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Achieving the unthinkable: University of Macau in Hengqin

The most notable Guangdong-Macao cooperation project attracting global attention is the new campus of the University of Macau (UM) on Hengqin Island.

After three-and-a-half years of construction, the campus was finally completed and handed over to the Macao Special Administrative Region (MSAR) government on July 20, 2013. Effective from this date, it will be under the legal jurisdiction of the MSAR.

Now with the new campus, the area of Macao has been enlarged by about 1 sq km, which is a historical moment and a monumental milestone for the development of both Macao and the Chinese mainland. The new campus not only serves as a launch pad for UM to project itself into the rank of first-rate universities, enhancing the level of higher education in Macao and the whole country, but also bears testimony to the flexibility, innovation and potential of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle. Many people would regard such changes as inconceivable.

While UM has developed rapidly in

recent years, Macao's lack of space has been a hurdle to its endeavour to transform into a top university in Asia. In hindsight, the solution to Macao's shortage of land seemed almost a miracle.

To the west of Taipa, across a 250m-wide waterway, is the large undeveloped Hengqin Island under the administration of Zhuhai. UM submitted a proposal to the MSAR government in 2008 suggesting several sites for the new campus construction, including leasing a plot of land on Hengqin Island. UM also requested that after completion, the campus should fall under the legal jurisdiction of MSAR.

After rounds of deep and thorough discussion among the governments of Guangdong province, Zhuhai and the MSAR, and with the full support of the central government, the National People's Congress Standing Committee passed a bill on June 27, 2009, authorizing the MSAR government to have legal jurisdiction over the new campus on Hengqin Island upon completion.

According to the agreement, the MSAR government paid 1.2 billion patacas (\$150

million) to lease the campus site until 2049 (renewable). The construction involved a total investment of 10.2 billion patacas (\$1.5 billion), which was borne by the MSAR government.

Separated from Macao by a narrow waterway, the new campus site is located on the eastern edge of the verdant and beautiful Hengqin Island. A 1-km underwater tunnel has been built, offering convenient, 24-hour access to the campus from Macao without immigration checkpoints, nor custom clearances.

Covering an area of about 1.1 sq km with over 80 new buildings, the new campus will implement the largest residential college system in Asia.

This is not merely a campus project but a significant milestone in the cooperation between Guangdong and Macao as well as an unprecedented innovation under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. It constitutes an extension of Macao's territory practically. Different from the rest of Hengqin Island, it is under MSAR's legal jurisdiction and managed separately by

green barriers.

People in the new campus will use Macao currency, practice academic freedom, have unrestricted Internet access, and enjoy social and political rights as they do in Macao. In terms of governance, the UM project is very different from other foreign institutions renting a campus site from a city of the Chinese mainland.

Hengqin Island will be turned into a "One Island, Two Systems" zone on its own. This "Hengqin Model" of "One Country, Two Systems and Three Entities" thus has a new dimension of significance: it makes the island more than just a free zone for economic and technological development. Some people expect that after some years of operations, a new border control gate between the entities can be created for further integration and synergies.

The new campus is a very difficult project because it involves cross-border works, dual technical standards, double legal jurisdictions and multiparty coordination. It has also created opportunities for innovations in governance models and legal systems,

thus further extending the "One Country, Two Systems" concept.

In addition, the management experience derived from this cross-border project will be helpful to the development of future large cross-border cooperation projects among Guangdong, Macao and Hong Kong.

The Hengqin model can also serve as an important reference for the Hong Kong SAR (HKSAR), where development has come to a bottleneck. With the support of the central government, Shenzhen can consider leasing portions of its land to the HKSAR allowing the HKSAR government to exercise jurisdiction over it.

This 'unthinkable' experience of Macao comes with a message for us: Under the "One Country" principle, our mind should be more open and innovative. Many unthinkable ideas can be explored. And the "Hengqin model" can be a new political arrangement for the world.

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