

Macau After the Handover: Society, Governance, Identity and Economic Transformation Under “One Country, Two Systems”

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Abstract

Macau occupies a unique position in modern China and the international system. As the oldest European settlement in East Asia and one of the two Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of the People’s Republic of China, it represents a distinctive case of institutional continuity, political adaptation and economic transformation. Since its return to Chinese sovereignty on 20 December 1999, Macau has operated under the constitutional principle of *One Country, Two Systems*, preserving its legal traditions, bilingual administration and open economy while becoming progressively integrated into China’s national development strategy. Unlike Hong Kong, Macau has experienced relatively limited political confrontation and sustained economic growth, supported by an executive-led system, extensive intermediary associations, and the world’s largest gaming industry.

This article examines Macau’s historical evolution, political institutions, civil society, identity formation and economic development from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Combining historical analysis with institutional and political economy approaches, it argues that Macau’s stability is best explained by four mutually reinforcing factors: institutional continuity inherited from the Portuguese administration; pragmatic cooperation between the Macau SAR Government and Beijing; the mediating role of powerful community associations; and sustained economic prosperity generated by gaming and tourism. The article further analyses Macau’s integration into the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) and discusses the challenges posed by economic diversification, demographic ageing and technological transformation. Rather than interpreting Macau simply as a smaller version of Hong Kong, the article demonstrates that it has developed a distinctive governance model rooted in its own historical trajectory and social structure.

Keywords: Macau, One Country, Two Systems, Greater Bay Area, governance, political development, civil society, gaming industry, Portuguese heritage

1. Introduction

Macau occupies a singular place in both Chinese and global history. For nearly five centuries, it served as a gateway between China and Europe, facilitating trade, diplomacy, missionary activity, scientific exchange and cultural interaction. Although its territory extends over little more than thirty square kilometres, Macau has exerted an influence far greater than its geographical dimensions suggest. Today, as one of China’s two Special Administrative Regions (SARs), it remains an important bridge between East and West while simultaneously acting as a platform for cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries.

The peaceful transfer of sovereignty from Portugal to the People’s Republic of China on 20 December 1999 marked the beginning of a new phase in Macau’s history. Governed under the constitutional framework of the Basic Law and the principle of *One Country, Two Systems*, the territory has maintained its capitalist economy,

independent judiciary, bilingual legal system and international commercial orientation while becoming increasingly integrated into China's national development strategy. During the past quarter-century, Macau has experienced remarkable economic expansion, becoming the world's largest gaming centre and one of Asia's wealthiest economies in terms of GDP per capita.

Despite its international importance, Macau has attracted considerably less academic attention than Hong Kong. The latter has often dominated scholarly debates concerning *One Country, Two Systems*, constitutional reform and centre–local relations. Consequently, Macau is frequently portrayed as a secondary case or simply as a more politically stable version of Hong Kong. Such interpretations overlook the territory's distinctive historical evolution, institutional arrangements and patterns of state–society relations.

This article argues that Macau should instead be understood as a unique model of post-colonial governance. Its political stability cannot be explained solely by economic prosperity or constitutional arrangements. Rather, it reflects the interaction of historical legacies, pragmatic governance, strong intermediary associations, relatively high institutional trust and close—but not identical—integration with the Chinese state. Macau's development demonstrates that political legitimacy can emerge from a combination of effective administration, economic performance and institutional continuity rather than from a single constitutional model.

The article therefore addresses three principal research questions.

First, how has Macau managed the transition from Portuguese administration to Chinese sovereignty while preserving institutional continuity?

Second, why has Macau experienced a comparatively stable political evolution under *One Country, Two Systems*?

Third, what challenges and opportunities will shape Macau's future as it diversifies its economy and deepens its integration into the Greater Bay Area?

To answer these questions, the paper combines historical analysis with institutional and political economy perspectives. Particular attention is given to the interaction between history, identity, governance and economic development. Rather than treating these dimensions separately, the article demonstrates how they reinforce one another to produce Macau's distinctive development trajectory.

Unlike studies focusing exclusively on constitutional law or the gaming industry, this article adopts an interdisciplinary perspective. It examines historical evolution, civil society, political institutions, educational development, linguistic diversity and economic transformation as components of a single governance model. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the growing literature on Macau while providing a broader reflection on institutional adaptation within contemporary China.

Finally, the article argues that Macau's future success will depend less upon continued expansion of gaming than upon its ability to diversify its economy, strengthen higher education and innovation, preserve its multicultural heritage and exploit its strategic position within both the Greater Bay Area and China's wider international engagement with Portuguese-speaking countries.

2. Research Design and Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical-institutional methodology combining historical research, political analysis and comparative governance. Rather than testing a single theoretical model, it examines how historical institutions, political practices and economic structures have interacted over time to shape Macau's contemporary development.

The research draws upon four principal sources of evidence.

First, it examines primary historical materials concerning Portuguese administration, the Sino-Portuguese negotiations and the 1999 transfer of sovereignty. These documents provide essential context for understanding the continuity of Macau's administrative and legal institutions.

Second, the analysis incorporates official publications issued by the Macau Special Administrative Region Government, including Policy Addresses, statistical yearbooks, legal documents and economic reports. These sources allow the authors to assess institutional evolution and socioeconomic change using official empirical evidence.

Third, the article engages with an extensive body of academic literature concerning Macau's history, governance, identity, public administration and political economy. Particular attention is given to the contributions of Wang Gungwu, Jean A. Berlie, Moisés Silva Fernandes and Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo, whose works collectively provide the most comprehensive analyses of Macau's historical development and political transformation.

Fourth, the article benefits from the authors' long-term engagement with Macau. Jean A. Berlie conducted ethnographic and historical research in Macau over more than two decades, developing close relationships with

academic institutions, community organizations and local scholars. These field observations complement documentary evidence while remaining grounded in published scholarship. Manuel Benard contributes a comparative perspective on governance, infrastructure development and public policy based on extensive international experience in Asia and beyond.

Among the relationships informing this long-term engagement was Berlie's association with Professor Gary Ngai Mei Cheong (1932–2021), a prominent Macau interpreter and civic figure who later served as president of the Macau Association for the Promotion of Exchange between Asia-Pacific and Latin America. Such contacts provided insight into the territory's associational life and the practical mediation of Chinese, Macanese and international networks.

Methodologically, the article employs process tracing to identify the principal institutional mechanisms explaining Macau's political evolution. Comparative references to Hong Kong are introduced where appropriate, not to establish normative rankings between the two Special Administrative Regions but rather to highlight the importance of differing historical trajectories, social structures and governance practices.

The study is intentionally interdisciplinary. It integrates insights from history, political science, sociology, economics and public administration in order to explain why Macau has followed a distinctive development path within the broader Chinese political system.

Although qualitative in nature, the article also draws upon official statistical data concerning population, tourism, education and economic development to support its analysis. The objective is not merely to describe Macau's transformation but to explain the institutional logic underpinning its remarkable continuity since 1999.

3. Literature Review

Macau has long attracted the attention of historians because of its exceptional role as the oldest European settlement in East Asia and as a strategic intermediary between China and the Western world. However, systematic academic research on Macau remained relatively limited until the final decades of Portuguese administration and expanded significantly only after the 1999 handover. The existing literature may be grouped into five broad themes: historical evolution, identity and society, political institutions, economic transformation, and regional integration.

The historical foundations of Macau have been examined by scholars who emphasize the territory's unique position at the intersection of Chinese and Portuguese civilizations. Early historical studies largely concentrated on maritime trade, missionary activities and diplomatic relations between Portugal and successive Chinese dynasties. These works demonstrated that Macau was never a conventional European colony in the sense observed elsewhere in Asia or Africa. Instead, Portuguese administration evolved through continuous negotiation with Chinese authorities, producing a hybrid political and legal order that combined European administrative institutions with enduring Chinese sovereignty.

Wang Gungwu's pioneering analyses of Chinese identity constitute an important theoretical foundation for understanding Macau's society. Rather than interpreting identity as a fixed ethnic or political category, Wang argues that "Chineseness" has historically been shaped by migration, commerce and cultural interaction. This perspective is particularly relevant to Macau, where Chinese traditions have coexisted with Portuguese legal institutions, Catholicism and extensive international commercial networks for more than four centuries.

Jean A. Berlie's ethnographic research further developed this perspective by documenting the social organization of Macau's Chinese communities, their associations, educational institutions and cultural practices. His work demonstrates that Macau's remarkable political stability cannot be understood without recognising the central role played by intermediary organizations, kinship networks and voluntary associations in structuring relations between society and public authorities. His long-term fieldwork also highlights the persistence of local traditions despite rapid economic modernization and demographic change.

Political scientists have increasingly examined Macau following the establishment of the Special Administrative Region. Among contemporary scholars, Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo has produced the most comprehensive body of research on Macau's governance and constitutional development. His work departs from conventional democratization theories by emphasizing administrative capacity, institutional legitimacy and what he terms a **state–society partnership**. According to Lo, Macau's political development is characterized less by confrontation between government and civil society than by structured cooperation among government agencies, neighbourhood associations, professional organizations and business groups. This corporatist pattern distinguishes Macau from many liberal democratic systems while simultaneously differentiating it from highly centralized administrative models.

Fernandes' work on the normalization of Sino-Portuguese relations offers an indispensable historical explanation for the peaceful transition of sovereignty in 1999. Rather than depicting the handover as an abrupt constitutional

event, he demonstrates that it resulted from a gradual diplomatic process initiated after Portugal's democratic revolution in 1974. The negotiations reflected mutual recognition by Lisbon and Beijing that institutional continuity would best serve Macau's long-term stability.

The literature on Macau's economy has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Earlier studies primarily examined manufacturing and export industries, particularly textiles and garments. Following the liberalization of casino concessions in 2002, however, scholarly attention shifted towards gaming, tourism, public finance and economic diversification. Economists have analysed the extraordinary fiscal contribution of gaming revenues while also highlighting the structural vulnerabilities associated with excessive dependence on a single sector. More recent research focuses on diversification strategies involving financial services, conventions and exhibitions, traditional Chinese medicine, higher education and technological innovation.

An emerging body of scholarship also situates Macau within China's broader regional development strategy. The establishment of the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area has generated renewed interest in cross-border governance, infrastructure integration, labour mobility and innovation networks. Researchers increasingly argue that Macau's long-term competitiveness will depend upon its ability to exploit its comparative advantages as a multilingual international platform while reducing dependence on gaming revenues.

Despite this growing literature, relatively few studies integrate historical evolution, institutional governance, civil society, cultural identity and political economy within a single analytical framework. Existing publications often focus on one dimension while giving limited attention to the interaction between institutions, society and economic development. This article seeks to address that gap by examining Macau as an integrated political and social system whose contemporary characteristics can only be understood through its long historical evolution.

Building upon historical scholarship, ethnographic research and contemporary political analysis, the article proposes that Macau's stability derives from the interaction of four mutually reinforcing factors: historical institutional continuity; pragmatic governance under the Basic Law; the mediating role of intermediary associations; and sustained economic prosperity supported by, but no longer entirely dependent upon, the gaming industry. This integrated approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Macau's development while providing insights into the broader functioning of *One Country, Two Systems* in the twenty-first century.

4. Theoretical Framework: Historical Institutionalism and State–Society Partnership

This study is grounded in historical institutionalism, a theoretical approach that emphasizes how institutions evolve over time and how past political decisions constrain or enable future policy choices. Rather than viewing political development as a sequence of isolated events, historical institutionalism argues that institutions create durable patterns of behaviour through processes of path dependence, critical junctures, and incremental adaptation (North, 1990; Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 2004).

The concept of path dependence is particularly relevant to Macau. Instead of dismantling the administrative and legal structures inherited from Portuguese rule after the 1999 handover, the People's Republic of China deliberately preserved most institutional arrangements through the Basic Law. The continuation of the civil law system, bilingual administration, independent judiciary, and market-oriented economy substantially reduced institutional uncertainty and strengthened confidence among residents, investors, and the international business community. Consequently, Macau's contemporary governance cannot be understood without reference to the institutional choices made during both the Portuguese administration and the Sino-Portuguese negotiations preceding the handover. (Fernandes, M. S., 2015; Macau Statistics & Census Service, 2024)

Historical institutionalism also emphasizes the importance of critical junctures, periods during which major political decisions redirect institutional development. Three such junctures have profoundly shaped modern Macau. The first was the Portuguese democratic revolution of 1974, which initiated negotiations concerning Macau's future and fundamentally transformed Portugal's colonial policy. The second was the signing of the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration in 1987, which established the constitutional principles governing the transfer of sovereignty. The third occurred in 1999 with the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region under the Basic Law. Rather than representing abrupt institutional ruptures, these events initiated gradual processes of adaptation that continue to influence governance today. (Fernandes, M. S., 2015; Government of the Macau Special Administrative Region, 2024; Macau Statistics & Census Service, 2024)

A second theoretical perspective informing this article is state capacity. Contemporary governance literature argues that political stability depends not only on constitutional arrangements but also on the ability of public institutions to formulate policy, implement decisions, provide public services, and maintain public confidence. Macau has consistently demonstrated relatively high administrative capacity. Successive governments have maintained balanced budgets, accumulated substantial fiscal reserves, invested extensively in education, healthcare and transport infrastructure, and responded effectively to external economic shocks. Such administrative performance has reinforced governmental legitimacy independently of constitutional debates.

(Macau Statistics & Census Service, 2024; Pierson, P., 2004; Rangel, J., 1991)

The article further incorporates the concept of state–society partnership, developed most systematically by Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo in his analyses of Macau’s political development. Unlike pluralist models that assume an adversarial relationship between government and civil society, Macau’s governance is characterized by structured cooperation among public authorities, neighbourhood associations, professional organizations, business groups and charitable institutions. These intermediary organizations perform multiple functions: they represent social interests, provide welfare services, disseminate public information and participate in policy consultation. Political legitimacy therefore emerges not only from formal institutions but also from continuous interaction between the state and organized society. (Macau Statistics & Census Service, 2024; North, D. C., 1990; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024)

The notion of adaptive governance also contributes to understanding Macau’s development. Adaptive governance emphasizes institutional flexibility and the capacity of governments to respond incrementally to changing social and economic conditions. Macau’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this principle. Rather than abandoning its established economic model, the Government introduced reforms encouraging diversification through finance, higher education, technological innovation, cultural industries and cooperation within the Greater Bay Area. These policies represent institutional adaptation rather than institutional replacement.

Finally, the article draws upon the literature on regional integration. The Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area represents an innovative governance framework in which multiple jurisdictions with different legal systems cooperate while preserving substantial institutional autonomy. This differs from classical models of political integration based upon legal harmonization. Instead, Macau’s integration is characterized by functional complementarity, whereby its comparative advantages—including bilingual administration, civil law traditions, tourism expertise and links with Portuguese-speaking countries—are combined with Guangdong’s industrial capacity and Hong Kong’s international financial role.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a coherent analytical framework for understanding Macau’s evolution. Historical institutionalism explains the persistence of inherited institutions; state capacity accounts for effective governance and public confidence; state–society partnership highlights the role of intermediary organizations in maintaining social cohesion; and regional integration theory explains Macau’s increasingly important position within the Greater Bay Area.

Accordingly, this article argues that Macau’s political stability cannot be attributed to any single institutional feature. Rather, it results from the interaction of historical continuity, administrative effectiveness, structured state–society cooperation, and gradual adaptation to changing regional and global conditions. This integrated framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of Macau’s development than approaches focusing exclusively on constitutional law, electoral institutions or economic performance.

5. Historical Evolution: From Portuguese Settlement to the Macau Special Administrative Region

Macau’s historical trajectory differs fundamentally from that of most colonial territories. Archaeological evidence indicates that the Pearl River Delta has been inhabited for several millennia, but Macau emerged as an international port during the sixteenth century when Portuguese merchants established a permanent commercial presence with the authorization of Ming authorities. Its strategic location at the mouth of the Pearl River transformed Macau into one of the principal maritime gateways connecting China with Europe, Japan, Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean.

The Portuguese settlement did not replace Chinese sovereignty but instead developed through a complex system of accommodation and negotiation. Chinese authorities retained ultimate sovereignty while allowing Portuguese residents considerable autonomy in local administration and commercial affairs. This unusual arrangement produced an institutional environment unlike that of European colonies elsewhere in Asia, where colonial powers generally exercised exclusive political authority.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Macau became a centre of global exchange. Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci used the city as a base for entering imperial China, contributing significantly to scientific, linguistic and cultural dialogue between Europe and East Asia. Portuguese merchants established extensive commercial networks linking Macau with Goa, Malacca, Nagasaki and Lisbon, making the city one of the earliest truly global trading ports.

Over subsequent centuries, Macau experienced alternating periods of prosperity and decline. The rise of Hong Kong after the First Opium War reduced Macau’s relative commercial importance, yet the territory retained its distinctive administrative institutions and multicultural character. Portuguese civil law, Catholic educational institutions and Chinese commercial traditions continued to coexist, creating a remarkably stable social order that survived profound political transformations in both Europe and China.

The democratic revolution in Portugal in April 1974 initiated a new phase in Macau's political history. Portugal progressively abandoned its colonial empire and entered negotiations with the People's Republic of China concerning Macau's future. These diplomatic discussions culminated in the 1987 Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration, which established the framework for the transfer of sovereignty on 20 December 1999 and guaranteed that Macau would retain its capitalist system, legal order and way of life for fifty years under the principle of *One Country, Two Systems*.

The transition to Chinese sovereignty in December 1999 represented one of the most orderly examples of decolonization in contemporary international relations. Unlike many post-colonial transitions that were accompanied by institutional disruption or political instability, Macau preserved the overwhelming majority of its administrative, legal, judicial and economic structures. The Basic Law, promulgated by the National People's Congress before the handover, became the constitutional foundation of the Macau Special Administrative Region (MSAR), guaranteeing a "high degree of autonomy" in all matters except defence and foreign affairs. The continuation of the civil law system, judicial independence, a separate customs territory, and bilingual administration reflected a deliberate policy of institutional continuity rather than rupture.



Figure 1. General Vasco Rocha Vieira (1939–2025), the last Governor of Macau

The first Chief Executive, Edmund Ho Hau Wah (1999–2009), played a pivotal role in consolidating the new constitutional order. His administration emphasized continuity, administrative professionalism, and constructive cooperation with the Central People's Government. These priorities reassured both local residents and international investors that Macau would remain a stable and predictable business environment. The maintenance of low taxation, prudent fiscal management, and openness to foreign investment reinforced public confidence during the first decade after the handover.

Economic liberalization constituted another decisive milestone. In 2002 the Government ended the long-standing monopoly of Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (STDM) by introducing a competitive concession system for gaming operators. International companies, including Las Vegas Sands, Wynn Resorts, MGM Resorts and Galaxy Entertainment, entered the Macau market, investing billions of US dollars in integrated casino resorts, luxury hotels, convention centres and entertainment complexes. This reform transformed Macau into the world's largest gaming destination within less than a decade and generated unprecedented fiscal revenues for the Government.

The rapid expansion of tourism profoundly altered Macau's urban landscape. Major infrastructure projects—including the expansion of Macau International Airport, the Light Rapid Transit (LRT) system, new ferry terminals, and, most significantly, the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge inaugurated in 2018—strengthened regional connectivity and facilitated closer integration with neighbouring Guangdong Province. These investments also reflected a broader strategic objective: positioning Macau not merely as a gaming destination but as an international tourism, cultural and service hub within southern China.

Nevertheless, rapid economic growth also created new social challenges. Escalating property prices, increasing dependence on imported labour, demographic ageing, and the concentration of economic activity in the gaming sector raised concerns regarding long-term sustainability. Successive administrations therefore began to place increasing emphasis on economic diversification, innovation and regional integration, particularly after the economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis represented the most severe economic shock since the establishment of the MSAR. Border restrictions dramatically reduced visitor arrivals, causing gaming revenues to decline sharply and exposing the vulnerabilities associated with excessive reliance on tourism. Yet the crisis also accelerated structural reforms. The Government introduced new gaming concession requirements encouraging operators to invest in non-gaming attractions, cultural industries, conventions, sports facilities and international tourism. At the same time, cooperation with Hengqin and the Greater Bay Area intensified as part of a broader national strategy to

diversify Macau's economic base.

Thus, the evolution of Macau since 1999 illustrates a pattern of adaptive continuity. Rather than pursuing abrupt institutional transformation, policymakers have consistently sought to preserve constitutional stability while gradually modernizing the economy and public administration. This incremental approach has become one of the defining characteristics of Macau's governance model.

6. Society, Identity and Cultural Heritage

Macau's society is characterized by an exceptional degree of cultural hybridity. Few cities have experienced such sustained interaction between Chinese and European civilizations over a period exceeding four centuries. This long historical coexistence has produced a distinctive social environment in which Chinese traditions remain predominant while Portuguese cultural influences continue to shape legal institutions, architecture, education and everyday life.

According to the latest demographic estimates, more than ninety percent of Macau's residents are ethnically Chinese. The majority speak Cantonese as their first language, reflecting the territory's close historical ties with neighbouring Guangdong Province. Mandarin has become increasingly important following the handover because of greater interaction with Mainland China, while Portuguese remains an official language protected by the Basic Law. English, meanwhile, has expanded significantly in higher education, international business and tourism, making Macau a genuinely multilingual society.

Historical field research further reveals the diversity contained within this predominantly Chinese population. Rangel's 1991 survey attributed 55 percent of the Chinese population to communities originating in Zhuhai, Zhongshan, Shiqi, Shunde and Panyu, and a further 24 percent to Xinhui, Doumen, Nanhai, Jiangmen and Heshan. Migration from Fujian and other provinces added additional layers to a society in which local belonging has long coexisted with wider regional and national identities (Rangel, 1991).

This linguistic diversity constitutes an important comparative advantage. The coexistence of Chinese and Portuguese within the legal and administrative systems enables Macau to function as China's principal platform for cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries. Legal professionals, translators, educators and civil servants frequently operate in multiple languages, reinforcing Macau's international orientation despite its relatively small population.

Identity in Macau has evolved differently from that observed in Hong Kong. Survey research consistently indicates that most residents simultaneously identify themselves as Chinese citizens and as residents of Macau. These identities are generally regarded as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. The comparatively limited politicization of identity partly reflects Macau's historical experience. Throughout both the Portuguese administration and the post-1999 period, local identity developed primarily around commerce, family networks, neighbourhood associations and cultural traditions rather than around political contestation.

The Macanese community occupies a particularly important symbolic place within this multicultural landscape. Descended from Portuguese settlers and Asian populations through centuries of intermarriage, the Macanese developed distinctive cultural practices, cuisine and the Creole language known as Patuá. Although the community now represents only a small proportion of Macau's population, its cultural contribution remains substantial. Festivals, culinary traditions, Catholic institutions and heritage preservation initiatives continue to reinforce Macau's reputation as one of Asia's most cosmopolitan historical cities.

UNESCO's inscription of the Historic Centre of Macao as a World Heritage Site in 2005 further recognized the global significance of this multicultural heritage. More than thirty historic monuments—including churches, temples, fortresses, public squares and civic buildings—illustrate the coexistence of Chinese and Portuguese architectural traditions. Heritage preservation has therefore become not merely a cultural objective but also an important component of Macau's tourism strategy and international identity.



Figure 2. The Ruins of Saint Paul, an emblem of Macau's Chinese–Portuguese heritage

The resilience of Macau's multicultural society demonstrates that cultural diversity and political stability are not necessarily contradictory. Instead, Macau suggests that a strong local identity can coexist with national integration when supported by inclusive institutions, shared economic interests and respect for historical continuity.

7. Education, Language Policy and Civil Society

Education has played a central role in Macau's social development and in the preservation of its multicultural identity. Since the sixteenth century, educational institutions have functioned not only as centres of learning but also as vehicles for cultural exchange between China and Europe. The establishment of missionary schools by the Jesuits transformed Macau into one of the earliest centres of Western education in East Asia. These institutions introduced mathematics, astronomy, geography and philosophy to Chinese scholars while simultaneously encouraging European understanding of Chinese civilization.

During the Portuguese administration, Macau's educational system remained pluralistic rather than centralized. Chinese community schools, Catholic institutions, Portuguese public schools and private educational establishments coexisted, reflecting the territory's multicultural composition. Although this diversity occasionally produced uneven educational standards, it also fostered linguistic flexibility and cultural openness that continue to characterize Macau today.

Following the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region, education became a strategic priority of public policy. Government investment increased substantially, expanding compulsory education, modernizing school infrastructure and strengthening higher education institutions. The objective was not only to improve educational attainment but also to prepare Macau's population for a knowledge-based economy less dependent upon gaming and tourism.

Language policy represents one of the most distinctive features of Macau's educational system. Chinese and Portuguese remain official languages under the Basic Law, while English has acquired increasing importance as the principal language of international business and higher education. Most primary and secondary schools teach in Chinese, primarily Cantonese, although Mandarin has become progressively more prominent owing to closer interaction with Mainland China. Portuguese-language schools continue to operate, preserving Macau's legal and historical traditions, while English-language programmes have expanded in response to globalization and the demands of the tourism and financial sectors.

Historical enrolment figures illustrate this evolution. Between 1989 and 1996, Chinese-medium enrolment rose

from approximately 60,600 to 80,000 students, Portuguese-medium enrolment from 3,500 to 4,000, and English-medium enrolment from 4,150 to 12,000; around 1,000 students were recorded in trilingual education in 1996 (Berlie, 1999). While not directly comparable with present-day statistics, these figures show both the continuing predominance of Chinese and the rapid expansion of English before the handover.

This multilingual environment provides Macau with a unique comparative advantage. Graduates proficient in Chinese, Portuguese and English possess skills that are increasingly valuable within the Greater Bay Area and in China's expanding relations with Portuguese-speaking countries. Consequently, language policy is closely linked not only to cultural preservation but also to economic competitiveness and diplomatic engagement.

Higher education has undergone remarkable expansion during the past two decades. The University of Macau has developed into a major research institution with growing international recognition, particularly in science, engineering, public administration and Chinese studies. Macau University of Science and Technology has strengthened research in medicine, hospitality management and technology, while the City University of Macau has expanded programmes in business, education and cultural studies. The University of Saint Joseph continues to contribute to humanities, social sciences, architecture and Lusophone studies, reinforcing Macau's role as a bridge between Chinese and Portuguese intellectual traditions.

Increasing collaboration with universities in Mainland China, Europe and Southeast Asia has enhanced Macau's international academic profile. Research partnerships in artificial intelligence, public health, sustainable urban development and marine sciences illustrate the growing diversification of Macau's higher education sector. At the same time, scholarship programmes encourage students from Portuguese-speaking countries to study in Macau, further strengthening its role as an international educational platform.

Education therefore performs multiple functions within Macau's development strategy. It preserves cultural diversity, supports economic modernization, promotes social mobility and reinforces the territory's international connections. As Macau seeks to diversify its economy beyond gaming, universities and research institutions are expected to play an increasingly important role in generating innovation and human capital.

8. Civil Society and Intermediary Associations

One of the defining characteristics of Macau's governance model is the prominent role played by intermediary associations. Unlike many Western democracies, where civil society organizations often position themselves as independent actors vis-à-vis the state, Macau's associations generally operate through cooperation, consultation and partnership with public authorities. This pattern has deep historical roots and continues to shape contemporary governance.

Chinese voluntary organizations emerged in Macau long before the establishment of the Special Administrative Region. Clan associations, guilds, charitable societies, neighbourhood organizations and religious institutions provided education, healthcare, welfare and mediation services during periods when government intervention remained limited. Portuguese authorities generally tolerated and often encouraged these organizations because they contributed to social stability and facilitated communication with the Chinese population.

Following the 1999 handover, intermediary associations retained—and in many cases strengthened—their influence. Rather than replacing these organizations with direct administrative control, the Macau SAR Government has incorporated them into formal and informal consultation processes. Public policy is frequently developed through dialogue with professional associations, labour organizations, business chambers, educational institutions and neighbourhood groups.

Among the most influential organizations is the General Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Macau (Kai Fong Association). Established in 1983, it coordinates numerous community organizations providing social welfare, legal assistance, youth activities, elderly services and neighbourhood consultation. Through its extensive grassroots network, the Association serves as an important intermediary between residents and government, communicating community concerns while also disseminating public information and policy initiatives.

Equally significant is the Women's General Association of Macau, founded in 1950. Originally established to improve women's welfare and education, it has evolved into one of Macau's largest social organizations. It operates childcare centres, vocational training programmes, family counselling services and health initiatives while participating actively in public consultations on social policy. The Association's long history illustrates the continuity of civil society institutions across both the Portuguese and post-handover periods.

Business organizations also occupy a central position in Macau's governance. Chambers of commerce representing Chinese, Portuguese and international enterprises maintain regular dialogue with government departments on taxation, labour markets, tourism, infrastructure and economic diversification. This institutionalized consultation contributes to policy stability and reinforces Macau's reputation as a predictable

environment for investment.

The breadth of this network is reflected in the presence of Portuguese-Chinese, British, French, German, Irish, Romanian and other international chambers. Alongside neighbourhood and welfare associations, these organizations connect Macau's local economy to wider commercial communities and reinforce its intermediary role between China and the outside world.

Religious institutions similarly continue to play an important social role. Buddhist temples, Catholic charities, Protestant organizations and other faith-based institutions complement government programmes by providing educational, medical and social services. Their activities reinforce community cohesion while illustrating Macau's long tradition of religious tolerance.

The prominence of intermediary associations reflects a broader governance philosophy emphasizing consensus rather than confrontation. Political participation occurs not only through elections but also through structured consultation and sustained interaction between government and organized society. This corporatist model differs from adversarial political systems while remaining compatible with increasing public participation in policymaking.

Consequently, Macau's civil society should not be interpreted as weak simply because it operates differently from liberal Western models. On the contrary, its dense network of voluntary organizations constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which social cohesion, policy implementation and political legitimacy are maintained. This state-society partnership has become one of the defining characteristics of Macau's post-1999 governance and provides an important explanation for the territory's relative political stability.

9. Political Institutions and Governance Under *One Country, Two Systems*

The constitutional architecture of the Macau Special Administrative Region is founded upon the Basic Law, adopted by the National People's Congress before the 1999 transfer of sovereignty. The Basic Law operationalizes the principle of *One Country, Two Systems*, guaranteeing Macau a "high degree of autonomy" while affirming that it forms an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China. Defence and foreign affairs remain under the responsibility of the Central People's Government, whereas the Macau SAR exercises autonomous authority over public administration, the judiciary, customs, immigration, education, healthcare, taxation and economic policy.

Unlike parliamentary systems in which executive authority derives from a legislative majority, Macau operates an executive-led model of governance. The Chief Executive occupies the central position within the constitutional framework, directing government policy and representing the Region in its relations with Beijing. The Chief Executive is selected by an Election Committee representing different sectors of Macau's society before being formally appointed by the Central People's Government. Although this method differs from direct universal suffrage, it reflects the corporatist tradition that has long characterized Macau's political institutions.

Since the establishment of the Macau SAR, four Chief Executives have successively guided the Region's political development: Edmund Ho Hau Wah (1999–2009), Fernando Chui Sai On (2009–2019), Ho Iat Seng (2019–2024), and Sam Hou Fai (since December 2024). Despite differences in professional background, all four administrations have emphasized continuity, administrative competence and close cooperation with Beijing. This consistency has reinforced institutional predictability and facilitated long-term policy planning.

The Legislative Assembly performs legislative and supervisory functions while reflecting Macau's mixed representational system. Members are elected through a combination of direct elections, functional constituencies and appointments. This arrangement aims to balance democratic participation with representation of professional, commercial and social organizations. Although the composition of the Assembly differs from legislatures based exclusively on territorial elections, it reflects Macau's long-standing emphasis on consensus-building among different sectors of society.

The judiciary constitutes another pillar of institutional continuity. Macau preserved the civil law tradition inherited from Portugal, maintaining judicial independence and a bilingual legal system in Chinese and Portuguese. The Court of Final Appeal serves as the highest judicial authority within the Region, reinforcing public confidence in the rule of law and legal certainty. This continuity has been particularly important in attracting international investment and preserving Macau's reputation as a secure commercial jurisdiction.

An important feature of Macau's governance is the relatively high level of public confidence in government institutions. Although political debate exists and elections remain competitive within the constitutional framework, public dissatisfaction has generally been less pronounced than in many comparable jurisdictions. Several factors contribute to this pattern: sustained economic prosperity, effective delivery of public services, prudent fiscal management and the extensive consultation mechanisms linking government with intermediary associations.

Political legitimacy in Macau therefore rests not exclusively upon electoral competition but also upon administrative performance. The Government has consistently emphasized efficient public administration, low public debt, substantial fiscal reserves and the redistribution of gaming revenues through healthcare, education, housing and annual cash-sharing programmes. These policies have strengthened public confidence while reducing socioeconomic inequalities associated with rapid economic growth.

Scholars such as Sonny Shiu-Hing Lo have argued that Macau illustrates an alternative model of governance in which legitimacy derives from administrative effectiveness, consultation and institutional continuity rather than adversarial political competition. Whether this model remains sustainable as Macau undergoes demographic, technological and economic transformation represents one of the central questions for future research.

10. The Gaming Economy and Economic Diversification

The gaming industry occupies a central position in Macau's economic history and contemporary development. Gambling has been legally regulated in Macau since the nineteenth century, making it one of the oldest continuously licensed gaming jurisdictions in the world. Initially dominated by traditional Chinese games such as *Fan Tan*, the sector underwent profound modernization following the concession granted in 1962 to Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau (STDM), led by Stanley Ho. Under his leadership, Macau gradually evolved from a regional gambling centre into an internationally recognized tourism destination.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Macau reportedly contained more than two hundred Fan Tan establishments. The opening of the Hotel Estoril in 1962 and the Hotel Lisboa in 1970 signalled the transition toward modern casino tourism. After Stanley Ho's death in 2020, the family's business legacy continued through several successors, including Pansy Ho, whose leadership roles in MGM China and Shun Tak Holdings link gaming, hospitality, property and transport within Macau's broader visitor economy.

The liberalization of the gaming market after the 1999 handover constituted a decisive turning point. In 2002 the Government replaced the monopoly system with a competitive concession model, opening the market to international operators. Major investments by Las Vegas Sands, Wynn Resorts, MGM Resorts, Galaxy Entertainment and Melco transformed the Cotai Strip into one of the largest integrated resort developments in the world. These projects combined casinos with luxury hotels, conference centres, shopping malls, entertainment venues and cultural attractions, significantly broadening Macau's tourism offer.

The economic consequences were extraordinary. Gaming revenues expanded at unprecedented rates, enabling Macau to surpass Las Vegas as the world's largest casino market. Public finances benefited substantially because gaming taxes account for a significant proportion of government revenue. This fiscal capacity allowed successive administrations to invest heavily in education, healthcare, housing, transport infrastructure and social welfare while maintaining one of the lowest tax burdens in Asia.

Nevertheless, extraordinary success also generated structural vulnerabilities. Dependence upon gaming made Macau particularly sensitive to fluctuations in tourism, regulatory reforms and external economic shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated these risks. International travel restrictions caused visitor arrivals to collapse, exposing the limitations of an economy overly concentrated in a single industry.

Recognizing these vulnerabilities, the Macau SAR Government has increasingly promoted economic diversification as a strategic priority. The revised gaming concessions introduced in 2022 require operators to expand investment in non-gaming activities, including conventions and exhibitions, cultural tourism, sports facilities, entertainment, gastronomy and family-oriented attractions. These reforms seek to reposition Macau as a comprehensive international tourism destination rather than solely a gaming centre.

Beyond tourism, diversification strategies focus on financial services, traditional Chinese medicine, higher education, digital technologies, cultural and creative industries, and cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries. The Hengqin Cooperation Zone has become a key instrument for supporting these objectives by providing additional land, research facilities and industrial space unavailable within Macau itself.

Economic diversification should therefore not be understood as replacing gaming but rather as reducing excessive dependence on a single source of revenue. Gaming will almost certainly remain a major pillar of Macau's economy for the foreseeable future; however, its future contribution is expected to become increasingly integrated with broader sectors of innovation, culture and international services.

The Macau experience illustrates an important lesson in economic governance. Extraordinary specialization can generate exceptional prosperity, but long-term resilience requires diversification, human capital development and continuous institutional adaptation. As Macau enters the second quarter-century of the *One Country, Two Systems* framework, the success of this diversification strategy will become one of the principal determinants of its future competitiveness.

11. Macau, the Greater Bay Area and China's National Development Strategy

The next phase of Macau's development is closely linked to its integration into the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). Officially launched through the *Outline Development Plan for the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area* in 2019, the initiative aims to create one of the world's leading metropolitan and innovation regions by integrating eleven cities with a combined population exceeding eighty million inhabitants and an economic output comparable to that of many advanced national economies.

For Macau, participation in the Greater Bay Area represents far more than regional economic cooperation. It constitutes a strategic transformation of its development model. Historically constrained by its limited land area of approximately 33 km² and high population density, Macau faces structural limitations that restrict industrial expansion and infrastructure development. Integration with neighbouring Zhuhai and the wider Pearl River Delta provides opportunities to overcome these physical constraints while preserving Macau's unique legal and institutional characteristics.

The Guangdong–Macao In-Depth Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, inaugurated in 2021, has become the principal laboratory for this new phase of development. Located immediately adjacent to Macau, Hengqin offers substantial land resources for activities that cannot easily be accommodated within the Special Administrative Region itself. Universities, research institutes, technology companies, healthcare facilities, cultural industries and financial services are increasingly encouraged to establish operations within the Cooperation Zone while maintaining close institutional links with Macau.

The Hengqin initiative illustrates an innovative form of cross-border governance. Rather than dissolving institutional boundaries, it seeks to combine the comparative advantages of different jurisdictions. Macau contributes its international legal environment, bilingual administrative capacity, tourism expertise and connections with Portuguese-speaking countries, while Guangdong provides industrial capacity, research infrastructure, manufacturing capabilities and access to a much larger domestic market.

Transport infrastructure has significantly reinforced this integration. The Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macao Bridge, the expansion of high-speed rail networks in Guangdong, improvements to ferry services and the progressive development of Macau's Light Rapid Transit system have substantially reduced travel times across the Pearl River Delta. Enhanced physical connectivity has facilitated labour mobility, tourism, academic exchanges and commercial cooperation.

Regional integration also supports economic diversification. Financial services represent one promising area of development. Macau is gradually strengthening its role as a platform for Renminbi settlement, green finance and cooperation with Lusophone countries. The Government has simultaneously promoted the development of bond markets, wealth management services and financial technology, seeking to complement rather than compete directly with Hong Kong's established international financial centre.

Higher education and scientific research constitute another strategic priority. Universities in Macau increasingly participate in joint research programmes with institutions in Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Collaborative research in artificial intelligence, integrated circuits, biomedical sciences, environmental sustainability and smart-city technologies contributes to the emergence of a regional innovation ecosystem extending beyond traditional administrative boundaries.

Healthcare cooperation has also expanded. Macau's internationally respected medical services, combined with new healthcare facilities in Hengqin, provide opportunities for developing medical tourism, pharmaceutical research and traditional Chinese medicine. Such initiatives align with China's broader objective of promoting high-quality development based upon innovation rather than labour-intensive industries.

Macau's role within the Greater Bay Area therefore extends beyond its own economic interests. It serves as a bridge between different legal systems, languages and commercial traditions, demonstrating how institutional diversity can become a source of regional competitiveness rather than an obstacle to integration.

12. Discussion

Macau's experience provides important insights into contemporary debates concerning governance, institutional adaptation and post-colonial political development. It challenges several conventional assumptions frequently encountered in comparative political science.

First, Macau demonstrates that successful post-colonial transitions do not necessarily require institutional discontinuity. In contrast to many former colonies that replaced inherited administrative structures with entirely new political systems, Macau deliberately preserved large parts of its legal order, civil service, judiciary and administrative culture. Institutional continuity reduced uncertainty, strengthened investor confidence and facilitated gradual rather than disruptive political adaptation.

Second, Macau illustrates that political legitimacy can derive from multiple sources. Liberal democratic theory frequently emphasizes electoral competition as the principal foundation of governmental legitimacy. Macau

suggests a more complex reality in which legitimacy also depends upon effective public administration, economic performance, social welfare provision, rule of law and continuous consultation between government and organized society. This observation does not imply that electoral institutions are unimportant; rather, it indicates that governance outcomes result from interactions among numerous institutional variables.

Third, Macau demonstrates the continuing importance of intermediary associations in modern governance. Neighbourhood organizations, professional associations, charitable institutions and business chambers perform functions extending well beyond interest representation. They facilitate communication between citizens and government, deliver social services, promote civic participation and contribute to policy implementation. Their prominence reflects long-standing Chinese traditions of collective organization while adapting successfully to contemporary administrative requirements.

Comparison with Hong Kong further illustrates the importance of historical context. Both Special Administrative Regions operate under the constitutional principle of *One Country, Two Systems*; nevertheless, their political trajectories have diverged significantly. Historical experience, patterns of identity formation, economic structure, administrative traditions and civil society organization all contribute to these different outcomes. Consequently, constitutional arrangements alone cannot explain variations in political development.

Macau also highlights the opportunities and challenges associated with economic specialization. The extraordinary success of the gaming industry generated unparalleled prosperity and substantial fiscal resources, yet it simultaneously created structural dependence upon a single economic sector. Recent diversification strategies therefore represent not a rejection of gaming but an effort to enhance economic resilience through innovation, education, finance and cultural industries.

Finally, Macau's growing integration into the Greater Bay Area illustrates an emerging model of regional governance in which institutional diversity is preserved within a framework of increasing economic cooperation. Rather than pursuing complete administrative harmonization, policymakers seek to exploit the complementary advantages of neighbouring jurisdictions. This flexible approach may offer valuable lessons for other metropolitan regions characterized by legal and institutional plurality.

13. Conclusion

Twenty-five years after the establishment of the Macau Special Administrative Region, Macau has demonstrated remarkable political stability, sustained economic prosperity and considerable institutional resilience. The peaceful transition from Portuguese administration to Chinese sovereignty remains one of the most successful examples of negotiated decolonization in contemporary international history. The preservation of the civil law system, bilingual administration and autonomous economic institutions under the Basic Law has provided continuity while allowing gradual adaptation to changing domestic and international circumstances.

This article has argued that Macau's development cannot be explained solely by constitutional arrangements or economic success. Rather, it reflects the interaction of four mutually reinforcing factors: historical institutional continuity, pragmatic governance under *One Country, Two Systems*, the mediating role of intermediary associations, and sustained economic performance supported by prudent public administration. Together, these elements have produced a governance model that differs both from liberal Western democracies and from highly centralized administrative systems.

Macau now enters a new phase of development. The future will depend less upon continued expansion of gaming than upon successful economic diversification, technological innovation and deeper integration into the Greater Bay Area. Higher education, scientific research, financial services, cultural industries and cooperation with Portuguese-speaking countries are likely to become increasingly important pillars of long-term competitiveness.

Demographic ageing, environmental sustainability, housing affordability and global economic uncertainty nevertheless present significant policy challenges. Addressing these issues will require continued institutional flexibility and strategic planning. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated both the vulnerabilities associated with economic concentration and the capacity of Macau's institutions to respond effectively to external shocks.

More broadly, Macau provides a valuable case study for scholars interested in comparative governance, post-colonial political development and regional integration. Its experience suggests that political stability and economic modernization can emerge from a combination of historical continuity, administrative competence, social partnership and gradual institutional adaptation. Rather than representing merely a smaller counterpart to Hong Kong, Macau has developed its own distinctive model of governance, rooted in its unique historical trajectory and its role as a bridge between China and the wider world.

As China continues its modernization and as the Greater Bay Area matures into one of the world's leading

economic regions, Macau is likely to retain strategic importance that extends well beyond its modest geographical size. Its capacity to preserve its multicultural heritage while embracing innovation and regional integration will determine whether it continues to serve as one of the most successful examples of peaceful institutional transformation in contemporary Asia.

Declaration: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of their affiliated institutions.

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