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Universities as strategic navigators: place leadership in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area

Tatiana Fumasoli^a  and Fumi Kitagawa^b 

ABSTRACT

This article investigates university place leadership within the context of a politically asymmetrical cross-border regional innovation system – China's state-steered, Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. We conceptualise place leadership as a process of strategic navigation, where universities manage two sets of tensions: (1) the strategic posture between state compliance and organisational opportunity and (2) the locus of their legitimacy between local political endorsement and global academic prestige. Based on a comparative analysis of seven universities, we develop a series of navigational profiles, revealing how universities mobilise resources and shape visions, offering insights for the study of place leadership and cross-border innovation.

KEYWORDS

Cross-border regional innovation systems; legitimacy; strategic posture; China; higher education

JEL I23, R5, I28, O38

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1. INTRODUCTION

Place leadership has become a pivotal concept in regional studies (Ayres, 2014; Beer et al., 2019; Beer & Clower, 2014). Place leaders are political, economic or academic actors who can influence a development process and mobilise other actors, resources and power (Sotara, 2016). Place leadership literature acknowledges the complex nature of collective action in a multi-value, multi-actor and multi-power context. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership, it is often collaborative, boundary-spanning and context-sensitive. In this article, we focus on the capacity of organisations to mobilise resources, build coalitions and shape strategic visions.

Studies on the relationship between place-making and leadership in cross-border regions (CBRs) (see for example, Collinge & Gibney, 2010) indicate unique governance landscapes of CBRs, demanding specific forms of place leadership capable of building trust and momentum across significant institutional divides across borders. Place leadership offers a crucial lens to understand how CBRs navigate contemporary economic and political pressures through a collective process through which diverse coalitions intervene to shape a region's development trajectory. A CBR is defined as a territorial unit


that includes contiguous subnational units from two or more nation-states (Perkmann & Sum, 2002). They exist in a variety of forms across diverse geographical, social and political environments (Sharif & Chandra, 2022; Yang, 2005, 2006). The very nature of the 'border' between places changes over time with inherent fluidity and fragmentation, as both the places and their boundaries are continually shaped and reshaped by a complex interplay of local, national and global processes (Derudder & Liu, 2025; Lundquist & Tripp, 2013).

Within this context, universities are increasingly recognised not merely as educational institutions, but as transformative agents capable of enacting place leadership (Fonseca et al., 2021). Their role is particularly salient in the formation of a cross-border regional innovation system (CBRIS), where they are central to fostering knowledge flows generating competitive advantages for the region (van den Broek et al., 2019). Yet, while a significant body of literature examines universities as place leaders and a separate strand explores the governance of a CBRIS, the intersection of these themes remains underdeveloped. This is especially relevant where the governance of innovation necessitates coordinating policies at multiple scales (Nelles & Durand, 2014) and is complicated by asymmetrical power relations between central governments and local actors (Cappellano et al., 2022).

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We present the case of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA), a cross-border megacity region spanning between the Pearl River Delta in Guangdong Province and Hong Kong and Macao (Hui et al., 2020; Yeh et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). The GBA exemplifies the dynamics of a state-steered innovation system, driven by the central government of China to integrate the Special Administrative Regions (SARs) of Hong Kong and Macao with nine municipalities in Guangdong Province (Zhao et al., 2024). This initiative operates under the Chinese *One Country, Two Systems* framework, redefined by some scholars as ‘one country, two systems, three legal systems, and three customs zones’ (Xie et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2023). Layered upon economic, political and demographic asymmetries, the GBA constitutes a distinctive institutional arena that raises fundamental questions about the nature of universities’ agency and their capacity for place leadership (Xie et al., 2021).

We argue that in such a context, university place leadership is best understood as, what we term, strategic navigation. This involves managing the tension between a set of two critical dimensions: first, the *strategic posture* adopted towards top-down policy agendas versus institutional goals; and second, the locus of *legitimacy* that a university cultivates and leverages to gather resources and thrive. By analysing these dimensions, this article aims, first, to uncover how universities, acting as place leaders, manage the tension between complying with top-down policy agendas and pursuing their own opportunities; second, to understand how universities leverage their distinct sources of legitimacy – from national political endorsement to global reputational standing – to navigate this complex environment and enact place leadership.

We first review the literature on the place leadership and CBRIS to establish the theoretical gap this article addresses. We then introduce our conceptual framework of strategic navigation and its two core dimensions. After detailing the GBA’s context and our research design, the article presents a comparative analysis of seven universities, generating a set of navigational profiles. The discussion section synthesises our findings before the conclusion elaborates on theoretical and empirical contributions of this study and outlines an agenda for future research.

2. ENACTING PLACE LEADERSHIP IN CROSS-BORDER REGIONAL INNOVATION SYSTEMS

To understand how universities enact place leadership in the GBA, our review synthesises literature from two key domains. We begin by establishing our core theoretical lens, the concept of place leadership, and focus on the importance of strategic agency in regional development. We then outline the structural complexities and institutional challenges of a CBRIS, i.e., the specific context in which university place leadership is exercised. Finally, we bring these streams together to highlight the role of universities, identifying the theoretical gap this article

addresses concerning their place leadership within state-steered, asymmetrical cross-border regions.

2.1. The role of agency: place leadership in regional development

The concept of place leadership focuses on the agency required to navigate and shape regional structures. It refers to the individual and collective process through which various actors and coalitions intervene to influence a region’s development trajectory (Beer et al., 2019). According to Sotarauta and Beer (2017, p. 212), place leadership is essentially concerned with (a) facilitating interdisciplinary development strategies and practices across institutional boundaries, technology themes and professional cultures and (b) ensuring the comprehensive engagement of various communities so that they would be able to contribute to and benefit from the development processes and outcomes of them.

Effective place leaders understand and manage the context in which they operate with a shared capacity to ‘mobilise resources and actionable knowledge’ to transform a place (Benneworth et al., 2017, p. 237). This involves identifying and realising opportunities (Roessler et al., 2025) while navigating the restrictions imposed by external forces that frame the ‘political space for place-based governance’ (Hambleton, 2019, p. 272). As Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) argue, new regional growth paths only emerge when an agent both perceives new opportunities and possesses the ‘capabilities to set actions towards the realisation of these opportunities’ (p. 716). Place leadership, therefore, can be conceptualised as the strategic exercise of agency, which is also shaped within a given structural and political context, across different modes of governance (see Collinge & Gibney, 2010).

2.2. The structural context: innovation systems and the cross-border challenge

A particularly challenging structural and political environment for place leadership is found in cross-border regions. The concept of regional innovation system (RIS) posits that innovation is not an isolated act but a systemic outcome of complex interactions between networks of actors – firms, government agencies and knowledge institutions – within a specific territory (Cooke, 2001). This system is characterised by shared institutional norms and trust, which facilitate knowledge flows and collective learning.

The cross-border regional innovation system (CBRIS) represents a particularly complex variant. It is a territorial unit of innovation that spans two or more distinct national or sub-national jurisdictions (Perkmann & Sum, 2002). Drawing on the CBRIS concept, Lundquist and Tripp (2013, pp. 454–458) present three ideal types of cross-border settings with different degrees of integration. While cross-border integration would offer opportunities for innovation, infrastructure building and expanding markets, CBRIS regions face significant barriers to integration. Against this backdrop, recent scholarship has critiqued earlier linear, evolutionary models for oversimplifying the nature of the border, which is ‘inherently

multidimensional, involving varied proximities and distances that shape cross-border innovation processes' (Capellano et al., 2022, p. 1).

One of the expectations of the earlier CBRIS literature seems to be that the agents have 'policy capability' with a sufficient level of 'autonomy' (legal competencies and financial resources) in relation to the cross-border governance mechanisms of innovation (Tripl, 2006). However, the governance of innovation in a CBRIS is further complicated by the need to coordinate policies across multiple scales (Nelles & Durand, 2014) and navigate asymmetrical power relations between the actors involved (Derudder & Liu, 2025). This is particularly pertinent in cases of state-steered CBRIS integration, where the rules of the game are set by a central government. Such structural contexts, defined by power asymmetry and institutional complexity, create challenges for place leadership and their agencies.

2.3. Universities as place leaders in CBRIS

When we bring these two streams of literature together, universities emerge as critical actors in the CBRIS. As major knowledge institutions, universities form a core part of the 'science base and knowledge infrastructure' of any innovation system (Lundquist & Tripl, 2013). Simultaneously, as strategic agencies with their own missions and resources, they have significant potential to act as place leaders.

The literature recognises universities as powerful 'anchor institutions' (Goddard et al., 2014), possessing the 'sticky capital' and long-term commitment to a place that allows them to drive regional transformation. To be effective, universities must achieve both 'agency and alignment' (Fonseca et al., 2021), by aligning their internal strategies with external opportunities. This is particularly challenging in a CBRIS, where universities must engage with multiple institutional environments and navigate differing political and economic priorities. The forms and formation of cross-border networks can be seen as key strategic choices made by universities in these complex settings (Fumasoli & Rossi, 2021).

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Existing models of CBRIS development (e.g., Lundquist & Tripl, 2013; Makkonen & Rhodes, 2016; van den Broek & Smulders, 2015) provide a valuable structural lens emphasising stages of integration, while place leadership literature (e.g., Roessler et al., 2025; Sotarauta et al., 2017) stresses the importance of agency. To integrate these perspectives and empirically capture university place leadership in the GBA, we require a conceptual lens that helps analyse the alignment between structure and agency on one hand, and the interplay between top-down political pressure and bottom-up organisational strategy, on the other hand.

We propose a conceptual framework of strategic navigation drawing on strategic management and higher education literatures (Clark, 1998; Mintzberg, 1994). We define strategic navigation as the dynamic process of

charting a course through complex, uncertain environments, which requires maintaining strategic intent amidst constant tactical adaptation (Fumasoli & Stensaker, 2013). This process is predicated on several core capacities: skilful sense-making in response to diverse and conflicting agendas, the execution of pragmatic and timely actions, and the ability to leverage systemic paradoxes for strategic advantage (Frølich et al., 2017). In the context of CBRIS, we focus on universities as strategic actors and investigate how they 'mobilise resources and actionable knowledge' (Benneworth et al., 2017, p. 237) while simultaneously navigating inherent 'asymmetrical power relations' (Derudder & Liu, 2025).

To better understand the processes of universities' strategic navigation in a CBR, we further identify two key dimensions with intrinsic tensions: (1) strategic posture and (2) locus of legitimacy.

3.1. Dimension 1: strategic posture – compliance vs. opportunity

The first critical dimension of a university's navigational strategy addresses how the university manages the tension between state agendas and its own organisational goals to leverage its own distinctive resources. Resource dependence theory posits that organisational behaviour is driven by the need to manage external dependencies and acquire critical resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), motivating actors to actively seek and exploit opportunities in their environment. This creates a spectrum of strategic postures. At one end lies strategic compliance, where a university closely aligns its activities with state directives, prioritising political endorsement and stability. At the other end is *entrepreneurial opportunism*, where a university actively scans the policy landscape for resources and openings that can be leveraged for its own advancement, sometimes interpreting policy mandates less strictly (Grillitsch & Sotarauta, 2020). This spectrum reflects the range of strategic responses to institutional pressures, from passive acquiescence to active manipulation (Oliver, 1991).

3.2. Dimension 2: locus of legitimacy – local vs. global

The second dimension of strategic navigation addresses how universities pursue and maintain legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as a 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). For universities, legitimacy is the ultimate resource, governing access to funding, talent and political support.

At one end of the spectrum is local political legitimacy. This form of legitimacy is derived from conforming to the norms and expectations of state actors within the regional environment, which in turn secures political endorsement and privileged access to state-controlled resources. It is cultivated by demonstrating alignment with national strategic priorities, fulfilling a state-steered mission, and embedding deeply within the regional innovation system. At the other end is global reputational legitimacy. It is

derived from conforming to the norms and expectations of the competitive global academic field, and it is built on international research prestige, membership in elite networks and, crucially, high standing in global university rankings. While methodologically problematic, we should note that rankings have become a powerful performative tool, functioning as a globally legible signal of quality that confers prestige and helps attract international faculty, students and partners (Hazelkorn, 2015; Salmi, 2009).

Ultimately, this framework posits that the exercise of university place leadership in contested and uncertain environments is the act of strategic navigation by balancing between these spectrums. The choices made along these two dimensions are not merely internal matters of university management; they also define the nature and style of each university's specific contribution to CBRIS.

4. UNIVERSITIES AS PLACE LEADERS IN THE GBA

The GBA presents a critical real-world laboratory for observing the theoretical tensions central to our framework. It is an arena defined by the powerful interplay between top-down state directives and substantial organisational opportunities, forcing universities to engage in constant strategic navigation. The GBA initiative, launched by the China State Council, represents a powerful coercive pressure demanding strategic compliance, structuring a 'multi-layered governance framework' that assigns specific roles and resources. Simultaneously, this state-led push to transform the region into a 'new Silicon Valley' (Sharif & Chandra, 2022) creates a landscape of entrepreneurial opportunity for universities as key players.

This dynamic environment directly sets the stage for the first dimension, *Strategic Posture*. Furthermore, the GBA's core ambition amplifies the tension in our second dimension, the *Locus of Legitimacy*. The state's goal to build a globally competitive hub necessitates the cultivation of world-class universities that possess global reputational legitimacy. Yet, this runs parallel to the demand for the universities to demonstrate local political legitimacy by contributing directly to state-defined regional development goals. The complexity of this environment is embedded in the 'one country, two systems' policy, which forces universities from different political and academic cultures to interact within an 'ambiguous space between politics and economics' (O'Donnell et al., 2017, p. 258), making capacity for strategic navigation paramount.

The cross-border innovation processes have been going on over the last three decades. As far back as 1994, the former president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) proposed establishing a city agglomeration similar to the San Francisco Bay Area (Xie et al., 2023). More recently, the wave of government-driven initiatives to develop the GBA was strategically initiated by the China State Council in its 13th Five-Year Plan (2015). Under a comprehensive planning framework, the Chinese government aims to link Hong Kong, Macao and nine cities in the Pearl River Delta

(Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Foshan, Zhongshan, Dongguan, Huizhou, Jiangmen and Zhaoqing) into an integrated technological, economic and business hub (Figure 1). Its implementation is structured within a multi-layered governance framework that assigns specific roles and resources, creating the complex pressures that universities must navigate. The cross-border megacity region traverses different political systems, languages and higher education systems, underscoring its multifaceted character. Against this backdrop, universities have been posited as key players, with a recent surge in cross-border partnerships, branch campuses and joint programmes, particularly since 2019 (GBA Plan, 2019).

Creating a world-class higher education cluster – a key source of global reputational legitimacy – is considered an 'urgent task' (Xie et al., 2023). For instance, one of the aims of the Plan for Promoting the Cooperation and Development of HE in the GBA (GBA Plan, 2019) is to strengthen institutional cooperation to build several world-class universities in Guangdong Province.

The evolving nature of the border between Hong Kong, Macao and mainland China needs to be understood in terms of its own historical and political 'socio-political spatiality' (Yang, 2005). This historical path-dependency has created distinct complexities of legitimacy. The GBA initiative also indicates China's global aspiration to compete with other identified 'bay areas', such as San Francisco, Tokyo and New York (Hui et al., 2020; Mok, 2022).

Table 1 below compares Guangdong Province, and Hong Kong and Macao SARs across key indicators highlighting significant differences in socio-economic, cultural and demographic characteristics which point to the diverse and dynamic nature of ongoing cross-border innovation processes within the GBA.

These socio-economic indicators underscore the diverse economic landscapes and development strategies of Guangdong Province, Hong Kong and Macao SARs. Guangdong's large population and economic/industrial output position it as a key driver of regional growth, whereas Hong Kong and Macao, much smaller in scale, contribute through specialised economies creating high value (in the case of Hong Kong, it has strengths in financial services, while Macao focuses on gaming and tourism industries). While Guangdong's human development index (HDI) of 0.780 is categorised as 'High', it lags the 'Very High' status of Hong Kong (0.949) and Macao (0.922). In turn, these high HDI scores are paired with significant income disparity, reflected in their Gini coefficients. As Derudder and Liu (2025) note, these metrics emphasise the diverse developmental challenges within the region. In this context, GBA universities must choose their strategic posture and cultivate their primary source of legitimacy across asymmetrical cross-border environments, making strategic navigation a necessity for their survival and success.

4.1. The GBA's asymmetrical higher education landscape

The higher education sectors in Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao do not just operate under different political



Figure 1. Map of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area.

Source: Created by Ismoon, Wikimedia Commons 20:37, 23 November 2021 (UTC), CC BY-SA 4.0. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guangdong%E2%80%93Hong_Kong%E2%80%93Macao_Greater_Bay_Area#/media/File:Guangdong%E2%80%93Hong_Kong%E2%80%93Macao_Greater_Bay_Area.png

systems; they confirm their own asymmetrical landscape that is the structural source of the different navigational strategies we observe. This asymmetry is starkly visible in both scale and standing: Guangdong Province, with around 160 institutions serving more than 2.8 million

students, is the largest system, yet has three universities in the top 500 of the QS ranking. In contrast, Hong Kong's smaller system of 12 universities and 100,000 students is globally renowned, with six top 500 universities (five of which are in the top 100). Macao, with 10 institutions and 56,000 students, holds a middle ground with two universities in the top 500. These variances are not mere context but the foundation upon which different loci of legitimacy are built and different strategic postures become necessary.

The higher education system of Guangdong Province is fundamentally oriented towards cultivating local political legitimacy. Its development has been a long-term exercise in strategic compliance, adapting to regional industrial demands and Beijing's vision for Guangdong as the GBA's technological engine. While government-led initiatives like the GBA Plan (2019) and the Guangdong Province Education Modernisation Plan (2021) ambitiously target science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) advancement, their success has been mixed. Some universities have expanded their global footprint, but others remain constrained by limited resources. As promising as initiatives like the Action Plan for High-Level Universities (2024) are, the system's focus remains on aligning with economic and educational objectives, specifically in providing Chinese labour markets with relevant skilled workers.

Table 1. Socio-economic characteristics across key indicators in the GBA

	Guangdong	Hong Kong	Macao
Area	179,800 km ²	1,106 km ²	33 km ²
Population	126 m	7.5 m	680,000
GDP	\$1.6t	\$360b	\$55b
GDP per capita	\$12,600	\$48,000	\$80,000
HDI (2022)	0.780	0.949	0.922
Gini index	0.467 (China, 2022)	0.397* (2021)	0.324** (2023)
Languages	Mandarin, Cantonese	Cantonese, English	Cantonese, Portuguese

Main sources: Greater Bay Area, <https://www.bayarea.gov.hk/en/>; Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong, <https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/>; Statistics and Census Service Macao, <https://www.dsec.gov.mo/en-US/>; HKTDC Research, <https://research.hktcd.com/en/>; <https://www.undp.org/>. *<https://www.ceicdata.com/>. **Government Information Bureau Macao, <https://www.gcs.gov.mo/detail/en/>.

In stark contrast, the Hong Kong SAR higher education system is built upon a foundation of global reputational legitimacy, rooted in its international standing for academic excellence and institutional autonomy. For Hong Kong universities, the GBA initiative creates a strategic dilemma, forcing a constant balance within the compliance-opportunity spectrum. The GBA offers significant entrepreneurial opportunity for research funding and collaboration, yet the associated pressures for integration pose a potential challenge to the institutional autonomy and academic freedom that underpin their global brand. Therefore, integrating effectively into the GBA requires a complex and nuanced navigation between emerging regional integration, long-standing global engagement, and the need to preserve the unique strengths – including academic freedom – that are considered pillars of their success.

The higher education system in Macao SAR displays a different, more hybrid form of strategic navigation. It leverages a unique identity as a specialised cultural and economic bridge towards the mainland. Its strategy is shaped by a political and economic imperative for deep integration with the mainland, a clear act of strategic compliance. This is symbolised by the University of Macau's relocation to Hengqin Island in 2014, a move that simultaneously secured political favour and unlocked the unique opportunity for expansion. However, this close alignment with economic sectors like tourism and gaming industries presents risks of narrowing academic focus, and the focus on regional integration in policies like the 14th Five-Year Development Plan (2021) can exacerbate disparities, favouring resource-rich institutions over those engaged locally.

4.2. The evolution of navigational strategies: a history of cross-border collaboration

Cross-border collaboration among universities was a cornerstone of the GBA's development long before the formal initiative was officially announced in 2019. As important actors in regional innovation (Chandra et al., 2023; Sharif & Chandra, 2022), universities have engaged in strategic navigation for decades, leveraging their capabilities to build connections across the territories. These collaborations represent a series of strategic choices that created a complex network of partnerships, setting the stage for the more intensified dynamics of the formal GBA era.

The initial wave of collaboration, beginning around 1999, demonstrates an early form of entrepreneurial opportunism heavily centred on the city of Shenzhen. Driven by its dynamic economic growth and targeted local incentives, several Hong Kong and Macao universities established a variety of cross-border projects – including research institutes, joint laboratories, a hospital and technology transfer offices – to access mainland research funding and collaborate with Shenzhen's burgeoning tech industry (Chen & Kenney, 2007; Liu & Cai, 2017; Kang & Jiang, 2019; Kitagawa & Horta, forthcoming 2026; Mok & Jiang, 2020; Sharif & Tang, 2014; Youtie

et al., 2017). This was a pragmatic strategy of leveraging their global reputational legitimacy as advanced knowledge producers to seize emerging market and resource opportunities.

However, the collaborative landscape soon broadened beyond Shenzhen. Zhuhai, given its proximity to Macao, became another key site for deep institutional partnerships, exemplified by the establishment of the Hong Kong Baptist University-Beijing Normal University United International College (UIC) in 2005. More recently, the provincial capital of Guangzhou has emerged as a strategic destination, highlighted by the opening of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology's Guangzhou campus (HKUST(GZ)). These moves signal a more mature phase of navigation, where universities establish significant physical presences to tap into distinct industrial ecosystems and provincial government priorities, thereby diversifying their place-based engagement.

Perhaps the most telling example of strategic compliance is the unique model of integration between Macao and Zhuhai. The relocation of the University of Macau's (UM's) main campus to Hengqin Island in 2014 was not merely a partnership but a landmark political project. This move showcases a navigational strategy predicated on alignment with state goals. While geographically on the mainland, the campus is legally under Macao SAR jurisdiction, creating a novel 'one university, two systems' environment that serves as a blueprint for wider GBA integration. This model of jurisdictional innovation secures UM both political favour and development opportunities.

Layered on these bottom-up strategies are top-down integration mechanisms that create new compliance pressures and structured opportunities. The establishment of State Key Laboratories (SKLs) in Hong Kong (16) and Macao (four) since 2005 has formally integrated both SARs' elite research into China's national innovation network. Furthermore, consortia like the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao University Alliance aim to systematise collaboration, providing universities with an increasingly institutionalised landscape where cooperation is both encouraged and constrained by national strategic interests (Dang et al., 2023).

Finally, these collaborations have created distinct, asymmetrical knowledge flows. The GBA has seen a significant influx of mainland Chinese students enrolling in Hong Kong and Macao universities to pursue degrees. Conversely, research and commercialisation flows appear to move in the opposite direction, with knowledge, talent and startups from Hong Kong and Macao deploying in Guangdong to take advantage of vast markets, industrial capacity and government incentives (Kitagawa & Horta, forthcoming 2026). This complex web of partnerships and flows is the direct outcome of both CBRIS integration and evolving navigational strategies. Universities navigate the compliance-opportunity spectrum by directing specific resources in different directions – students to Hong Kong and Macao to leverage their educational brands, and research and development (R&D) to Guangdong to exploit market opportunities.

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

To empirically investigate how universities perform place leadership as strategic navigation within the GBA, we adopted a comparative cross-case analysis methodology. Following approaches developed by Upton and Warshaw (2017), our research design is based on a ‘controlled comparison’ (Bennett & George, 2005, p. 81) of a small number of cases to explore distinctive organisational strategic pathways, as opposed to the empirical generalisation sought in large-sample studies (Yin, 2009). This approach is appropriate for exploring how different universities navigate a variety of regional opportunities and pressures. Our research design involved three main stages: case selection, data collection and data analysis.

The selection of the seven universities for this study was critical and purposive. It ensures variation across the GBA’s three distinct jurisdictions (Guangdong Province, Hong Kong SAR and Macao SAR) and captures a range of positions along the Locus of Legitimacy dimension. This involved selecting institutions known for global prestige as well as those primarily defined by state-defined missions. In addition to this theoretical sampling, we ensured that the selected cases reflected the diversity of the region’s higher education landscape in terms of other key institutional characteristics, including size, international student and staff populations, and education and research portfolios. We acknowledge that our documentary analysis relies on official university communications, which are curated self-representations and may not fully capture on-the-ground realities. However, since our research aims to analyse how universities formally position themselves within the GBA, these documents are considered as the most direct evidence of their intended strategic navigation. This method effectively reveals universities’ official navigational profiles, while calling for further future research to better capture micro-political negotiations (e.g., interview-based research).

We adopted a documentary analysis and desk research approach. An extensive set of policy documents addressing the development of the GBA from the central government, the three jurisdictions and the seven selected universities was collected and catalogued (see Tables A1–A3 in the Appendix in the online supplemental data for a full list). This data included national and regional Five-Year Plans, GBA-specific policy directives, university strategic plans, annual reports and public communications (websites, press releases) related to their cross-border engagement in the GBA.

Our data analysis was designed to map each university’s position along the two dimensions of our conceptual framework to generate their navigational profiles. This involved a qualitative content analysis of the collected documents.

Operationalising dimension 1 – *strategic posture*: To determine each university’s posture on the compliance-opportunity spectrum, we coded their strategic documents identifying language indicating strategic compliance, e.g., explicit references to national plans and to fulfilling a

national duty. Conversely, language indicating entrepreneurial behaviour included emphasis on market access, competitive advantage and resource acquisition.

Operationalising dimension 2 – *locus of legitimacy*: To map each university’s position on the local vs. global legitimacy spectrum, we combined quantitative and qualitative indicators. Global reputational legitimacy was assessed using global rankings (i.e., QS) and institutional language foregrounding international status. Local political legitimacy was assessed through qualitative evidence of alignment with state policies, targeted government funding and narratives emphasising contributions to national socioeconomic development.

In practice, navigational strategies were identified through a range of observable university activities. For instance, efforts in developing research infrastructure or building human capital were analysed to see if they primarily served to comply with state industrial policy or to seize a new opportunity for organisational development. Similarly, the formation of partnerships and alliances – acting as ‘a nest for knowledge gatekeepers’ (Raagmaa & Keerbergh, 2017) – was examined to determine if these networks primarily enhanced local political legitimacy (e.g., local government-industry consortia) or global reputational legitimacy (e.g., partnerships with other world-leading universities). Finally, activities related to ‘social and cultural impact’ – such as hosting cultural events or engaging in community outreach – were interpreted as further evidence of a university’s strategic commitment to local political legitimacy.

By interpreting these concrete activities through our two-dimensional framework, we were able to construct a navigational profile for each case. This allowed us to move beyond anecdotal description and provide a theory-driven, evidence-based comparative analysis of how university place leadership is enacted in the GBA.

6. NAVIGATIONAL PROFILES OF PLACE LEADERSHIP

The choice of the seven institutions, characterised in Table 2, is central to our comparative analysis. They were purposively selected to represent a broad spectrum of positions across our two key dimensions. The sample allows for a ‘controlled comparison’ (Bennett & George, 2005, p. 81) that includes universities from all three jurisdictions, ranging from century-old flagships with high global reputational legitimacy (e.g., University of Hong Kong (HKU)) to state-aligned institutions built on local political legitimacy (e.g., Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU)).

6.1. Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) – the regional steward

SYSU’s navigational profile is that of a *Regional Steward*. As a leading public university in Guangdong Province, its place leadership is enacted through a strategic posture of high compliance, leveraging its deep state connections to reinforce its local political legitimacy. Its GBA initiatives are framed as a direct response to the government’s

Table 2. Case universities in the GBA.

Name	Acronym	GBA territory	Ownership	Year of creation	Language of instruction	QS ranking 2026	N students	% International students	% international staff	Motto
1 Sun Yat-Sen University	SYSU	Guangdong Province	public	1924	Chinese	276	65,245	19	2	Study Extensively, Inquire Accurately, Reflect Carefully, Discriminate Clearly, Practise Earnestly
2 Southern University of Science and Technology	SUSTech	Guangdong Province	public	2011	Chinese and English	343	8863	>1	18	Virtue, Truth and Advance
3 University of Hong Kong	HKU	Hong Kong SAR	public	1911	English	11	18,724	45	73	Wisdom and Virtue
4 Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	HKUST	Hong Kong SAR	public	1991	English	44	8837	40	81	Dare to dream, ready to achieve!
5 Hong Kong Polytechnic University	PolyU	Hong Kong SAR	public	1994	English	54	20,658	36	66	To learn and to apply, for the benefit of mankind
6 University of Macau	UM	Macao SAR	public	1981	English, Chinese	285	12,149	50	83	Humanity, Integrity, Propriety, Wisdom, Sincerity
7 Macau University of Science and Technology	MUST	Macao SAR	private	2000	English, Chinese	440	19,450	94	81	Dedication to practical studies, Enhancement of knowledge, Ability and Quality

Sources: Collated by authors from QS World University Rankings 2026: Top global universities, <https://www.topuniversities.com/world-university-rankings>; institutional websites: <https://www.sysu.edu.cn/>; <https://www.sustech.edu.cn/>; <https://www.hku.hk/>; <https://www.hkust.edu.hk/en/>; <https://www.polyu.edu.hk/en/>; <https://www.um.edu.mo/>; <https://www.must.edu.mo/> (last accessed 2 August 2025)

vision, a strategic choice that secures its role as a key state instrument and guarantees access to resources. This is evident in its strategic focus on interdisciplinary fields critical to the GBA – health, environmental sustainability and marine sciences – which directly contribute to the ambition of becoming a global innovation hub through alignment with state priorities (SYSU, 2021).

The evidence for this steward role is multifaceted. The establishment of SYSU's Institute of Advanced Studies in the Hong Kong Science Park (2024) – a direct implementation of the state's cross-border integration agenda – is a landmark move. Furthermore, its leadership in the GBA university alliances and its strategic focus on interdisciplinary fields critical to the region, such as health and marine sciences, demonstrate a pattern of leadership by executing state priorities. While SYSU also engages in broader community service, its primary strategic actions reinforce its function as a reliable and instrumental partner to the state, confirming its core navigational profile.

6.2. Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) – the designed instrument

Southern University of Science and Technology's (SUSTech's) place leadership is characterised as a *Designed Instrument*, an expression of high compliance driven by its mission. Created by the Shenzhen municipality in 2011 to cultivate local political legitimacy, it navigates the GBA by positioning itself as the ideal vehicle for achieving national policies on technological advancement, focusing on innovation-driven areas like artificial intelligence and robotics (SUSTech, 2021). This alignment is reflected in its curriculum, which is tailored to produce graduates proficient in the specific technology and engineering fields required to meet the GBA's economic goals.

This strategy is demonstrated through its active and domestic cooperation with government institutions and industries, supported by extensive city-level funding. Key initiatives that serve this instrumental role include the Joint School of Microelectronics with HKUST and joint PhD programmes with Hong Kong universities, which are explicitly designed to support knowledge transfer and create academic networks that serve regional industrial policy. Its sustainable development agenda is framed through the provision of technological solutions, underscoring its primary function as an innovative tool of the state.

6.3. University of Hong Kong (HKU) – the prestige navigator

As the region's oldest and most prestigious university, HKU's navigational profile is that of a *Prestige Navigator*. Its strategy is anchored in its primary locus of legitimacy: its global reputation, evidenced by its elite international ranking and powerful brand. Protecting this core asset – which includes its institutional autonomy – dictates its strategic posture, forcing it into a careful and selective balance between state compliance and entrepreneurial opportunity. This dual commitment is reflected in its strategic

plan, which pairs the ambition of being 'Asia's Global University' with a goal to contribute to the social and economic development of the region (HKU, 2016). This requires selective engagement in high-profile GBA projects that enhance its regional impact without diluting its international standing.

This balancing act is illustrated by the University of Hong Kong-Shenzhen Hospital, a major initiative that allows HKU to make a significant contribution to cross-border public health while operating within its area of core strength. However, this navigational strategy faces significant challenges. Geopolitical tensions create scrutiny in sensitive technological collaborations, while complex local politics require careful navigation, showcasing the constant effort required for a Prestige Navigator to maintain its position in the GBA.

6.4. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) – the entrepreneurial exploiter

HKUST's profile is an example of an *Entrepreneurial Exploiter*, defined by a distinctive entrepreneurial opportunism, proactively using the GBA framework as a vehicle for its own ambitious expansion. It leverages its identity as an agile, world-class science and technology university to proactively use the GBA framework as a vehicle for its own goals. This is epitomised by its 'HKUST 2.0' vision and the establishment of its Guangzhou campus (2022), as outlined in its Strategic Plan (HKUST, 2021). These are framed not as acts of compliance, but as strategic moves to transform the GBA into a seamless CBRIS, a platform in which HKUST expands and thrives.

An early adopter of cross-border collaboration since 1999, HKUST has a long history of seeking entrepreneurial opportunities with industry in Shenzhen to cultivate talent and advance research. Its patterns of collaboration involve a wide range of academic and industrial partners across the GBA, fostering joint research and knowledge transfer. Its community engagement, through public lectures and outreach programmes, is another component of its strategy to build a broad base of support for its ambitious, opportunity-driven agenda within the region.

6.5. Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) – the applied broker

Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) enacts its place leadership as an *Applied Broker*, a strategy centred on active opportunity-seeking. Its strategic posture is one of active entrepreneurial opportunism, focused on identifying and building a niche that connects regional industry needs with academic solutions. This is reflected in its educational programmes, which emphasise practical and interdisciplinary learning to prepare graduates for specific careers in technology, design and business (PolyU, 2019).

The cornerstone of this broker strategy is its network of partnerships with regional and international industry stakeholders. PolyU pragmatically focuses its GBA engagement in areas like construction technology, where it can broker Hong Kong's expertise to the GBA's vast market.

This navigational approach as an Applied Broker necessitates a critical balancing act: it must deliver short-term, applied solutions to maintain its industry relevance while also conducting the basic research required to sustain its global academic standing.

6.6. University of Macau (UM) – the integrated partner

The University of Macau's (UM's) navigational profile is that of an *Integrated Partner*, a role defined by its unique geopolitical position. Driven by Macao's political and economic imperative to integrate with the mainland, UM's strategic posture reveals high compliance. This is formalised in its Five-Year Development Plan, which commits the university to co-construct the GBA and support Macao's role in national development (UM, 2021). UM's compliant strategy is designed to cultivate its locus of legitimacy as a trusted local political actor, leveraging its identity as a vital cross-border link.

This is exemplified by its campus on Hengqin Island, which constitutes a direct bridge in the GBA. Hence physical and jurisdictional integration is the foundation of UM strategy to enhance its local political legitimacy. This strategy is further evidenced by the establishment of research centres in state-prioritised fields like micro-electronics and Chinese traditional medicine, which directly support both Macao's and the GBA's goals. Collaborative research projects and cultural initiatives based there aim to enhance the GBA as a CBRIS while reinforcing Macao's unique heritage.

6.7. Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) – the aspiring player

As a younger, private university, Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) adopts the profile of an *Aspiring Player*. Its strategic posture is actively entrepreneurial, seeking opportunities within the GBA to rapidly build its research profile and global reputational legitimacy. As a private university founded in 2000, it leverages its identity as an agile and less bureaucratic organisation to engage in high-profile, ambitious projects conducive to significant prestige (MUST, 2021). For MUST, the GBA is not just a set of rules to comply with but primarily a landscape of opportunity to accelerate its own ascent.

A key illustration of this strategy are its extensive collaborative scientific enterprises, such as the successful launch of its exploration satellites from a base in mainland China (2023). This project combines research, training and strategic political integration contributing to MUST's national profile as well as emerging as a global research university. Equally, its two State Key Laboratories (Quality Research in Chinese Medicine and Lunar and Planetary Sciences) and active partnerships across the GBA support its strategy to build its international reputation while reinforcing the GBA as CBRIS.

Table 3 provides a comparative summary of how the seven selected universities are strategically engaging with the GBA. For each university, it outlines the officially stated strategic vision, lists the key practical initiatives

undertaken (such as new campuses or research partnerships), and specifies the target contributions to regional development, ranging from supplying high-tech talent to driving economic diversification.

7. DISCUSSION

Our analysis of seven leading universities in the GBA reveals their distinct navigational profiles for CBR engagement. These findings demonstrate that universities are not passive implementers of the state-steered GBA initiative; rather, they are active agents who strategically interpret a complex policy landscape to find their own opportunities and evolutionary pathways. This process is the foundational mechanism through which they enact their distinctive place leadership in the emerging CBRIS.

7.1. Place leadership: navigating strategic posture and legitimacy

A university's chosen strategic posture directly defines its style of place leadership. Our findings show divergence between place leadership of the universities – between those driven by strategic compliance and entrepreneurial opportunism. Compliant place leaders like Sun Yat-sen University (*Regional Steward*) and the University of Macau (*Integrated Partner*) enact their leadership by serving as trusted implementers of the state's vision, providing stability and ensuring regional alignment. In contrast, opportunistic leaders like HKUST (*Entrepreneurial Exploiter*) and MUST (*Aspiring Player*) choose to act as entrepreneurial pathfinders, identifying new opportunities and forging novel development pathways within the GBA's resource-rich landscape.

The core asset that enables and shapes these leadership styles is the university's primary locus of legitimacy. This dimension reflects a fundamental paradox at the heart of the GBA policy. On the one hand, China's ambitions to forge a world-leading innovation hub that requires world-class universities with global reputational legitimacy built on global academic norms of institutional autonomy and academic freedom. On the other hand, the Chinese central government requires GBA universities to demonstrate local political legitimacy and directly serve state-defined economic and industrial goals. For universities, this creates a strategic dilemma, as they must strategically determine the balance between these two opposites. This calibration, i.e., deciding how much to lean towards global academic autonomy versus local responsiveness, is what ultimately defines their place leadership in the GBA.

7.2. From individual competition to collective leadership?

A crucial finding of our study is that the collective place leadership of the GBA does not stem from intentional, planned collaboration. Our evidence points to universities pursuing individual and pragmatic strategies, often competing directly with each other for resources, talent and status within their respective systems in Hong Kong, Macao and Guangdong.

Table 3. University GBA strategic focus and key initiatives.

University	Stated GBA strategic vision/goals	Key GBA initiatives	Target contribution to GBA
Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU)	Align with GBA development; be a source of major tech breakthroughs; cultivate innovative talent for GBA; construct China's autonomous knowledge system based on GBA practice.	Multi-campus presence (Guangzhou, Zhuhai, Shenzhen) with a research institute in Hong Kong serving GBA; interdisciplinary research; collaboration with enterprises; lead GBA university alliances; GBA Development Blue Book.	Provide high-calibre talent and tech innovation; contribute to theoretical understanding and policy for GBA development.
Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech)	Serve GBA scientific and technological innovation; align with GBA industrial needs; build 'government-industry-university-research-application' ecosystem.	Shen Kong Microelectronics College; research institutions in energy materials, nanotech; collaboration with local GBA governments (e.g., Dapeng); GBA University Alliance participation.	Drive innovation in high-tech industries; provide talent for Shenzhen and the broader GBA; promote industry-university research cooperation.
University of Hong Kong HKU	Leverage international standing to act as a 'gateway' and 'intellectual hub' for the GBA; integrate into national development while fostering global excellence and institutional autonomy.	HKU-Shenzhen Hospital; HKU-Shenzhen Institute of Research and Innovation (SIRI); GBA-focused research platforms and policy forums; entrepreneurship support (e.g., iDendron) for start-ups targeting the GBA market.	Provide world-class talent and research in strategic areas (e.g., biomedicine, fintech, data science); offer thought leadership and policy advice; bridge the GBA with global networks.
Hong Kong University of Science and Technology HKUST	Implement the 'HKUST 2.0' vision, creating a unified, cross-campus system to drive innovation for the GBA; become a powerhouse for <i>deep tech</i> and entrepreneurship within the region.	HKUST (Guangzhou) campus with a novel cross-disciplinary academic structure; complementary functions between Clear Water Bay and Guangzhou campuses; HKUST-Shenzhen Research Institute; strong support for start-ups; industry collaborations with GBA tech giants.	Drive cutting-edge, industry-relevant innovation; cultivate a new generation of entrepreneurial talent through a novel pedagogical model; create a seamless innovation ecosystem linking Hong Kong research with GBA industry.
Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU)	Leverage applied research and industry collaboration for GBA needs; support innovation, entrepreneurship and cross-region employability.	University-industry collaboration; GBA construction industry cooperation project; PolyU SPEED 'KYB' project for GBA entrepreneurship; GBA tourism cluster branding study; potential Foshan campus.	Address specific sectoral needs (construction, tourism, health); foster GBA entrepreneurship and talent mobility.
University of Macau (UM)	Co-construct GBA; integrate into national development; support Macau's '1 + 4' economic diversification via Hengqin.	Zhuhai UM Science and Technology Research Institute (ZUMRI) in Hengqin with State Key Lab branches (Chinese Medicine, Microelectronics, IoT); GBA-focused AI and Robotics Centre; programmes for Macau's new industries.	Support Macau's diversification; commercialise research for GBA; provide talent for Hengqin and GBA specialised industries.

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

University	Stated GBA strategic vision/ goals	Key GBA initiatives	Target contribution to GBA
Macao University of Science and Technology (MUST)	Contribute to GBA construction and Macau's diversification; promote science and tech innovation in GBA; cultivate innovation talents.	MUST Zhuhai Research Institute and State Key Lab branches in Hengqin; Macau Intellectual Property Research Centre; GBA Intellectual Property Law Alliance (IPLAG); GBA marine economy research.	Drive science and tech innovation; provide IP expertise for GBA; cultivate specialised talent for GBA and Macau.

Note: Compiled by authors.

Yet, we argue that a coherent form of collective place leadership emerges from these individual organisational processes. The state-steered CBRIS structures shape the competitive landscape, creating distinct niches. As universities pursue their own navigational strategic profiles, they specialise and fill different roles. Therefore, the GBA's collective leadership capacity emerges not from coordinated strategy, but as unplanned, system-level outcomes of structured, actor-level competition. This dynamic gives rise to a model of selective integration, where instrumental, project-based collaboration is pursued within strict, politically defined boundaries. At the same time, deeper structural alignment that might threaten universities' autonomy is intentionally avoided (Fumasoli & Shen, 2025).

7.3. Implications for place leadership in state-steered CBRIS

Our findings offer two key theoretical contributions. First, for place leadership literature, our study pluralises the concept of leadership in highly centralised and politically and economically asymmetrical environments. It demonstrates that place leadership is not always about visionary, autonomous action. In a state-steered context, it can also be effectively enacted through savvy compliance, niche-finding and strategic alignment. The *Regional Steward* is as much a place leader as the *Entrepreneurial Exploiter*; they practice a different, but equally necessary form of place leadership.

Second, for the CBRIS literature, our study challenges models that assume integration to be primarily driven by bottom-up collaboration. We show that in an asymmetrical, state-steered CBRIS like the GBA, a system can remain fragmented due to lack of deep coordination while a division of labour emerges in a CBR. The concept of strategic navigation thus illuminates how the interplay between state structure and university agency produces a complex, multi-layered and continually evolving cross-border regional landscape.

8. CONCLUSION

Building on foundational work (e.g., Beer et al., 2019; Sotarauta et al., 2017; Sotarauta & Beer, 2017), our analysis provides a critical insight to the place leadership

literature. Our primary theoretical contribution is to offer a new, empirically grounded framework for analysing place leadership drawing on non-Western, state-steered contexts. By operationalising the dimensions of *strategic posture* and *locus of legitimacy*, our concept of strategic navigation moves beyond generic calls for 'agency' (e.g., Benneworth et al., 2017). It provides the analytical tools to capture how agency is exercised within specific political constraints, that frame the 'political space for place-based governance' (Hambleton, 2019, p. 272).

This article investigated how universities enact place leadership in the state-steered, asymmetrical context of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA). Our analysis reveals that universities manage effectively the profound tensions between state agendas and individual organisational goals by adopting distinctive *strategic postures*, ranging from compliance to opportunism, demonstrating agency and capacity for action (Benneworth et al., 2017; Fonseca et al., 2021; Roessler et al., 2025). We find that universities leverage their symbolic resources by cultivating a primary *locus of legitimacy*, balancing the pursuit of local political endorsement against global academic prestige. By analysing these dynamics, we have developed a series of distinct navigational profiles that demonstrate the varied and complex ways university's place leadership is performed. The comparative cases demonstrated that savvy compliance can be a potent form of place leadership as much as entrepreneurial opportunism.

Understanding local agencies and the leadership which they offer is only part of the picture of leadership embedded in a place. Our empirical analysis further shows that collective place leadership in the GBA emerges not necessarily from coordinated policy actions, but as a system-level outcome of structured, actor-level competition. This finding supports what Collinge and Gibney (2010) call the 'self-organising mechanisms' at work in place making as 'meta-governance'. We argue that a key challenge for the GBA as a CBRIS is to build a form of place leadership as 'meta-governance' in an asymmetrical power structure, which bridges between diverse actors including universities, ensuring their collective strengths can shape a more sustainable cross-border region. Thus, scholars investigating place leadership in cross-border contexts need to dissect the nuanced, often paradoxical

strategies that organisations employ, to advance our ability to understand and compare the complex realities of place leadership in diverse global localities.

We acknowledge the limitations of our documentary analysis deployed in this article, which, while effective at identifying strategic profiles, cannot capture the micro-political processes of negotiation at intra- and inter-university level. This remains a crucial avenue for future research using methods such as interviews and process-tracing. Further, the strategic navigation framework can be applied to other state-steered regional, cross border projects to increase our understanding of how place leadership is enacted under specific political conditions. A longitudinal study would help illuminate the quality and sustainability of these place leadership dynamics as the cross-border relationships continue to evolve.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary material.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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