

Places & Landmarks

Shenzhen, China: The Birth of the World's Fastest Growing City



Three decades ago, Shenzhen was sparsely populated farmland. Today it's a city of more than ten million.

The year is 1978, and the small area in southern China, soon to be known as Shenzhen, is thinly populated with farmers and fishermen. The inhabitants of this rural enclave don't know it yet, but something's afoot in Chinese politics that will change their lives forever. Their small rural land, a place that for centuries had been just a minor producer of crops, also has some features that can't be found anywhere else. Shenzhen is located amid the Pearl River Delta, making it a prime spot for an export economy. It also happens to be just north of Hong Kong, the world's busiest port city.

The change began in the closed chamber rooms of the Chinese government. In the late 1970s, the economy of the People's Republic of China underwent a radical transformation. The new leader of the Republic, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), sought to modernize and globalize the country's economy. He appreciated the vast productive potential of China's massive land and population size and the necessity of international trade. Yet in order to be a global player, China needed something it didn't yet have: the West's technology and industrial management skills.

Xiaoping encouraged industries throughout China to open up to foreign partnerships, and he relaxed government restrictions on trade and financial institutions. As part of this plan, Xiaoping established four Special Economic Zones in China. These were based on the duty-free international zones imposed on third-world countries after the end of colonialism. Different areas throughout Africa, Asia, and South America enjoy lower taxes and fewer commercial restrictions in order to encourage an export-based economy. These specialized trade laws enable the developing world to supply the Western world's consumption. The Chinese government took many of the

strategies of these duty-free international zones and applied them to their own economy.

China's State Council officially declared Shenzhen a Special Economic Zone in 1980. Shenzhen quickly proved to be the fastest growing and most influential of all the zones. Migrant workers from across China flocked to the area like moths to a lightbulb. In 1979, the population of the Shenzhen area was, at most, 300,000. Today it is at least ten million—making it more populous than New York City. The Chinese government supplied some of the funds for infrastructure development, but this rapid transformation was mostly the result of joint ventures with foreign companies. Chinese companies supplied the cheap land, labor, and materials; the foreign investors supplied the technology and management.

Within ten years, Shenzhen was a full-fledged modern city, complete with skyscrapers, fancy hotels, and petty crime. Yet unlike other cities, Shenzhen was populated with such haste that it developed some unique characteristics. Shenzhen's population of migrant workers is unusually high. In 2006, poor migrant workers accounted for more than three-quarters of the population. Complex residency restrictions make it difficult for these laborers, who decades ago lived in small villages throughout China, to settle into Shenzhen for the long haul. A sense of rootless restlessness permeates the populace. Surrounding the concentration of wealth and glitz in Shenzhen's downtown area is a high density of gang warfare, prostitution, petty crime, and general desolation. These problems, like the city itself, sprang up overnight, and it's hard to tell what lies ahead in this short story of Shenzhen's sudden growth and development.



"A great city is not to be confounded with a populous one."

—ARISTOTLE