

Exchange between Russia and the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area in a Historical Context

Li Sheng*, Michael Share**

ABSTRACT: In Sino-Russian relations, the presence of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) plays a crucial role. Historically, exchange and co-operation between Russia and the GBA date back to 400 years ago, and can be divided into three phases: Qing–Tsarist Period, Revolutionary Period, and China–Soviet Period. While currently, new exchanges between Russia and the GBA are also developing, ranging from politics, military, economy, culture, aspects like education, religion, and media are also important. Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the post-pandemic era, co-operation between the GBA and Russia is expected to be further developed.

KEYWORDS: Sino-Russian relations; Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area; Belt and Road Initiative; Post-pandemic co-operation.

* Li Sheng is a professor in the Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. (Political Economy) from University of Freiburg, Germany, after graduating with his B.A. from Peking University. Professor Sheng's positions include: Associate Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Director of Russian Centre (in co-operation with Russkiy Mir Foundation), Master's Programme Co-ordinator in European Studies (in co-operation with Institute of European Studies of Macau), and Vice Chairman of Grand Thought Think Tank (specialised in Belt and Road Initiative).

Li Sheng é professor do Departamento de Governo e Administração Pública da Universidade de Macau. Possui um mestrado e doutoramento (Economia Política) pela Universidade de Friburgo, Alemanha, após a licenciatura na Universidade de Pequim. Os seus cargos incluem: Subdirector da Faculdade de Ciências Sociais, Director do Centro de Estudos Russos (em cooperação com a Fundação Russkiy Mir), Coordenador do Programa de Mestrado em Estudos Europeus (em cooperação com o Instituto de Estudos Europeus de Macau) e Vice-Presidente do Grand Thought Think Tank (especializado em "Uma Faixa, Uma Rota").

** Michael Share is a part-time teacher in the Department of Government and Public Administration, University of Macau. He received his B.A. (European History) from the State University of New York, M.A. (International History) from the London School of Economics, and Ph.D. (Russian History) from the University of Wisconsin. Michael Share's research has shifted to Russian–Chinese relations during the past 20 years and published several articles in well-known international journals.

Michael Share é professor a tempo parcial do Departamento de Governo e Administração Pública da Universidade de Macau. É licenciado (História Europeia) pela Universidade Estadual de Nova Iorque, mestrado (História Internacional) pela Escola de Economia e Ciência Política de Londres e doutorado (História da Rússia) pela Universidade de Wisconsin. O foco de investigação de Michael Share mudou para as relações russo-chinesas nos últimos vinte anos, tendo publicado vários artigos em notáveis jornais internacionais.

China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has triggered worldwide interest, among which the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) plays a crucial role as an essential node on the One Belt One Road.¹ The variabilities in attitudes and involvement of different countries towards China's One Belt One Road strategy have aroused increased attention from scholars.² Compared with the greater degree of opposition from the remaining European countries, Russia's view on China is biased towards adopting a policy of hedging China and implementing a non-conflictual tactic.³ To explain Russia's different interactions with the EU and with China, Vsevolod Samokhvalov (2018) applies a loose synthetic, analytical framework to examine how the interplay among three factors — ideas, capabilities, and circumstantial factors — shapes the process of Russia's interactions with the EU and with China in their respective shared neighbourhoods.⁴ While there have been noticeable attempts in recent Area Studies and International Relations scholarship to analyse the co-operation between China and Russia in the BRI,⁵ relevant research on the interaction between China and Russia in the GBA has, to the best of our knowledge, not yet appeared. Hence, this research will attempt to fill this gap by examining this under-explored area.

This article will draw on Samokhvalov's framework and adapt it to the analysis of the exchange between Russia and the GBA from a historical perspective. The application realms of his framework will be expanded in two aspects in this study. First and foremost, the article extends this framework from observing the interaction between great powers in their shared neighbourhoods to investigating the participation of great powers in the development process of another country's internal regions, such as the GBA, which provides a new perspective for the analysis of competition and co-operation among great powers. Another virtual point, based on this framework, is that the article analyses how the three factors (ideas, capabilities, and circumstances)

interplay in the long-term interaction in historical context and ultimately shape the enormous potential of co-operation between Russia and China in the GBA. We find that these countries have established an idea of co-operation in the long history of co-operation in the GBA, which has great potential to be inherited. In particular, a paramount factor that played a role in developing a collaborative pattern of interaction was the growth in trade between Russia and China over 300 years. The GBA is different from Central Asia, which Russia considers a sphere of traditional interests, and thus is not important to Russian identity. Additionally, the improvement in material capabilities of both China and Russia has created a need for co-operation in multiple fields, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The two countries are scurrying from limited economic links to a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership. We conclude that, under this framework, the mutual promotion of these three factors (ideas, capabilities, and circumstantial factors) can greatly boost the level of trust in Sino-Russian relations, further preventing conflict and facilitating co-operation between the two parties in GBA settings.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Pearl River Delta was given a new name as well as a new historical mission to become a world-level bay like New York Bay and San Francisco Bay.⁶ The Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area, also known as Greater Bay Area (GBA), comprises the two Special Administrative Regions of Hong Kong and Macao, and the nine municipalities of Guangdong province including Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Huizhou, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Jiangmen, and Zhaoqing. Among the 11 cities in the GBA, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Macao take the core role in the area. The total area is around 56,000 km². At the end of 2019, the total population was over 72 million; the GDP stood at 1,679.5 billion USD, and GDP per capita was 23,371 USD.⁷ Located

ESTUDOS DE MACAU

in the Pearl River Delta and along the coast of the South China Sea, the GBA has been a critical external exchange hub and one of the most prosperous regions in China. Correspondingly, it has played a leading role in the reform and opening-up policy. Proposed in 2017, the Greater Bay Area is accorded the status of key strategic planning of China's development strategy and is exceptionally significant in China's implementation of innovation-driven development and commitment to reform and opening-up. The objectives are to deepen further co-operation among Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, fully leverage the composite advantages of the three places, facilitate in-depth integration within the region, and promote co-ordinated regional economic development, with a view to developing an international first-class bay area ideal for living, working and travelling.⁸

The GBA and Russia are geographically distant from each other. Taking the viewpoint of China, Russia is the neighbour from the North, while the GBA is in the southernmost region, adjacent to its mainland. As the result of geographic distance, admittedly, the GBA's exchange with Russia is not as frequent as provinces in the northeast region, but it still cannot be restricted by the historical and current distance. In the ancient era, it took great effort for Russia to build commercial routes with Southern China, known as the 'Tea Road' on both land and maritime routes. Nowadays, with the impact of the recent Crimea Crisis (2014) and economic sanctions by Western countries, Russia is trying out a Eurasian strategy by seeking opportunities in the East and the South. In this context, it is a favourable opportunity for the GBA to develop exchange ties with Russia in a situation where Russia is trying to deepen its connection with Asia from the north to the south. In fact, exchange between Russia and the GBA has been proliferating in recent years.

Taking Hong Kong as an example, although the number of Russians living in Hong Kong and Macao remains unclear, some sources prove that Russians might be an important foreign group in the SARs.⁹ Another report in the *South China Morning Post* claimed that a

survey by Asia2Go indicated that 186,461 Russians visited Hong Kong in 2012, and figures from the Russian Consulate-General suggest 800 Russians now live in Hong Kong, and as registration with the consulate is optional, the Hong Kong Russian Club estimates the true figure could be as high as 2,000.¹⁰ Another source is the interviews with the Russia-Hong Kong Business Association from the *Oriental Daily*, and the Association suggests around 5,000 Russians were working and doing business in Hong Kong until 2016, and this figure will have since increased rapidly.¹¹ At the same time, the Russian diaspora is increasing in the cities of southern China. Cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen are also popular for Russian people to travel and work.

By taking the GBA as an integrated area, this article is going to show its connection with Russia from a historical perspective. It could be seen that Russia has no motive to pursue dominance in the GBA. Consequently, Russia is more inclined to adopt the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation's idea of equal partnership, mutual respect, and trust when interacting with China in the GBA. This article will firstly discuss the history of GBA-Russia relations before the collapse of the Soviet Union and then review the achievements of the GBA-Russia exchange in recent decades, especially after the new millennium. After that, the article will outline the future of the GBA-Russia exchange to find more potential space to deepen the bilateral relations between China and Russia.

2. GBA-RUSSIA EXCHANGE UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic is still rampant. Even though China's domestic society and economy have recovered from the pandemic, it is still confronting a series of external challenges. Politically, the pressures from the United States and its allies towards China are increasing, which can be seen from the recent Sino-US dialogue in Alaska. Economically, China's industries are also suffering from global economic decline arising from decreasing demand and uncertain

supply chains. The present challenges are strongly impacting the export-oriented economy of China, especially in the GBA, which is playing a significant role in China's opening-up policy as well as the BRI. Under such circumstances, it is indispensable for China to deepen its external co-operation and explore more developing space for its export-oriented industries and regions. According to the Outline Development Plan of the GBA in 2019,¹² the GBA is not only designed to propel development in south central China and southwest China but also southeast and southern Asia. As a matter of fact, the GBA has been known as the 'south gate' of China's opening-up policy and has built up deep partnerships with a range of countries and regions in the world. However, more improvements are being expected by finding more external partners considering the economic scale of the GBA, particularly when it comes to co-operation with Russia.

Under the scope of the BRI, Russia is significant mainly for the following five reasons. Firstly, Russia is the second largest country in terms of economic scale endowed with abundant resources, and its economy is highly complementary with China. Secondly, as Lavrov said in a speech in his most recent visit to Guilin, a city in southern China, 'China–Russia ties are at their best level in history.'¹³ Even though both sides suffered from the pandemic in 2020, the bilateral trade volume remained steady at more than 100 billion USD. Thirdly, Russia has a strong presence in the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, and all of those regions are geopolitically significant for the BRI. Moreover, Russia has established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as a free-trade zone dominated by itself, which could also be complementary with China's BRI.¹⁴ However, with Western sanctions over the Crimea Crisis and shrinkage of global energy prices, the economy of Russia and its partners have been experiencing a serious decline in recent years. For these reasons, the EEU of Russia is eager to find more survival space by going to the east and the south.

In the history of Sino-Russian relations, the northern part of China, especially north-eastern provinces like Heilongjiang, plays a co-ordinative role with Russia in terms of their shared borders and frequent trade and cultural exchanges. Under the framework of the BRI, an economic corridor has been built up among China, Mongolia, and Russia to facilitate co-operation and connectivity with each other. However, limited by the problems such as declining economy and old industries, the economic co-operation between northeast China and Russia has remained low. At the same time, Russia has shown its interest to go to southern places such as Hainan province in China and even Southeast Asian countries. In these circumstances, the GBA can not only take advantage of its diverse industries and the key position of China's opening-up policy to diversify the Sino-Russian co-operation but also play bridging role between foreign enterprises and southern China and even southern regions such as ASEAN and the Pacific Rim.¹⁵ In the next section, we can see how the long history of co-operation in the GBA between China and Russia shapes the tradition and idea of a collaborative pattern of interaction.

3. ENABLING CONDITIONS FOR CO-OPERATION: THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN GBA AND RUSSIA IN HISTORY

From the perspective of historical time, the history of the 300-year Sino-Russian relationship can be divided into four phases. The first period spans from the late 17th century to 1917 when the Soviets overturned Tsarist Russia. The second period is between 1917 and 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China. The third period is until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. The fourth period is from 1990 to the present.¹⁶ Accordingly, as a segment of Sino-Russian relations, the exchange between Russia and the GBA can also be observed under this framework. This section is going to discuss the first period to the third.

ESTUDOS DE MACAU

3.1 The First Phase: Qing–Tsarist Period (the late 17th century–1917)

Even though China is bounded by Russia in the north and the GBA is distant from Russia, still, the contacts between China and Russia are not confined to the northern region. The desire for Chinese tea drove Russia to make contact with southern China via both land and maritime routes. Guangzhou, one of the core cities in the GBA and a vital international trade port since ancient times, attracted the attention of Russia since the late 17th century, according to existing Russian documents. In 1858, Russia finally accessed commercial rights in Guangzhou via the Treaty of Tianjin. In 1879, Russia established its first consulate in Guangzhou.

At the same period, quite a few merchants from Guangdong province were also seeking commercial opportunities in Russia.¹⁷ Since 1870, Chinese representatives in Russia have noted four main groups of associations of Chinese entrepreneurs in the Russian Far East. Entrepreneurs from Shandong province were called ‘Eastern Community’, from Hebei and three north-eastern provinces — ‘Northern Community’, from Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces — ‘Southern Community’, from Guangdong province — ‘Guang Community’.¹⁸ From the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century in Blagoveshchensk, which is located opposite the Chinese town of Heihe, the Chinese were also actively involved in trade. Moreover, the largest Chinese firms — Huatsantai, Tun Yongli and Yun He — worked in Blagoveshchensk. At that time, Huatsantai had over 100 employees and traded in household goods from Guangdong and Harbin.¹⁹

3.2 The Second Phase: Revolutionary Period (1917–1949)

In the revolutionary period spanning from 1917 to 1949, Russia played a crucial role in China’s nationalist revolution and left a deep mark on Guangzhou. In the 1920s, the revolutionary

government led by Sun Yat-sen came to power in Guangdong province, proposed ‘the First United Front’, and formed an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as Soviet Russia together against warlords and imperialists. In the meantime, a relatively large amount of military assistance was provided to the Guangdong National Revolutionary Government and the subsequent Kuomintang (KMT) government, including several R-1 aircraft,²⁰ and KMT pilots were also trained in the Soviet Union.²¹ In 1923, Moscow responded positively to the request by KMT leaders to assist in the reorganisation of the party and the creation of a national revolutionary army by sending a group of Soviet military advisers to the KMT subdivision of Guangdong province. At the end of 1924, V. K. Blyukher (В. К. Блюхер) was sent to its administrative centre, Guangzhou, as a chief military adviser, under the pseudonym of V. V. Uralsky (В. В. Уральский).²² Moreover, during the 1920s, A. I. Cherepanov (А. И. Черепанов), as an adviser to the First Army of the Northern Expedition, participated in the campaign of the Eastern Expedition of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces. Since Cherepanov founded the Whampoa Military Academy in Guangzhou together with He Yingqin, he also served as the general military adviser to the Nationalist Government in the mid- to late 1930s. In 1927, Moscow was also actively involved with the launch of the Guangzhou Uprising. It is reported that a group of Soviet military advisers even directly participated in this movement, and diplomats of the Soviet consulate in Guangzhou also publicly intervened in the riot.

3.3 The Third Period: China–Soviet Period (1949–1990)

After 1949 when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was founded, Guangzhou was still a key city for international trade in China. Since 1957, the China Export Commodities Fair (CECF or Canton Fair) has been held in Guangzhou in spring and autumn every year, which serves as a major platform for China’s international trade especially when the new China was

isolated by the international community in the first three decades after the founding of the PRC. The fair also creates opportunities for Russia to exchange with the GBA, and Russian business practitioners have also participated for many times. Enterprises go there to promote their products, and Chinese and foreign businessmen look for suppliers and new trading partners. The Canton Fair takes place in several stages, and each exhibits different categories of goods — up to 150,000.²³ In sum, historical circumstantial factors have created enabling conditions for collaboration between China and Russia in the GBA.

4. NEW DEVELOPMENT IN RECENT DECADES

The complementarity of these two countries is reflected in the history of the interaction in the GBA between the two countries. In fact, the fast-changing world has created more demand for co-operation between China and Russia. The two countries are moving rapidly from limited economic links to a comprehensive strategic and economic partnership that can be accelerated by their rapid growing capacities. Sino-Russian relations opened a brand-new chapter with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Russian Federation in 1990. In the new millennium, Sino-Russian relations have become increasingly close as China and Russia are highly complementary in various aspects, especially in terms of their economies. At the same time, there is considerable space for the two sides to improve bilateral co-operation considering China is deepening its reform and opening-up policy by looking for more markets while Russia is eager to seek more opportunities for investment and infrastructure projects to decelerate its economic decline. Against this background, several cities in Guangdong province have built up twin-city relations with Russian counterparts.

As the pilot area of China's reform and opening-up policy, the GBA is one of the most prosperous regions of China, and its core cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen are ranked the third and the fourth largest cities after Beijing and Shanghai, which means that GBA

is abundant with opportunities for trade and investment. Apart from its economic achievement, the GBA is also strategically significant as the home of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's Naval South Sea Fleet.

4.1 Political, Military, and Security

Politically, over the past decades, the government of Guangdong province has set up a multilevel mechanism for co-operation with provincial governments of the Russian Federation. Provincial visits between Guangdong province and provincial governments of Russia have become increasingly frequent in recent years. Bilateral trust is accordingly deepened.²⁴ On the other hand, the core cities in the GBA, such as Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Zhanjiang, have built up twin-city relations in Russia, and in 2002, Guangzhou was twinned with Yekaterinburg. Later, Guangzhou–Kazan twin-city relations were established in 2012.²⁵ In 2007, another twin-city relationship was established between Zhanjiang and Serpukhov. In 2008, Shenzhen also found its Russian counterpart in the city of Samara. On the other hand, the opening of the Consulate-General of the Russian Federation in Guangzhou is a landmark event in the history of exchange between Guangdong province and Russia under the framework of deepening Sino-Russian relations. To some extent, the opening of Russia's Consulate-General in Guangzhou also displayed the increasing interest of Russia in south China.

Militarily, since 1996, the largest air show in Mainland China, the China International Aviation and Aerospace Exhibition, has been held every other year in Zhuhai. Since 1998, Russia has been a frequent air show visitor with its aerobatic performances of Russian Knights and Russian Strizhi. In 2018, a full-scale prototype of CRJ929, the first wide-body long-haul passenger aircraft to be developed by a Sino-Russian joint venture, made its debut at the air show in Zhuhai.

In 2016, Russia and China kicked off a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea, the Joint Sea 2016. It was scheduled to last until 19 September, and

ESTUDOS DE MACAU

included a visit by the Russian surface contingent to China's South Sea fleet headquarters at Zhanjiang. The Joint Sea 2016 is the latest in a series of Russo-Chinese drills that have evolved steadily into more frequent and sophisticated interactions over the past decade.

Furthermore, Russia is supportive of China in security issues and in opposing interference from the Western countries in issues like Hong Kong. When Western countries and media turn their attention to the affairs of Hong Kong, Russia tends to stand with China and counterattack this interference from the West. As Wang Yi, the Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister said, 'China and Russia will continue to co-operate on fighting the "colour revolutions", disinformation and to safeguard political security together', while such pressure from the US has brought China and Russia closer together, fighting both coronavirus and 'political virus'.²⁶

When Western countries attack China's human rights record, Russia has stood by China and refuted accusations made by Western countries. To name only a few, most Western clothing companies' recent decisions to no longer source cotton from Xinjiang has sparked a Chinese backlash. The Russian media saw through the American conspiracy, lashed out against the lies made with ulterior motives, and emphasised that it was Washington's own troubles behind the 'Xinjiang Cotton' problem.

4.2 Economic Co-operation

In the first two decades of the 21st century, economic exchange between Russia and the GBA has obviously improved. As early as 1999, the government of Guangdong province set up a representative office in Moscow to help entrepreneurs from Guangdong seeking commercial opportunities. With exchange between Guangdong province and Russia accelerating via the twinning of cities, trade and economic exchange are becoming closer. After the establishment of twin-city relations between Guangzhou and Yekaterinburg, these two cities frequently held

commercial exhibitions for each other. The number of Russian companies in Guangdong and the companies connecting with Russian foreign trade in Guangdong has gradually increased, covering the trade in trade, telecommunications technology, logistics, network development, etc. In a classic win-win situation for both Russia and China, most of these projects are complementary to those that come under the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative.²⁷

In September 2018, a Sino-Russian financial centre was established in the GBA according to the project initiated by the Savings Bank of the Russian Federation, Guangzhou Economic and Technological Development Zone, and Beijing Xinnuo Investment Co. The centre is designed to satisfy diverse needs with multiple financial services. Upon completion, it is predicted to facilitate the financial integration of Central Asia, West Asia, Europe, Russia, Mongolia, and other countries. The total investment of the project is 5 billion CNY (730 million USD approximately), half of which will be used for construction.²⁸

In December 2019, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), the Russia-China Investment Fund (RCIF), and the investment fund of China's Guangdong province agreed on the conditions for creating a Russian-Chinese Greater Bay Area Fund, with financing available up to 1 billion USD. The fund will strengthen trade and economic ties between Russia and China, promote Russian business in Guangdong, and encourage Guangdong's companies to enter the Russian market.²⁹ Additionally, representative of this development is the recent Russian Food Exhibition Hall in Guangzhou. On 1 January 2021, Guangzhou held the opening ceremony of China's largest Russian food exhibition hall. The project was implemented by the Russian Federation of Asian Industrial Entrepreneurs with the support of major enterprises of Lihuang Group and Kaisa Group Development Company. The exhibition hall is a showroom for displayed goods, and wholesale products can be ordered directly from Russia. Vitaly Mankevich, chairman of the Russian Federation of Asian Industrial

Entrepreneurs, said in an interview with the Sputnik News Agency that since its opening on 1 January, more than 100 Chinese wholesale companies and thousands of people had visited the Russian Food Exhibition Hall in Guangzhou.³⁰

In the meantime, Russia's co-operation with Hong Kong has also been snowballing in recent years. As the result of the Crimea Crisis in 2014, Russia has been troubled with sanction from Western countries and suffered economic decline. It is expected that more Russian companies will search for overseas stock markets based in Hong Kong or Singapore, rather than London and New York as in the past. Russia is eager to find more opportunities to stimulate its national economy after these sanctions. Hence, the prosperity of the GBA is increasingly attractive to Russia.

London used to be the first choice for Russian companies to contact Western capitals and utilise their financial platforms.³¹ However, as Russian relations with Western countries have deteriorated in recent years, a host of firms in Russia are searching for a 'safer' stock market. Hong Kong is one of their best choices. On 15 January 2016, the Stock Exchange of Hong Kong Limited published its Country Guide on Russia and placed Russia on its list of 'acceptable jurisdictions', formally signifying that Hong Kong's sole regulated stock exchange is now open to applications from companies incorporated in Russia.³² In the same year, Hong Kong and Russia signed a Comprehensive Avoidance of Double Taxation Agreement (CDTA).³³ The CDTA sets out the allocation of taxation rights between the two jurisdictions and thus helps investors better assess their potential tax liabilities from cross-border economic activities. The agreement bolsters the economic and trade connections between the two places and offers added incentives for companies in Russia to do business or invest in Hong Kong, and vice versa.³⁴ In February 2019, S. Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, paid a two-day official visit to Hong Kong, suggesting the increasing importance that Russia attaches to co-operation with Hong Kong.

Currently, as part of the intimate co-operation between China and Russia, it is expected that more Russian corporations will choose Hong Kong as a location point for connection with Western capitals. According to the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in London, the bilateral trade relationship between Hong Kong and Russia remains stable. Data from this office demonstrated that 'Total trade between the two economies amounted to 4.5 billion USD in 2019. In the same year, around 3% or 3.4 billion USD of the total trade between Russia and the Mainland of China was routed through Hong Kong. In 2019, Hong Kong's main exports to Russia were non-ferrous base metal waste and scrap (28.4%), jewellery (27.8%), plastic tubes, pipes and hoses (18.4%).'³⁵ Moreover, both Hong Kong and Moscow are seeking opportunities to expand their international influence, and the Russia–Hong Kong Business Association is also trying its best to participate in international exhibitions and forums to enhance the reputations of Hong Kong and Moscow, as well as enhancing bilateral economic co-operation. A quintessential example should be cited that, in 2017, Russia–Hong Kong Business Association Chairman Ivan Polyakov took part in the XXI St. Petersburg International Economic Forum to expand the Russia–Hong Kong connection.³⁶

4.3 Cultural, Educational, and Academic Exchange

As a country with abundant cultural resources, Russia has huge to develop cultural exchanges with the GBA in many areas, such as art exhibitions, music, drama and ballet performances, as well as co-operation in education and technology.

• Artistic Exchange

In 2006, during the Russia Art Festival of China, an exhibition of Russian realist paintings from the second half of the 19th century was exhibited at the 'Truth of Life: Art Poems' exhibition at the

ESTUDOS DE MACAU

Guangzhou Art Museum. The exhibition included 200 works on different themes, including portraits, landscapes, and still-life paintings of the following Russian classics: Viktor Vasnetsov, Ivan Kramskoy, Ilya Repin, Ivan Shishkin.³⁷ It fully reflected the outstanding achievements of the Russians in art and culture.

In 2015, the Subscription Concert, an audio-visual feast related to Russian humanistic feelings was presented by the Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra. The musical feast offered excellent classical music performances of two distinguished Russian composers, Modest Mussorgsky and Sergey Prokofiev.³⁸

In 2017, the 7th Guangzhou International Art Fair was held from 18 to 21 May. At the Art Fair, Shanghai Lanyi Culture Communication Co., Ltd. (Sino-Russian Cultural Exchange Centre) selected a number of portraits and landscapes, featuring Russian art masters' feats, and presented them to the audience, encouraging individuals to enjoy the beauty of Russian oil painting art.³⁹ Moreover, the 25th Autumn Guangzhou Art Fair was held at Nan Fung International Convention & Exhibition Centre in Guangzhou from 3 to 6 December 2020. As part of the Art Fair, the Russian themed pavilion presented examples of masterpieces of famous Russian painting circles.⁴⁰

Later, from 29 September 2017 to 7 January 2018, the exhibition, called 'Golden Age: the Treasure of the Russian Empire from the 18th to 20th Centuries', was on display at the Guangdong Museum. All the items on display in this exhibition came from the Russian State Historical Museum, which was the best testimony of the history of the Russian Empire over the past 200 years.⁴¹

In 2019, organised by the Macao Museum of Art, Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao SAR Government and the State Tretyakov Gallery, the exhibition 'Masterpieces of Russian Art from the State Tretyakov Gallery' was presented in Macao.

- **Education and Academic Co-operation**

According to statistics in 2018, nearly 85,000 Chinese and Russian students were studying in each

other's countries with an ongoing annual increase. At the same time, within the GBA, numerous prestigious universities and institutes have established exchange and interaction programmes with their peers in Russia. Within Guangdong province, several prestigious universities have opened Russian-language departments in their schools of foreign studies, including two national key universities, Sun Yat-sen University and South China Normal University, as well as one key provincial university, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. In the past decades, these universities have established deep relations with their peers in Russia by exchange programmes or the founding of the Russian research centres. Among those universities, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GUFS) is the most prestigious in terms of teaching Russian, educating translators, interpreters, and teachers for Chinese international education and so on. In 2007, GUFS reached an agreement with Ural University for co-operation in a Confucius Institute, including Chinese international education and China–Russia culture communication.⁴²

As early as 2014, Shenzhen co-founded a higher educational institution with Russia. The 2016 establishment of Shenzhen MSU–BIT University, co-founded with Lomonosov Moscow State University, Beijing Institute of Technology, and Shenzhen Municipal People's Government, indicates a new chapter of co-operation between China and Russia in the internationalisation of higher education. Over the following years, both the presidents and prime ministers of China and Russia have given multiple speeches and attached high expectations to the development of Shenzhen MSU–BIT.⁴³ As this university bears more political than educational significance, it is expected to have a bright development against the background of increased Sino-Russian relations in recent years.

Besides, academic research on Russia has generally improved in recent years as several Russian research centres have been founded in the GBA. The Russian Research Centre of the Guangdong Academy

of International Strategic Studies was established in 2011, one of the earliest regional research centres established by the Academy. In recent years, with the efforts and support of Prof. Yang Ke, Deputy Dean of the School of Western Languages, and Prof. Shuchun Wang of the School of Law, the centre has achieved gratifying results in the research of Russian politics, economics, diplomacy, and culture.⁴⁴ In 2018, the Russian Research Centre of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies was established. The founding of Russian centres fills the gap in the professional research institutions of Russian issues in Guangdong province. The centre was established based on integrating the Russian research resources of the School of International Relations and the School of Western Language and Culture on campus, and organically combining the study of international issues with Russian language and culture. The centre will hold academic seminars and report meetings from time to time, establish extensive contacts with relevant academic institutions and well-known scholars and exchange the latest developments and academic achievements on Russian research.⁴⁵

Besides, there is also educational co-operation between Russia and Hong Kong, as well as Russia and Macao. Some higher education institutions in the two SARs also established their own Russian centres, as well as Russian language and literature departments. At the University of Macau, the Russian Centre, supported by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, was established in 2015, aiming to study Russia as a nation, including its politics, economy, history, culture, language, etc.⁴⁶ However, due to the small population and limited higher educational institutions, there is no Russian language major offered by universities in Macao.

In terms of Hong Kong, many public universities offer Russian learning projects, though most of them are minor programmes, elective courses, or part-time short courses. At the University of Hong Kong, the bachelor programme of European Studies offers Russian as an elective course.⁴⁷ At the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the Department of Linguistic and Modern Languages

offers Russian courses as a minor programme.⁴⁸ At Hong Kong Baptist University, the School of Continuing Education offers a short course on Russian language for both students and wider community.⁴⁹

• Media

The event organised by the Guangdong Broadcasting Company in partnership with Russia Today, was held within the framework of the China Festival in Moscow, dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Russia–China diplomatic relations. Within the framework of the discussion forum 'Russia and Guangdong: creating the future together', leading experts from Russia and China exchanged views on bilateral co-operation, including in the spheres of economy, new technologies, culture, and mass media, spoke concerning the experience of joint regional projects involving Russian and Guangdong enterprises and organisations.⁵⁰

• Religion

The Russian Orthodox Church is also present in Hong Kong. Located in Sheung Wan, near the city centre of Hong Kong, the Saint Apostles Peter & Paul Orthodox Church in Hong Kong is a crucial Russian Orthodox religious centre in Hong Kong. In addition to its functions as an Orthodox Church, it also acts as a cultural centre to enhance people's knowledge of the Orthodox Church and Russia. It provides cultural projects like translation and publishing, music and singing, talks, Sunday schools, and Bible classes. It also operates a library and online store to introduce Orthodox Church and Russia-related cultural products.⁵¹

4.4 Anti-pandemic Co-operation

In 2020, confronting the challenges and uncertainties brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, China and Russia stood together and helped each other, displaying the traditional friendship of both sides. The GBA has devoted itself to China–Russia co-operation.

ESTUDOS DE MACAU

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Russian city Yekaterinburg provided two million medical masks to Guangzhou to show Russia's friendship and to express Russia's best wishes to China in overcoming the epidemic as quickly as possible. When China recovered from the first wave of the pandemic, Guangzhou returned the kindness of Russia and supplied masks and thermometers to Kazan. The mayor of Kazan, Yevgenia Lodvigova said, 'As they say, a friend in need is a friend indeed. Friendly ties are solid during a crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our partners from Guangzhou and Hangzhou offered us help with supplies of medical masks and thermometers.' Meanwhile, the Russian Direct Investment Fund reached an agreement with Shenzhen Yuanxing Gene-tech to produce over 60 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine against the coronavirus in China and this project started in May 2021.⁵² This reflects the united spirit of the Chinese and Russian people to face difficulties. As the virus continues to circulate, the more it will mutate, and strengthened co-operation in vaccine production between China and Russia will shorten the pandemic and help stimulate the development of the world economy.

5. OUTLOOK: THE FUTURE OF GBA–RUSSIA EXCHANGE

We can see that the historical circumstantial interaction between Russia and China has shaped the idea and foundation of co-operation, and the growing capabilities of the two countries have expanded the space for co-operation in the GBA context. Both countries consistently deepen the mutual benefits of bilateral co-operation and strengthen co-ordination and interaction in GBA affairs. Under the framework of the BRI, China–Russia co-operation is expected to be further improved. However, in the context of the GBA, there are still some problems. Although the framework of ideas, capabilities, and circumstantial factors in our analysis are relatively stable, any change even in minor factors involved in the process of interaction

can lead to escalation and conflict when unfavourable political factors impact the GBA co-operation. From the perspective of Russia, the variety of administrative levels of the 11 cities of GBA may bring some complexity, especially when it involves Hong Kong and Macao. The two Special Administrative Regions are different from the other nine cities in law, currency, tariff standards, and social systems, which may raise the cost of Russia's entrepreneurs in the process of trade and management. It may also bring quite a few political risks considering a series of events in Hong Kong in 2019. Therefore, cross-administrative level co-ordination will be the foremost challenge when the GBA develops external co-operation.

From the perspective of China, the exchange between the GBA and Russia is also confronting a multitude of challenges. From the general sphere, China–Russia trade has remained at a low level where the raw materials and low-added value products take the major percentage of bilateral trade. Meanwhile, rampant corruption in Russia also discourages investors from China. From the dimension of the GBA, the geographic distance is still a problem for trade with Russia. Besides, given that Guangdong is not a border province with Russia, it cannot enjoy preferential economic policies as much as those making up the Sino-Russian border. Besides, Russia lacks a certain degree of cultural output in China, unlike American blockbusters, British gentleman culture, and the broader acceptance of Japanese and Korean popular culture by younger generations, which are representative and deeply rooted in the hearts of the characters. The cultural cognition of Russia is relatively shallow in China. In these circumstances, it is indispensable for the GBA to enhance its complementarity with provinces like Heilongjiang in the exchange and connectivity with Russia. To put it differently, with Beijing's policy as the guide, the vertical and horizontal sectors are the links to promote the mechanism of connections among Russia, Heilongjiang province and the GBA, speeding up the construction of the GBA. **RC**

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