HKSAR

Aspire higher

A girl tries rock climbing on Friday during the opening day of the Hong Kong Outdoor and Sport Expo 2025 cum Sportival Asia at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wan Chai. The exhibition celebrates the 15th National Games and features a wide variety of sporting goods, equipment, and services, including sports therapy. Attendees can also enjoy exciting competitions and interactive activities aimed at fostering residents' passion for sports and outdoor activities. ADAM LAM / CHINA DAILY

HK seniors able to collect social allowances on the mainland

Older adults in Guangdong, Fujian can receive benefits in local bank accounts

By LU WANQING in Hong Kong
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Starting in mid-2026, Hong Kong seniors residing on the Chinese mainland will be able to collect their social security allowances and benefits on the mainland, under a new service jointly launched by the special administrative region government and two major banks on Friday.

The city's Social Welfare Department signed memorandums of understanding with the Bank of China (Hong Kong) and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (Asia) — both subsidiaries of major State-owned commercial banks — to facilitate the cross-border disbursement of cash assistance to about 28,000 Hong Kong seniors living in Guangdong and Fujian provinces.

With this new service, recipients of Hong Kong social security who are retiring in Guangdong and Fujian can opt to receive portable cash assistance directly into their mainland bank accounts with the Bank of China or the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China.

Benefits eligible for direct cross-border payment include those delivered through the Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA), the Old Age Allowance, and the Old Age Living Allowance.

The optimization is expected to spell the end of the current logistical hurdle, in which recipients bear the cost and hassle of transferring their monthly allowances from Hong Kong bank accounts for use on the mainland.

During the signing ceremony, Hong Kong Secretary for Labour and Welfare Chris Sun Yuk-han called the upcoming direct remittance a "last mile" breakthrough, adding that the existing process, while "apparently smooth enough", can be revamped for greater efficiency.

Darryl Chan Wai-man, deputy chief executive of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, expressed confidence in the initiative as a "faster and more direct solution" for disbursing portable cash assistance, thanks to the two banks' extensive presence on the mainland and cross-border serviceability of "great expertise and strength".

The Bank of China and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China have a combined network of nearly 3,800 branches in Guangdong and Fujian, Chan said.

Hong Kong seniors living in Guangdong and Fujian provinces remain eligible to apply for the SAR's CSSA and old-age allowances under special programs — initiatives responding to a growing number of elderly people opting for retirement across the border.

As of late September, around 29,000 Hong Kong seniors based in Guangdong or Fujian had applied to collect Hong Kong's elderly benefits.

The CSSA offers a monthly subsidy ranging from HK$3,995 ($513) to HK$7,225, depending on health status, for people aged 65 and older who meet certain financial criteria.

For those aged 65 and older who meet the asset limits, the Old Age Living Allowance offers HK$4,250 per month. Seniors 70 and older can unconditionally apply for an additional HK$1,640 monthly allowance through the Old Age Allowance.

Leaders from the Social Welfare Department, Bank of China (Hong Kong), and Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (Asia) display signed memorandums of understanding at the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government headquarters in Admiralty on Friday. The agreements were signed under the witness of senior city and financial officials. ADAM LAM / CHINA DAILY

NEW BLUEPRINT | GREATER BAY AREA

Services trade to propel industrial upgrades

By ZHOU MO in Shenzhen
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Accelerated integration of the services trade in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area will propel the region's industrial upgrading and help China gain strategic advantages in global trade, experts said.

Their remarks followed last month's adoption of recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-30), which mapped out a development blueprint over the coming five years.

The document suggested boosting trade in services by encouraging exports, refining the negative list-based management system for cross-border trade, and improving standards.

As the country's foreign trade powerhouse, the Greater Bay Area, which consists of nine cities in Guangdong province plus the Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions, has seen robust development in trade in goods over recent years. However, experts argue that trade in services has been overshadowed and needs to be promoted through greater cross-border integration.

Official statistics show that Guangdong's services trade accounted for only 12.5 percent of its total trade in 2024, 12 percentage points lower than the global average level and two percentage points lower than the national average.

While Guangdong boasts a solid foundation in the goods trade, it grapples with an imbalance — favoring tangible goods over services and digital sectors — said Gong Xiaofeng, director of the Greater Bay Area emerging industry development research institute at Shenzhen University.

"The province should develop a matching modern producer service system to bridge the gap between the growth of advanced manufacturing and lagging services," he said.

Guangdong has been stepping up efforts to expand openness for Hong Kong and Macao service providers, with notable progress having been made, but there remains ample room for improvement.

"The integration of trade in services in the Greater Bay Area is of great significance," said Guo Wanda, executive vice-president of Shenzhen-based think tank China Development Institute.

"On the one hand, China remains committed to advancing institutional opening-up, which centers on standards, rules and governance. The Greater Bay Area, as a pilot zone and forerunner of such institutional opening-up, bears significant implications for the country's overall drive in this regard," he said. "On the other hand, such integration can promote industrial upgrading and the free flow of various factors of production within the region."

Dai Zhipeng, assistant professor of the Faculty of Economics at Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, said the integration of trade in services in the Greater Bay Area is a crucial step for the country to gain a strategic advantage in the new round of global free trade.

"By leveraging the region's advantages through platform coordination, the flow of factors, and a complete industrial chain of research and development, production and sales can be formed, facilitating the country's transformation from 'goods export' to 'service export' and enhancing its international competitiveness," he said.

Amid global value chain restructuring and rising manufacturing costs, the services trade is playing an increasingly important role in China's foreign trade development. Government data show China's services trade volume surpassed $1 trillion for the first time last year, posting a 13.2 percent year-on-year increase and accounting for 14.6 percent of the country's total foreign trade — 2.2 percentage points higher than the 2020 level.

Guo said that the key challenge with the regional integration of the services trade lies in the lack of alignment in rules and standards across the Greater Bay Area.

"The nine mainland cities are widening their doors to Hong Kong and Macao in terms of professional qualifications, digital payment, travel, etc. Ideally, a two-way opening-up mechanism should be established in the long run."

He added that priority should be given to advancing alignment in specific sectors. "More efforts should be made to accelerate the opening-up of rules and standards in industrial sectors. The liberalization of such rules and standards that drive industrial development will smooth the progress of Greater Bay Area integration."

Dai stressed that aligning institutional rules is the key to unblocking the region's services trade integration, with the rollout of a streamlined cross-border services negative list as a critical breakthrough.

"Full enforcement of national treatment for Hong Kong and Macao service providers and removal of non-negative-list restrictions will unlock cross-border factor flows and deepen regional cooperation," he said. Gong also emphasized that complementary synergy, rather than homogeneity, is the core of the integration.

He proposed three steps to advance regional development: unifying industrial and supply chains to boost enterprise coordination, integrating the full lifecycle from R&D to talent allocation, and standardizing norms to facilitate trade liberalization and facilitation.

State Key Laboratory for Climate Resilience set to launch on Dec 4

By WU KUNLING in Hong Kong
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The State Key Laboratory of Climate Resilience for Coastal Cities, one of Hong Kong's 15 newly approved State Key Laboratories (SKLs), will launch on Dec 4, to enhance the coastal region's capabilities for managing extreme weather events.

Established earlier this year through a joint effort by the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Hong Kong Polytechnic University, this laboratory leverages HKUST's Geotechnical Centrifuge Facility's strengths and international research network, combined with PolyU's expertise in engineering and policy management.

Duan Huan-feng, associate director of the SKL and a professor at PolyU's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, told China Daily that the lab's first academic committee meeting is scheduled for Dec 3 at PolyU, followed by symposiums on Dec 4 and 5.

Duan said that projects within the lab's six major research directions, covering climate, weather, urban disasters and solutions, and policy management, have already begun. Since mid-October, the lab has opened applications for research funding to the academic community, he added.

Charles Ng Wang-wai, a director of the lab and chair professor of HKUST's Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, shared his vision for the lab. "Our research will investigate various aspects of climate resilience, provide scientific backing for government policy decisions, and safeguard residents' welfare against climate change challenges," Ng said.

Earlier this year, the laboratory, along with 14 other labs spanning fields such as medicine, quantum studies, and biology, achieved a historic milestone by being incorporated into the nation's State Key Laboratory Scheme, managed by the Ministry of Science and Technology. Each lab is set to receive annual funding of up to HK$20 million ($2.57 million) from the special administrative region government to enhance their research capabilities.

An official plaque presentation ceremony was held in August for the State Key Laboratory of Climate Resilience for Coastal Cities. Beyond addressing climate change challenges, its mission also includes promoting the development of safe, green and sustainable coastal cities.

Climate resilience is of great importance for places like Hong Kong, given its vulnerability to frequent extreme weather events such as heavy rainfall and typhoons due to its subtropical coastal location, Ng said.

The risks of flooding, landslides, and mudslides are notably high in the city, with over 60 percent of its land being natural terrain and about 60,000 registered manmade slopes, according to Ng. Such incidents could lead to far-reaching impact, considering the city's limited land area and high population density, Ng added.

Building robust climate resilience requires interdisciplinary collaboration across meteorology, firefighting, water and electricity management, healthcare, and infrastructure development, Ng said.

The lab's HKUST branch plans to have about 50 professionals, including 30 to 40 doctoral candidates and 10 to 15 postdoctoral researchers, specializing in four key fields: urban disaster prediction, eco-friendly mitigation, infrastructure resilience, and public awareness and warning systems.

Ng also said that research activities related to these topics have been ongoing in one of the lab's predecessors, HKUST's Geotechnical Centrifuge Facility. Some cutting-edge research initiatives include using eco-friendly materials to replace cement walls for slope stabilization and utilizing vegetation for slope protection.

Ng said he believes that Hong Kong's climate resilience is currently at a commendable level globally, thanks to the strong academic capabilities of local universities and proactive government measures. He said that the SKLs will persist in advancing this field through robust scientific research.

Initially, SKLs were limited to the Chinese mainland, with labs in Hong Kong serving as partners to mainland SKLs upon approval from the Ministry of Science and Technology. Since 2018, Hong Kong has been authorized to set up national-level labs, and in early 2025, these labs were officially transformed into SKLs.

Ceremony: Athletes shine at event, inspiring residents

From page 1

Another Hong Kong resident, Benny Chan Ka-yau, said he was most amazed by cycling ace Ceci Lee Sze-wing, who clinched three gold medals, in the women's road race, the women's Madison, and the women's omnium.

With a total four gold medals in two National Games editions, the 24-year-old has now surpassed cycling veteran Wong Kam-po for the most gold medals won by a Hong Kong athlete in the games.

Chan said the men's handball team also moved him deeply, as some players quit their full-time jobs to prepare for the games. The squad finished fourth after a 33-25 loss to Beijing in the bronze-medal match. Yet the result still marked Hong Kong's best-ever finish in the competition.

"Not many people would be willing to give up earning money to pursue something so costly and with such little payback," Chan said, adding that he hopes the SAR government and related organizations will put more effort into supporting the growth of non-elite sports in Hong Kong.

Lily Tse Siu-lee, a supervisor of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, said taking the stage at the National Games carries great significance for both Hong Kong's athletes and young generations.

"The Hong Kong team showcased more than just their achievements on the scoreboard," Tse said. "It also demonstrated how more young athletes broke their own records with enterprising spirit and professional attitudes, while igniting local residents' passion for sports."

These experiences will serve as an inspiring example and a source of motivation for the future development of youth sports and the sporting culture in Hong Kong, she added.

Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu said on Friday that the athletes' perseverance and sportsmanship have made the city's residents, including him, "deeply encouraged, moved, and proud".

He said the HKSAR government has spared no effort in advancing sports development and the industry through a range of policies, including promoting sports in the community, supporting elite sports, and maintaining the city as a center for major international sports events.

"The government will leverage the successful experience of the 15th National Games and continue to promote sports development through different initiatives," Lee added.

Eric Chan Kwok-ki, the Hong Kong chief secretary for administration and the vice-president of the games' organizing committee, said the historic results present "a golden opportunity" for Hong Kong. He vowed to continue attracting more international mega sports events to the city, promoting the local sports industry, and leveraging the events to boost sports tourism.