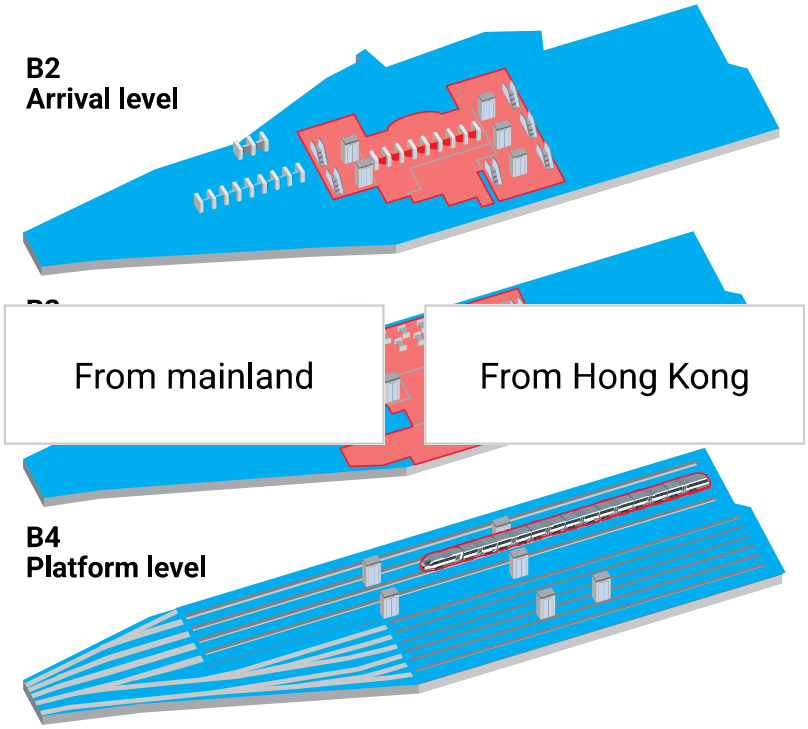
The previous generation of border crossings was built around separation. Travellers passed through one checkpoint on one side and then moved to another checkpoint on the other side. The physical boundary and the location of border procedures were closely connected.

West Kowloon Station offered an early example of a different approach. When the high-speed rail link opened in 2018, mainland immigration and customs facilities were introduced inside a railway station located in the centre of Hong Kong. A border function that traditionally existed at the edge of a city was brought into one of its busiest urban transport facilities.

The debate at the time was not simply about convenience. It reflected deeper questions about how a city should balance connectivity, jurisdiction and territorial boundaries. After years of operation, the station has provided practical experience in how different border systems can function within a shared transport environment.

West Kowloon terminus immigration plan

Hong Kong has leased parts of the new West Kowloon station to mainland China's immigration and customs authorities, which have full jurisdiction there. Select a travel direction below to see how the plan will work.



Source: HK Government

The new Huanggang Port border crossing represents another step in this evolution. Unlike the previous arrangement, where travellers moved between separate checkpoints on the Hong Kong and Shenzhen sides of the boundary, the new port brings both sides' clearance facilities into a single building in Shenzhen.

Hong Kong's border control functions will be housed inside a facility in Shenzhen, rather than at the traditional boundary line itself. The boundary itself has not moved. What has changed is where and how its functions are organised.

This is the deeper significance of the arrangement. The reduction in clearance time from around 30 minutes to an expected five minutes is only the visible result. The more important change is conceptual: border management does not have to follow a fixed spatial model. Border functions can be reorganised when neighbouring cities cooperate and when infrastructure is designed around the way people actually travel.

Taken together, West Kowloon and Huanggang suggest a different way of thinking about borders. The next question is how far this thinking can go. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge provides a more complex test. Unlike a railway station or a land port, the bridge connects three cities and serves different types of users and vehicles.

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Having crossed it several times, I have noticed the bridge itself rarely feels like the main obstacle. The pressure appears when vehicles arrive at border facilities, where different procedures converge and need to be completed at the same location.

The bridge itself can carry substantial traffic, but border facilities at the entry and exit points can become bottlenecks where movement is interrupted.

The experience of West Kowloon and Huanggang suggests another possibility. If border functions have already moved beyond the traditional boundary line into railway stations and urban buildings, they might not necessarily need to remain tied to a single checkpoint in the future.

Many Hong Kong private cars travelling north across the bridge are not heading to Zhuhai itself. They continue towards other destinations on the mainland highway network. With advance declarations, digital monitoring and risk-based management, it is worth exploring whether some border procedures could be organised at different stages of a journey, including designated locations along the transport network, rather than requiring every vehicle to complete every process at one location.

The point is not that every vehicle should be checked elsewhere, and neither does it mean reducing the importance of border controls. Different jurisdictions will continue to have different responsibilities. The broader question is whether border management should remain tied to a single physical point, or whether it can become a more flexible system designed around actual patterns of movement.



Members of the media tour the newly constructed main building of Huanggang Port on August 1 as the redevelopment enters its final sprint. Photo: Karma Lo

In many ways, this is a question closely connected to Hong Kong's own experience. For decades, Hong Kong's competitiveness has depended on its ability to connect with the world while managing one of Asia's busiest international gateways. As a global city known for its openness and extensive international connections, Hong Kong has accumulated considerable experience in managing the movement of people, capital and ideas across borders.

Greater connectivity with Greater Bay Area cities does not diminish this identity. It expands Hong Kong's economic hinterland and strengthens the foundations on which the city's future depends.

In an era when borders are often associated with restriction and control, Hong Kong's experience suggests that effective border management is not necessarily about making movement harder. It is about designing systems that allow openness and security to work together.

Huanggang's importance is therefore not only that it will make crossing easier. It offers a reminder that borders are not just physical structures – they are systems that can evolve.

As the Greater Bay Area becomes increasingly connected, Hong Kong's challenge is to keep rethinking where border functions work best and how they can support the next stage of regional exchange.

This article was originally written in Chinese. AI was used by the author to translate the article into English for publication

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