

Urban planning as political experimentation

A study of Special Economic Zones in China

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Abstract

China's economic rise has engendered fresh inquiries about new possible development models. The Reform and Opening policy, initiated in 1978, has allowed China to explore market strategies that align with its socialist planned economy. This exploration has primarily occurred within designated areas known as Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which serve as experimental grounds for innovative policies. These SEZs are not only seen as urban endeavours but also as the vanguard of a political agenda geared towards modernising and innovating institutions. The concept of SEZs has arisen from the common interests of local, national, and international stakeholders, all aiming for mutually advantageous outcomes. This political endeavour has empowered China to address not only political conflicts with resistant regions and post-Cold War Western powers but also to cultivate a competitive political landscape that consistently enhances its institutions. As a result, the experimental urban developments incorporated by SEZs have evolved into a unique and efficient territorial development model. For nations in the Global South, China's SEZ provides valuable insights into an alternative route towards collaborative and integrated development. This investigation seeks to delineate the fundamental economic and political insights gleaned from China's SEZ initiative.

Keywords

Special Economic Zones, Trans-scalar Urban Planning, Political innovation, Integrated Territorial Development.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1970s, China has continuously carried out policy experiments on its territorial planning program, which have had an impact on land planning and accelerated urbanisation. China witnessed a substantial uptick in urbanisation from 1978 to 2010. Over this period, the urban population expanded from 172 million to 681 million, with the rate of urban growth, in terms of area, exceeding twice the population growth rate¹. This shift in demographics can be attributed to the reorientation of the Chinese industrial modernisation policy by the Deng Xiaoping government.

During the Cold War, Western developed countries made significant investments in East Asian industry, leading to its rapid acceleration. Following the conclusion of World War II, Japan emerged as a key recipient of American factory relocation, which in turn sparked a wave of industrialization across East Asia. In the 1970s, Japan achieved its own industrialization and, consequently, Japan replicated the process, transferring its manufactures to Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Hong Kong, known as the “East Asian Tigers”. The transfer of industries to these expanding markets was primarily focused on lower value sectors, aiming to capitalise on inexpensive labour and thereby decrease production costs. As a result, regional production chains were intensified.

By the late 1970s, there was consensus at the highest political levels that China must develop a strategy to introduce foreign equipment and technology needed for modernization. However, for this to happen, China needed to have access to foreign exchange reserves that would only come from the export market². Therefore, China’s proximity to these new emerging markets opened the door to indirect technological co-optation, given that China was still suffering from economic and political sanctions from the West since the Cold War.

After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1978, reforms took a new direction with the creation of the Special Economic Zones (SEZ)³. The location of SEZs is based on political interests and geographical factors. It is necessary to find communities less affected by the old Mao Zedong regime in order to minimise resistance to the application of experimental policies⁴. Furthermore, SEZs must be well-positioned in terms of regional geopolitics, as they aim to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) while leveraging the production logistics created in East Asia⁵.

However, China’s desire to urbanise ran counter to an important debate among Chinese urban planners at the time. During the 1980s, discussions arose regarding the equity and efficacy of national development. Broadly speaking, a significant portion of urban planners during this period believed that small cities should experience rapid growth in order to foster urban-rural integration, conversely, it was suggested that large cities should adopt a slower pace of growth to prevent excessive strain on infrastructure resulting from population expansion⁶. Therefore, the large industrial cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, would not be considered in the new plan. A new place was needed, with physical and social space to exploit.

Before implementing the project, Deng Xiaoping organised a political delegation to various developed countries to inspect and learn the various different development strategies ap-

plied around the world⁷. These visits expanded the party's political capabilities and created an institutional breeding ground for the development of experimental SEZ strategies. In this way, the party attempts to replicate the market-oriented policies that led to Western economic development, but under the reins of Chinese socialism. SEZ has developed into channels for absorbing manufactures and know-how. In 1980, during the 15th Session of China's Fifth National People's Congress, the party finally launched the SEZ plan, initially establishing four territories: Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and Xiamen⁸.

The four initial SEZs shared similar characteristics: they all had a weak industrialisation, sparsely populated areas with a predominantly rural lifestyle and were positioned along the borders of China's recently unified industrialised provinces. Despite commencing at a similar developmental level, these zones diverged in their trajectories due to varying political adjustments made to align with the geopolitical circumstances of each area. Initially, the boundaries of the SEZs encompassed only a small portion of their respective districts, but gradually expanded to encompass nearly all municipal territories.

From that point forward, the establishment of SEZ was initiated and shaped in accordance with economic demand and China's political agenda. The first generation was established in 1980 as part of Deng Xiaoping's reform and open-door policy. During this period, the Chinese government aimed to address its technological lag by attracting new manufacturers and to promote peaceful reconciliation with Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan through economic co-operation and integration. In the subsequent decade, under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, the second generation of SEZ was introduced, encompassing Shanghai and Hainan provinces. The objective was to experiment with successful policies from capitalist nations, adapting them to Chinese socialism. Therefore, in the 1990s, China's focus shifted towards promoting institutional and governance innovations that would facilitate the transformation of China into a developed and sustainable society.

SEZs have emerged as arenas for political experimentation, as they are established to promote market-oriented policies within a socialist nation. The controversial nature of these enclaves has sparked debates on new possibilities for urban planning strategies and positioned China as a site of continual urban political innovation. Moreover, the SEZ initiative has fostered a more intimate amalgamation between China's urban micropolitics and territorial macropolitics. This is due to the fact that the incorporation of several experimental policies from the SEZ into the national reform plan coincided with the expansion of the special political zones model to encompass other urban projects across the country. Therefore, understanding the urban framework of SEZs is crucial for comprehending the model of urbanisation that China is currently adopting. This article has highlighted some of the political and social benefits that China has gained through its urban experimentation.

THE FIRST GENERATION OF SEZ

From the experience of the first generation of SEZ, China was able to experiment various

positive outcomes in its economy, politics, and diplomacy. Taking the cases of Shenzhen and Xiamen's SEZ as the most successful, we find that:

THE SUCCESS OF THE SEZ WAS ONLY POSSIBLE THANKS TO THE EXISTING LABOUR RESERVE IN THE PEASANT INTERIOR.

In the late 1970s, Shenzhen had a population of just 23 thousand, characterised by a high incidence of illegal immigration to various destinations such as Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, the USA, and the Netherlands⁹. Consequently, it was impossible for organic population growth to keep pace with a rapid industrialisation, at the

same time the government could not even estimate this demand, given the uncertainty of the reforms. The city's pilot plan projected a population of 100 thousand, but just four years after the establishment of SEZ, the municipality's population had already surpassed 700 thousand residents¹⁰.

In the mid-1990s, the authorities began to recognise the value of the migrant population, because during this period, as industrialisation increased, the demand for young, cheap labour also grew. Hence, the Chinese government saw an increase in the number of internal migrants. The local media partially acknowledged the contribution of migrants in the city's construction, recognizing them as vital to its modernisation. However, simultaneously, the city experienced a flourishing period of the sex market, which had been "extinct" since the late 1950s, raising government concerns about modernisation strategies¹¹. Subsequently, in 1994, the local government initiated a discussion on "How to be a Shenzhen citizen," launching a campaign to promote civic values in the modern city, including the recognition of migrant workers¹².

THE SEZ CREATED BRIDGES OF RECONCILIATION AND DIPLOMATIC OPENNESS.

Beyond economic interests, the SEZ was initially established with a geopolitical perspective in mind. China's objective was to bring together territories that were considered "resistant". In 1985, the government introduced the "one country, two systems" policy, using economic ties as a means to reconcile with Hong Kong and Macau. These two provinces gained significant advantages by expanding their production capacity through outsourcing to the territories of the SEZs, accessing more labour and raw materials. Nevertheless, Taiwan did not readily embrace the political reconciliation proposals as effortlessly as Hong Kong and Macau did. Consequently, this resulted in a setback for the economic advancement of the Xiamen SEZ project. The involvement of Hong Kong in the SEZ project held far greater importance compared to Taiwan's contribution. Hong Kong entrepreneurs and government officials were encouraged to engage in the SEZ initiatives. Particularly in the context of Shenzhen, the input of the Hong Kong business sector was sought during the development of the city's masterplan strategy¹³.

Hence,comprehending the underlying factors behind Shenzhen's extraordinary progress necessitates an examination of its geopolitical context. Despite its origins as a modest fishing

town in 1979, the city experienced accelerated growth owing to Hong Kong's dedication to the SEZ project. This propelled Shenzhen's development far beyond that of Xiamen, which, despite boasting a more well-established infrastructure network during that period, failed to match Shenzhen's progress. The significance of the inflow of direct investment from Hong Kong and Taiwan into China can be observed in Figure 20. Additionally, Figure 21 highlights the crucial role played by Hong Kong in the development of some industrial sectors in Shenzhen.

According to Wu (1997), Hong Kong played a crucial role in acting as a middleman for channelling investments from nations that did not have diplomatic relationships with China, as well as in the transmission of technology by Hong Kong companies that had assimilated it from Western origins. In this way, China's development is due, at least in its early days, to co-operation with Hong Kong and Taiwan. It is worth noting that Japan, the United States, and the European Union are the main sources of FDI globally. However, while these developed economies accounted for 92% of global FDI, their share in China was less than 30%, with Taiwan and Hong Kong being the key players, representing 58% of all FDI¹⁴.

Additionally, the foundation of China's foreign policy would stem from the reunification agreements with Hong Kong. According to Leng (2011), the "one country, two systems" policy sought peaceful reunification by acknowledging the possibility of coexistence between socialism and capitalism within a sovereign state. This stance aimed to demonstrate to the world that historical issues and international disputes could be resolved without conflict. China's ascent came about in a different manner due to the dissolution of the USSR and the advent of the Global War on Terror. Unlike the USSR, which experienced a clash between socialism and capitalism during its expansion, China pursued a path of peaceful mutual benefit by advocating for economic progress.

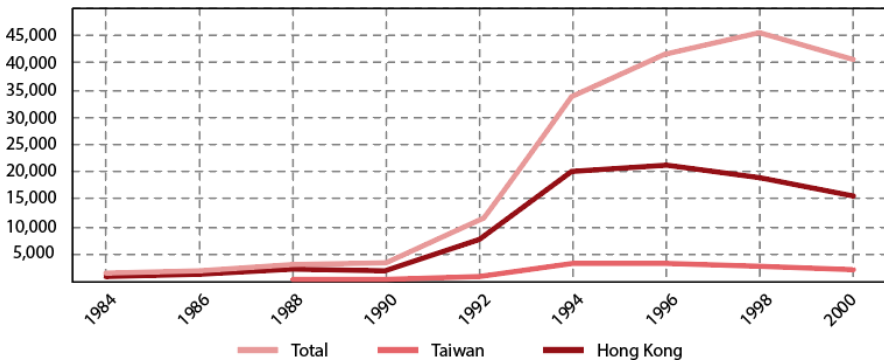


Fig. 1. Volume of direct investment in China by Taiwan and Hong Kong, between 1984 and 2000, values in US\$. Source: Zhang (2005, p.05), adapted by the authors.

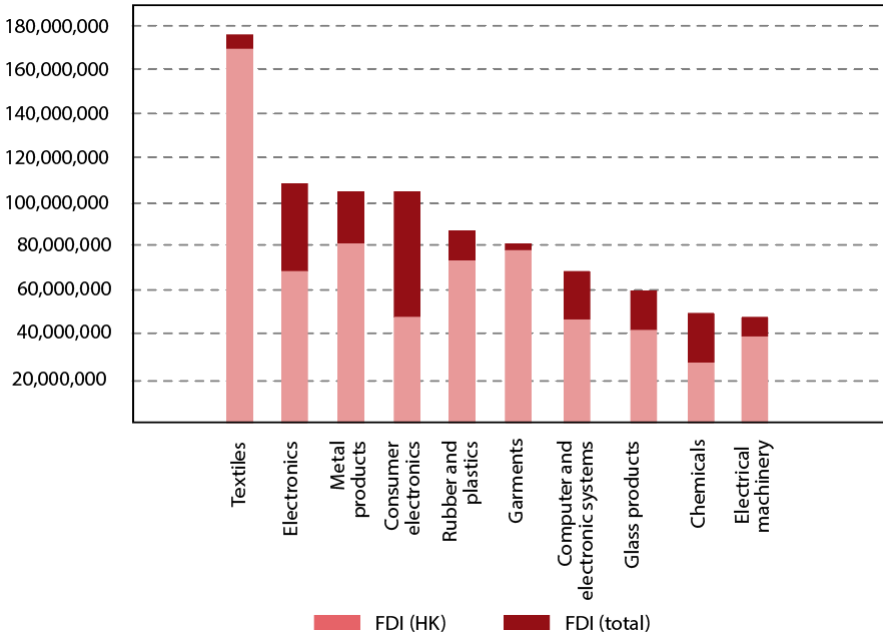


Fig. 2. Share of Hong Kong investment in FDI, by different industrial sectors, in Shenzhen in 1991 (in US\$). Source: Wu (1997), adapted by the authors.

Therefore, China is poised to execute an “economic diplomacy” approach in its worldwide strategy, aiming to enhance and promote diplomatic relations, protect economic interests, and harmonise foreign policy with economic objectives by establishing economic cooperation alliances on bilateral and multilateral platforms. This transition became apparent in China’s economic growth in the 1990s, as China delved into developing markets in Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe to ensure availability of crucial resources and circumvent global sanctions enforced following the Tiananmen Square event¹⁵. Consequently, a practical strategy of avoiding conflict was adopted, prioritising economic collaboration on an international scale. Provinces themselves began engaging in diplomatic efforts as part of China’s “economic diplomacy.” By the turn of the millennium, each provincial government and nearly 300 cities had established connections with 950 sister cities spanning over 100 countries¹⁶.

SEZ HAVE BEEN REPLICATED AS A MODEL OF URBAN POLICY

Due to the rapid success of SEZs in their early years, China utilised them as a development model to drive urbanisation. From 1980 onwards, China expanded special policies to include 14 new coastal cities, two peninsulas (Liaodong and Jiaodong), two river deltas (the Yangtze and Zhujiang Rivers), and the triangular area composed of Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Zhengzhou¹⁷. Furthermore, China started creating different zones with specific objectives, such as Free Trade Zones (FTZs), Technological and Economic Development Zones (TEDZs), Export

Processing Zones (EPZs), and High-Tech Industrial Development Zones (HIDZs)¹⁸. The first generation of SEZs had exclusive economic advantages that were not available elsewhere in China, including

taxation controls, land use regulations, labour laws, and wage policies¹⁹. However, with the diversification of these new special zones, the original SEZs began implementing their own internal development programs to stimulate competitiveness.

In addition to promoting economic development, SEZs stimulated domestic and international relations by granting greater autonomy to local governments. Policy exchanges, production integration, and knowledge sharing fostered the creation of integrated production clusters, many of which were located near SEZs or other Special Zones, contributing to nationwide chain development. By the 2000s, over 60% of FDI flowing into China was directed towards city clusters²⁰. Although SEZs were initially conceived as enclaves, the economic development of these cities spilled over to benefit the entire country.

Hence, SEZs played a crucial role in the integrated and collaborative development of Chinese cities. Not only did the national government spearhead and coordinate SEZ projects, but provincial governments also took the lead in establishing their own Special Zones. In the following Figures 22 and 23, we can observe how special policies embedded in these territories rapidly expanded in the first 26 years of reforms. It is also noticeable how, after the 2008 crisis, there was a significant increase in provincial and national efforts to establish new Special Zones, far surpassing the levels recorded in the 1990s.

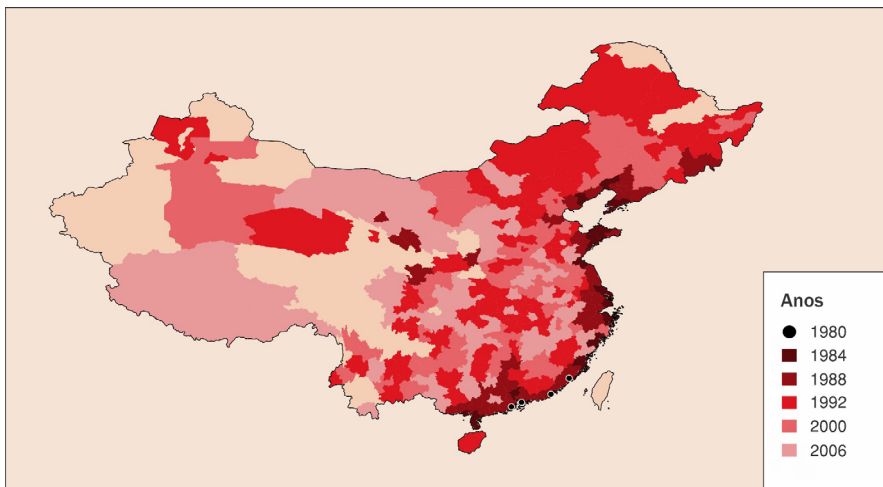


Fig. 3. Expansion of economic openness through special zone projects by municipal district, between 1980 and 2006. Source: Caporalli, Souto (2022)

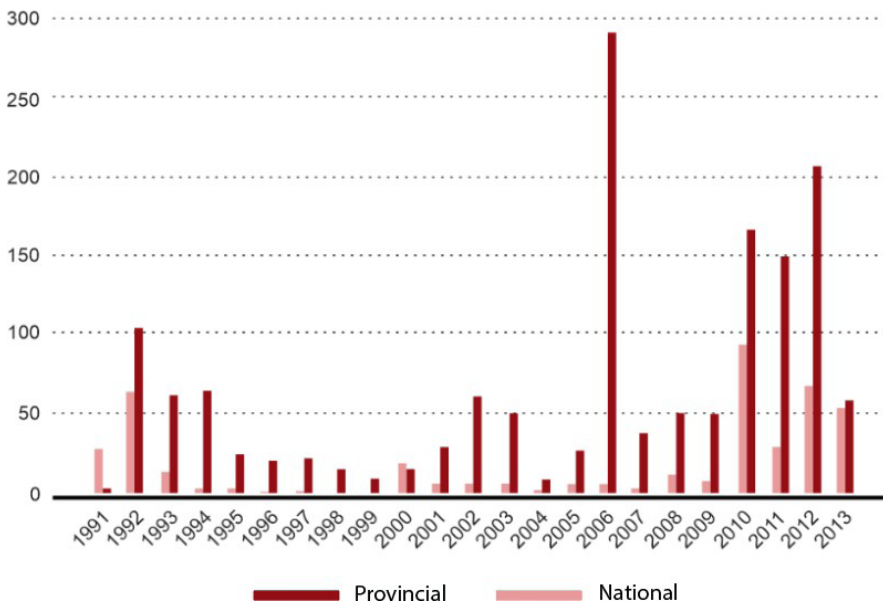


Fig. 4. Development of New Industrial Zones in China from 1991 to 2013. Source: Zeng et al (2021), adapted by the authors.

THE SEZ SERVED AS A POLITICAL LEARNING EXPERIENCE

At the beginning of the reform and opening-up program, Deng Xiaoping faced a lack of sufficient political support to implement nationwide reforms. Consequently, economic reforms were carried out in the limited territories of the SEZ. In 1978, before the establishment of these zones, Deng’s top political leaders visited more than 50 countries and organised an economic study group the following year to examine foreign economies, including those of Hong Kong, Macau, France, England, Switzerland, and other developed nations²¹. By studying the economic programs of Western and regional countries, China was able to experiment with market policies that had proven successful in these countries.

Moreover, provinces and local governments established transnational political networks, allowing them to learn from other cities and nations. By the late 1980s, Shenzhen introduced a comprehensive five-year legislative plan consisting of 135 economic regulations, drawing inspiration from observations made during official visits to Hong Kong, Europe and the USA²². Additionally, the city’s urban development plan incorporated insights from Singapore following a delegation visit led by Party Secretary Liang Xiang to the island in 1983²³. By implementing experimental policies in specific limited areas and adapting them to local circumstances, policymakers gained a range of experiences that contributed to the development of a nuanced understanding of region-specific economic policies.

THE SECOND GENERATION OF SEZ

In the 1990s, China launched a new political agenda alongside its SEZ strategy. Under the command of Jiang Zemin, two new projects were launched, the Hainan Province's SEZ and the Pudong Financial District's SEZ, through which China wanted to prove itself to the world as a model modern nation. These two new SEZs were forged with the policy repertoire of the first generation, and were characterised by their ecological (Hainan) and financial (Shanghai) focus. Furthermore, China initiated nationwide economic political reform following the outcomes of the SEZ trials. Consequently, in contrast to the initial generation that enjoyed exclusive economic policies, the subsequent SEZ generation would solely be granted precedence in the implementation of experimental policies. From these two new urban projects, we have that:

THE CREATION OF PUDONG HELPED REVITALISE CHINA'S FINANCIAL MARKET AND THE CITY OF SHANGHAI

In the 1990s, China embarked on a renewed reform and opening-up program aimed at promoting the corporatization of state-owned enterprises through business reforms. These reforms also had the objective of integrating China into international cooperation organisations. During this period, the government implemented tax modifications and relaxed its financial and banking systems²⁴, by removing non-tariff barriers and reducing tariffs from 13% to 6.8% on its manufactured goods²⁵. From 1983 to 1999, China was the top recipient of FDI among Asian countries²⁶, making it the world's second-largest recipient of FDI from the mid-1990s onwards²⁷. China's entry into the WTO in 2001 facilitated the conquest of new markets and, as a result, exports accelerated. From 1990 to 2001 the increase in exports was 427%, while from 1990 to 2001 this growth was 470%²⁸. The construction of the Pudong SEZ in Shanghai was the spearhead for China's integration into contemporary globalisation, as it served to modernise China's financial market.

Unlike Xiamen and Shenzhen, Shanghai was already an industrialised and export-oriented city. At the beginning of the 20th century, the industrial sector accounted for more than 60% of the city's GDP and, by 1930, it was responsible for almost 70% of China's total exports²⁹. The creation of Pudong would serve to reinvigorate Shanghai's influence in the global financial market, since before the communist revolution, the city was the third largest financial centre in the world³⁰, but lost ground to Hong Kong in the second half of the 20th century³¹. Success was almost immediate. By 1996, the new financial centre of Pudong had absorbed almost 17 billion in investments³², surpassing Shenzhen's turnover in 1998³³. Between 1992 and 2002, the number of companies registered with foreign capital grew around 6 times³⁴. The city expanded its financial services network, becoming more relevant on the global network than Seoul and Taipei in 2004³⁵. Shanghai's stock exchange became the fifth largest in the world in terms of market capitalisation after the 2008 crisis³⁶. In this way, the city returned to its role as one of the protagonists in the international and regional financial market.

Furthermore, the government successfully mediated the development of its three financial centres, allowing China to have different financial fronts. Hong Kong continued to play a lead-

ing role in Asian financial relations, hosting 70 of the world's top 100 banks and being one of the most influential international think tanks³⁷. Shenzhen continued to serve as an extension of Hong Kong's financial market, acting as a gateway to the regional domestic market³⁸. Finally, Shanghai served as the main gateway for investors into the thriving Chinese market.

ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT HAS BECOME A KEY GOAL IN CHINESE URBAN-TERRITORIAL PLANNING

During the 1980s and 1990s, China experienced a rapid economic and industrial development that gave rise to significant environmental challenges. The air quality in major cities plummeted to levels far from desirable, while more than one-third of urban rivers suffered from severe pollution³⁹. In 2003, the estimated costs of air and water pollution had already reached almost 6% of China's GDP⁴⁰.

In response, China launched environmental strategies in the early 2000s, focusing on pollutant mitigation and reforestation. The Chinese government embarked on ambitious projects, including the ongoing "Great Green Wall" campaign since 1978, which aims to reforest the northern regions, and the "Conversion of Farmland to Forests" initiative launched in 1999⁴¹. At the same time, China initiated the exploration of alternative development models that prioritise environmental sustainability.

The island of Hainan was designated as a testing ground for innovative policies, particularly focusing on eco-tourism and sustainable economic practices. In 1996, Hainan initiated the 'One Province, Two Places' initiative, aimed at creating a conducive economic environment that integrates agriculture, tourism, and industry⁴². By 1999, Hainan achieved two significant environmental milestones: first, it obtained approval from the State Environmental Protection Administration to establish its inaugural pilot city for the construction of an Ecological Province; second, the Provincial People's Congress deliberated and endorsed the 'Guidelines for Planning the Development of Hainan as an Ecological Province'⁴³.

In Hainan, sustainable development gained traction in national strategies and plans, promoting a unified approach to planning. One year after designating Hainan as an "ecological province" in 1999, the Fujian government also embarked on formulating an ecological master plan for the province⁴⁴. Furthermore, since 2001, China has been implementing the use of Eco-Industrial Parks to drive its green transition, with over 90 parks established by 2018⁴⁵, and in 2012, the authorities established the Ecological Civilisation Pilot Zones, designating Hainan, Fujian, Jiangxi, and Guizhou as experimental regions for the innovative program⁴⁶.

The initiative known as the "Construction of an Ecological Civilisation" programme was established as a comprehensive effort, encompassing various aspects in its design, such as green financing and economics, social and scientific organisations and research institutions, public-private partnerships, technological assistance, and ecological regulations and laws⁴⁷. At the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, it was proposed that advancing ecological development is a continual mission crucial for the sustainable growth of the Chinese nation and global ecological stability⁴⁸. Subsequently, in 2018, the concept was

enshrined in the Constitution through an amendment assigning to Chinese Socialism with Chinese Characteristics the duty to advance progress in economy, politics, culture, society, and now ecology, within the framework of the “Integrated Plan of Five Spheres”⁴⁹.

Between 2009 and 2011, the Ministry of Environmental Protection in China initiated more than 50 pilot zones dedicated to the development of eco-friendly cities and counties⁵⁰. By 2013, the number of these zones had risen to 125, with a significant portion of them situated in the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Guangdong, and Sichuan⁵¹. Subsequently, China went on to establish national pilot zones two years later, with the objective of conducting comprehensive experiments on system reform to advance ecological progress, oversee various experimental projects, and gather knowledge to strengthen the institutional framework for fostering an ecological civilization⁵².

THE CHINESE SEZ MODEL HAS EMERGED AS A POTENTIAL AVENUE FOR ECONOMIC PROGRESS IN DEVELOPING REGIONS ACROSS THE WORLD

In addition to bilateral investments, China innovates by framing its cooperation agreements within a single productive network. In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to integrate the productive infrastructure of nations across Asia, Africa, and Europe through land and maritime trade routes. This initiative has attracted participation from over 130 countries, offering opportunities for regional and global development cooperation.

One of China’s strategies involves replicating the SEZ model to promote industrialisation in partner developing countries. Currently, the African continent showcases significant examples of SEZs established under the influence of the Chinese model. Caporalli and Souto (2021) highlight China’s cooperation agreements for the development of Sino-African SEZs, including the Chambishi Zone and Lusaka sub-zone in Zambia; the Suez Canal Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone in Egypt; the Lekki Free Trade Zone and Ogun in Nigeria; the Jinfei Industrial Zone in Mauritius; and the Eastern Industrial Zone in Ethiopia. These SEZs are designed based on the initial Chinese SEZ framework.

Firstly, these SEZs are conceptualised in relation to global production scales, leveraging existing and developing production routes and hubs. Secondly, the design of African SEZs aligns local and transnational interests, fostering cooperation between national states and local and international businesses. Thirdly, they serve as spaces for absorbing industry and technology transfers from China. Fourthly, most of these SEZs are coastal, enabling direct access to global maritime trade routes for their production.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, It has been shown that China’s rise in the 21st century is the result of a complex development strategy. By using SEZ, China has managed to combine national economic planning policies in line with its urbanisation process, experimenting with different

combinations of capitalist market economy and socialist planned economy. As these zones have evolved and continue to evolve, these cities prove new political possibilities, providing China with a wide range of institutional repertoires to catalyse its development. In general terms, it can be said that, through the SEZ, the national planning programme was combined with the urban project of these cities. At the same time, it is also possible to suggest that SEZs have stimulated urbanisation oriented towards institutional innovations. Understanding Chinese urbanisation is increasingly necessary as China inspires the development of new cities and urban policies, especially in the global south.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Natacha Rena, PhD in Communication and Semiotics from the Pontifical University of São Paulo, holds a position as a professor at the UFMG's School of Architecture and is involved in leading the Geopolítica e Planejamento Territorial (GeoPT) research group and the Nova Economia do Projeto (NEP) research group. João Souto, an architect and urban planner from the UFMG, is associated with GeoPT and NEP. Elias Jabbour, PhD in Geography from the University of São Paulo, holds positions as a Consultant to the Presidency of the New Development Bank, a Professor at the UERJ's Faculty of Economic Sciences and leads the NEP research group.

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