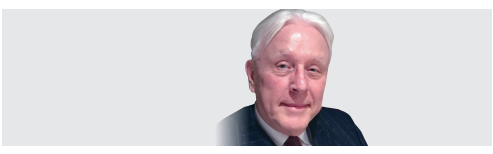
COMMENTHK

NEW BLUEPRINT | HONG KONG SAR

Solid foundations will boost SAR's cultural development

Grenville Cross says the city's museums, theaters, and performance venues appeal to people from all walks of life



Grenville Cross
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In the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30) for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, a prominent role is envisaged for cultural development. The idea is to advance reform in the cultural sector, thereby unleashing the country's inner strengths. If China's centuries-old civilization is imaginatively leveraged, that objective is undoubtedly within grasp, and solid foundations are already in place.

In 2023, the first Forum on Building up China's Cultural Strength was held in Shenzhen, with the theme "Towards Greater Cultural Confidence and Mutual Learning Among Civilizations". In a congratulatory message, President Xi Jinping said the Communist Party of China was committed to achieving new successes in developing socialist culture, an important aspect of national governance. These forums have been held annually in Shenzhen ever since, with the latest being held earlier this month. Each in its own way has sought to advance Xi's visionary approach to cultural issues.

Once cultural development is comprehensively embraced, it will help to fulfill Xi's belief in "the resurgence of the Chinese nation". This is why the latest five-year plan is multifaceted and involves integrating traditional Chinese culture with subsequent permutations, including revolutionary and advanced socialist themes. It is also outward-looking, with cultural exchanges and global engagement featuring prominently.

As the five-year plan is a modern program for a new age, it is unsurprising that it emphasizes fostering new forms of digital literature and art, thereby providing the public with greater access to cultural mores. The strategy of "shaping tourism through culture and promoting culture through tourism" will also play its part, with appropriate facilities being created. If existing heritage sites are imaginatively showcased and if related sites are attractively presented to outsiders, it will be a powerful magnet for foreign tourists, providing them with better perspectives on the China story.

On March 12, in welcoming the five-year plan, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region's chief executive, John Lee Ka-chiu, applauded its objective of "notable cultural and ethical progress across society". Therefore, as the HKSAR develops its first-ever five-year plan, there is every reason to suppose that cultural development will loom large. In all likelihood, the plan will seek to consolidate the HKSAR's role as a place where East and West converge, and cultural exchanges are encouraged. However, it must not be thought that the city is starting from scratch.

Hong Kong's culture is defined by Chinese and Western influences, including its Lingnan Cantonese heritage and its British-era occupation. It is also enriched by its indigenous communities (the largest being of Chiu Chow origin) and its ethnic minorities (from South and Southeast Asia). After all, the HKSAR bills itself as "Asia's World City", and its cultural credentials are an integral aspect of the "one country, two systems" policy.

Indeed, when it comes to international cultural cooperation, the two special administrative regions — Macao and Hong Kong — have already proved their worth. This can be confirmed by anyone who, for example, has seen the display of foreign historical artifacts at the Hong Kong Palace Museum or viewed the *Art Macao: Macao International Art Biennale 2025* at Gallery Tap Seac in central Macao.

In terms of cultural development, it is no exaggeration to describe the HKSAR as a trailblazer, with its Culture Commission having been established in 2023. The commission has advised the government on various cultural issues, including promoting Chinese culture, fostering international exchanges, and nurturing arts and cultural talent. Its views were influential when the then-secretary for culture, sports and tourism, Kevin Yeung Yun-hung, promulgated the "Blueprint for Arts and Culture and Creative Industries Development" in 2024.

By any yardstick, the blueprint was visionary. Its central features include the promotion of traditional Chinese culture and the development of Hong Kong-flavored cultural programs, the nurturing of outward-looking arts and culture industries, the use of international platforms to foster East-meets-West arts and cultural exchanges, and the creation of an ecosystem for the arts, culture and creative industries.

In the Macao Special Administrative Region, the cultural scene has also developed exponentially. Whereas the Macao Museum in Monte Fort skillfully brings the past to life through its delightful displays, the Macao Museum of Art is a five-story building near the Outer Harbour Ferry Terminal that provides a host of exhibitions showcasing contemporary and classic themes, both Chinese and Western (mainly Portuguese, but also with a British flavor, including acclaimed 19th-century China coast artist George Chinnery, whose works are permanently displayed).

Within the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, cultural development centers on growing a cohesive "Cultural Bay Area". It envisages, for example, shared heritage projects, cross-border arts festivals, and the use of technological advances to enhance the Greater Bay Area's "cultural soft power" (facilitated by the HKSAR's global connectivity). Whereas performing arts groups in the Greater Bay Area frequently co-produce modern and technologically enhanced plays, historical sites (like Shenzhen's Nantou Ancient Town) are being revitalized into cultural centers that celebrate both local history and recent advances.

Given the not-inconsiderable progress already made in advancing the HKSAR's cultural development, the government must consider how to accelerate the process in its five-year plan. However, as solid foundations are already in place, the task should not be unduly onerous. In some areas, little more than fine-tuning will be required, although in others, the foot may need to be applied more firmly to the pedal. The emphasis should be on promoting cultural prosperity, ensuring that the city's youth is culturally aware, and increasing global connectivity in all key areas. Once this is achieved, Hong Kong's cultural status will be appropriately reinforced and national imperatives will be satisfied.

The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.

AI Plus is blueprint for inclusive intelligent economy

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China has entered the 15th Five-Year Plan period (2026-30) with a clear focus on high-quality development. At a State Council Information Office news conference on April 17, National Development and Reform Commission Deputy Director Wang Changlin identified one initiative as particularly transformative — the deep implementation of the Artificial Intelligence Plus (AI Plus) action to foster new forms of intelligent economy.

This is not merely another technology program. It represents a fundamental shift — elevating AI from a specialized tool to the central engine for reshaping the entire economic structure. By embedding AI across all sectors, China aims to drive systemic upgrading rather than isolated breakthroughs.

The "Plus" in AI Plus carries profound significance. Building on the earlier "Internet Plus" strategy, it goes further — seeking to permeate and reinvent every industry, from intelligent manufacturing and precision agriculture to service sector optimization. Wang stressed the need for deep integration between scientific and technological innovation and industrial innovation, noting that even traditional industries can become new sources of growth through upgrading.

At a deeper level, AI Plus redefines the relationship between humans and machines. The true revolution lies not in automation — replacing human labor with algorithms — but in human-AI co-creation — treating artificial intelligence as a partner that amplifies human wisdom. When AI handles pattern recognition at scale and humans contribute creativity, ethical judgment, and cross-cultural insight, the resulting value far exceeds what either could produce alone. This is the pathway from being a superconnector to becoming a super value-adder.

This approach directly addresses a key global challenge identified in PwC's 2026 AI Jobs Barometer. A survey of 1,217 senior executives across 25 industries found that 74 percent of AI-generated economic value is captured by just 20 percent of leading organizations, with most companies still confined to pilot projects.

What distinguishes front-runners is that they treat AI not simply as a productivity enhancer but as a catalyst for business model reinvention. These leaders are two to three times more likely to identify cross-industry integration opportunities and 2.6 times more likely to reshape their commercial models. Cross-industry integration emerges as the single strongest driver of AI-driven financial performance — surpassing pure efficiency gains.

The root cause of this concentration is cultural, not merely technological. Too many organizations still deploy AI primarily for cost reduction, viewing it as a tool to cut headcount rather than an engine for growth. Bridging this gap requires a fundamental shift: from "AI replaces people" to "AI empowers people". Without deliberate intervention, AI risks widening industrial divides rather than narrowing them. China's AI Plus strategy is designed precisely to prevent a winner-takes-all outcome, positioning AI as shared public infrastructure so that small and medium-sized enterprises and traditional sectors can also harness its benefits.

This vision rests on solid foundations. Stanford HAI's 2026 AI Index Report shows that top AI models from China and the United States have repeatedly traded the lead since early 2025. As of March, the strongest US model holds only a narrow 2.7 percent advantage. China has already taken the lead in AI research paper volume, citations, total patent filings, and industrial robot installations — tangible proof of AI's transition from laboratories to real-world production lines.

For Hong Kong, the national AI Plus strategy opens significant opportunities as the city prepares its own first five-year plan. Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu has underscored that the national plan provides strong backing for Hong Kong's ambition to become an international innovation and technology center.

Hong Kong can contribute meaningfully in three strategic areas. The first is AI governance. The Hong Kong Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Institute, whose board was formed in March, is tasked with advising on governance frameworks and regulatory approaches. As global foundation model transparency has declined — Stanford HAI's index fell from 58 to 40 points — Hong Kong is well-placed to develop credible, internationally respected standards bridging different regulatory philosophies. Safety is not the antithesis of innovation; it is innovation's infrastructure.

The second is sovereign AI capabilities. The Hong Kong Generative AI Research and Development Center, led by Professor Guo Yike, is developing local sovereign models tailored to Hong Kong's data security, linguistic, and cultural context — conceived as core urban infrastructure that enhances autonomy while contributing to national and global AI progress.

The third is talent ecosystem development. Stanford HAI's report highlights an 89 percent decline in AI talent flows toward the United States since 2017, while employment among software developers aged 22 to 25 in the US has dropped nearly 20 percent from its late-2022 peak. Hong Kong, uniquely positioned between the Chinese mainland and the world, can attract top-tier talent while preparing local workforces for AI-driven transformation. The next generation must learn not merely to operate AI tools, but to collaborate with AI as creative partners.

The operational logic is clear: Governance standards and research developed in Hong Kong, commercialization and scaling across the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, and market access extended worldwide. The true power of AI Plus lies in its multiplier effect — when AI deeply integrates with every sector of the economy, the resulting value will far exceed the sum of the individual parts. By aligning closely with national priorities and contributing governance expertise, sovereign technologies, and talent pathways, Hong Kong can help ensure that the intelligent economy of the future is both innovative and inclusive.

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Lai Ka-ying inspires local innovation and technology ambitions

From the perspective of Hong Kong residents, the selection of Lai Ka-ying as an astronaut for the Shenzhou XXIII spaceflight mission has achieved the boldest dream of the city's participation in the space exploration program of the motherland. The story of Lai is one of inspiration.

Gaining the trust and strong support of central government, we are confident that no innovation and technology dream is too high to achieve in the special administrative region. It is a great honor for Lai to contribute to the advancement of the nation's manned space programs. She is a model patriot. Now we realize, deep in our bones, that we should follow Lai's example to serve our nation.

Lai's space journey started in 2022. China began selecting its fourth generation of astronauts in October 2022 and announced the completion of the process in June 2024. The selected astronauts included eight spacecraft pilots and two science payload specialists. Both payload specialists were selected from Hong Kong and Macao, marking the first time that residents from the two special administrative regions have joined the astronaut team of the motherland. Lai is the chosen one of our time.

In response to the news, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said the inclusion of Lai was "an extremely inspiring and uplifting development" and called it "a glorious milestone in the history of Hong Kong". He also thanked the central government for including Lai in the selection, describing it as a show of support for Hong Kong's scientific and technological development. The Macao SAR government said the central government's move sent a powerful message of encouragement to young people in the city, according to a China Daily report on June 12, 2024.

Both special administrative regions have framed the selection as a blessing for their innovation and technology-oriented high-quality economic development. Lai's selection as a payload specialist has evoked the aspiration that Hong Kong has the potential to become an innovation and technology hub if it can gain full support from the central government and mobilize support from various sectors of the community. The Macao government stated that it was committed to promoting the city's aerospace technology and its integration with other sectors to facilitate Macao's high-quality economic development.

Lai's space journey has dispelled pessimism that Hong Kong would never become an innovation and technology hub. Her unprecedented mission has encouraged Hong Kong's innovation and technology sector to scale new heights. According to Secretary for Innovation, Technology and Industry Sun Dong, Hong Kong is accelerating the development of an international innovation and technology hub. Local universities have made significant contributions to national missions, including the Hong Kong Polytechnic University's assistance in Chang'e 6's far side lunar sampling. The HKSAR government has granted over $100 million to support six space-related projects, including the Multi-Spectral Imaging Carbon Observatory, nicknamed "eye for space", aboard the Tiangong Space Station. As Lee has pointed out, Lai's participation in the spaceflight mission demonstrates the country's recognition of Hong Kong and its trust and support for the city, as well as confidence in the city's innovation and technology capabilities.

To align with the nation's 15th Five-Year Plan and better serve the development needs of the motherland, the HKSAR has developed targeted strategic roadmaps to ensure the city evolves from a traditional superconnector into a more proactive "super value-adder".

One of the strategies is to develop Hong Kong into an international innovation and technology hub. By leveraging world-class universities and pioneering the cross-border Northern Metropolis corridor, Hong Kong is tasked with accelerating the commercialization of emerging industries such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology and green technology. What is often overlooked is the aerospace industry. Our think tank hopes Lai's mission will encourage more businesses to invest in this emerging sector.

The HKSAR government has actively funded aerospace research and development, committing millions to support local university projects tied directly to China's space programs. The Chinese University of Hong Kong has successfully co-developed advanced Earth observation satellites with custom artificial intelligence models. The Hong Kong Space Robotics and Energy Centre has also developed technologies supporting the Chang'e 8 lunar mission, while the Macau University of Science and Technology has a partnership with the Chinese Academy of Sciences to analyze deep-space and lunar data.

Equally noteworthy are Lai's efforts in meeting the demanding requirements and completing rigorous training at the China Astronaut Research and Training Center. Involving tremendous dedication, Lai overcame immense challenges and completed the training program in just over one year. Young people in the city should learn from her perseverance. As a mother of three children, Lai has also shown the psychological fortitude to endure a long separation from her family. Although the requirements for the physiological and psychological conditions of payload specialists may not be as stringent as those for professional astronauts, payload specialists are still required to master their own areas of work and undertake training in other skills.

Also noteworthy is that a Macao resident was among the final 10 astronauts chosen for the spaceflight training program. We hope the Macao payload specialist will soon participate in the next spaceflight mission. Both special administrative regions possess the unique advantages of strong national support and close connections to the world. Brazil, a Portuguese-speaking country, hosts the largest aerospace industry in the Southern Hemisphere, and Macao could explore the possibility of cooperation with Brazil's aerospace industry.

Our think tank hopes Lai's space journey will boost the development of aerospace industries in both special administrative regions and inspire more young people in these two cities to devote themselves to innovation and technology, thereby contributing to the nation's scientific and technological self-reliance and strength. We wish Lai the very best of luck.

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