

Hong Kong Emerges As The Strategic Nucleus Of Life Sciences Innovation In Greater China

April 17, 2026 | Analysis | By Ankit Kankar | ankit.kankar@mmactiv.com

Blending global capital access, regulatory alignment, and cross border clinical integration, Hong Kong is shaping how innovation scales and delivers real world healthcare impact across the Greater Bay Area and beyond



“Hong Kong is steadily evolving beyond its traditional identity as a gateway into China to become a strategic command centre for life sciences innovation across the Greater China belt. It uniquely brings together global capital access, internationally aligned regulatory frameworks, and a rapidly maturing biotech ecosystem that is both agile and scalable. What sets Hong Kong apart is not just its ability to attract innovation, but its capacity to translate that innovation into accelerated market access through mechanisms like cross border clinical integration and regulatory convergence with the Greater Bay Area.

As we move into 2026, Hong Kong's role becomes even more critical. It stands at the intersection of science, policy, and capital, enabling companies to de risk entry into one of the world's fastest growing healthcare markets while maintaining global standards of compliance and intellectual property protection. For innovators, investors, and policymakers alike, Hong Kong is no longer an optional node in the ecosystem. It is a central force shaping how innovation flows, scales, and ultimately delivers real world impact across Greater China.”

— **Ankit Kankar, General Manager, BioSpectrum Asia**

Hong Kong is rapidly emerging as a **life sciences hub** linking China's vast healthcare market with global innovation. The city now hosts 260+ listed biotech/healthcare firms (market cap ~HK\$4.8T) and has seen US\$17.5b raised through biotech IPOs (2018–mid-2025). Backed by strong research institutions, plentiful funding (public and private), and new regulatory initiatives, Hong Kong is poised to play a central role in the Greater Bay Area (GBA) and China's innovation belt by 2026.

Key findings: Greater China's healthcare demand is surging (China's market projected to grow from ~US\$900b (2019) to US\$2.3t by 2030), underpinning biotech growth. China's VC/IPO investment in biopharma leapt to ~US\$15b by

2023, while Hong Kong's specialized stock reforms (Chapter 18A/18C) have made it Asia's largest biotech fundraising center. Hong Kong's talent base is modest locally (47,000 R&D personnel in 2024) but is bolstered by attraction schemes (TTPS, OASES) and GBA collaboration. State-of-the-art infrastructure (HK Science Park, new gene/cell therapy labs, hospitals) and planned GBA clinical trial platforms strengthen its capabilities. Regulatory reforms – e.g. HK's "1+" drug scheme (2023) and ICH observer status – are aligning HK with international standards. IP protection is robust (common-law basis), and generous R&D tax deductions (300% on first HK\$2m) and other incentives support innovation.

Challenges: Hong Kong's smaller market and talent pool lag Mainland peers: e.g. Shenzhen invests ~RMB245b in R&D (6.7% of GDP)^[11] versus HK's HK\$35.8b (1.13% of GDP). Geopolitical uncertainty (US-China tech tensions, data security) and competition from other hubs (Shenzhen, Shanghai, Singapore) pose risks.

Outlook (2026): Hong Kong's unique position – as a bridge for global capital and expertise into Greater China – will deepen. GBA policies (regulatory sandbox, clinical trial institute) and continued funding schemes will expand HK's influence. Companies and investors should leverage Hong Kong's financing platform and trial networks; policymakers must sustain incentives, talent attraction, and Hong Kong's legal/financial stability to cement the city's leadership in the region's life sciences innovation hub.

Market Demand (Hong Kong & Greater China)

China's healthcare and biotech **demand** is growing rapidly. With an aging population and rising chronic disease, China's healthcare spending is projected to more than double by 2030^[3]. The government has launched major initiatives (Healthy China 2030, 14th Five-Year Plan) prioritising biomedicine. By 2024 China accounted for ~25% of next-generation drug candidates worldwide. Out-licensing and foreign deals surged (US\$8b in 2020 to >US\$50b in 2024), reflecting strong local R&D output.

Hong Kong's domestic market is smaller (7.5m people), but its healthcare system and two top medical schools (HKU, CUHK) provide a quality base. HK's strategy is to serve both local needs and as a conduit to the ~86m Greater Bay Area (GBA) market. A key enabler is the "one window, one submission" (GBA regulatory sandbox) started in 2021: Hong Kong-registered drugs/devices can be used in designated GBA hospitals without full Chinese approval^[16]. By early 2026, 66 drugs and 87 devices had been cleared under this program^[16], illustrating HK's role in accelerating access to the vast GBA market.

Singapore competes as an Asia-Pacific biotech hub. It hosts 8 of the world's top 10 pharma firms for manufacturing and has ~70 life-science companies. Singapore's stable business environment and connectivity make it a gateway to Asia, but its domestic market is much smaller (5.6m people). Still, it complements HK by focusing on biomanufacturing excellence and acting as a regional springboard Investment and Funding Trends (2018–2025, Outlook 2026)

Hong Kong's capital markets have been transformed for biotech. In 2018 HKEX introduced Chapter 18A, allowing pre-revenue biotechs to list. By mid-2025, 73 biotech companies had listed, raising ~US\$16–17.5b. In H1 2025 alone, 10 healthcare IPOs raised US\$2.1b, and 27 follow-on deals raised US\$3.9b. The launch of Chapter 18C (Mar 2023) further broadened access for AI-driven and pre-commercial firms. Overall, HK is now **Asia's largest** biotech fundraising centre and 2nd globally. *Figure: Hong Kong's biotech IPO fundraising dwarfs Singapore's funding* (SG had only ~US\$82m equity raised in 2025).

By comparison, **Mainland China** has seen explosive VC/PE and M&A activity. Biotech investment grew from negligible in 2015 to **US\$15b in 2023**^[4]. Big pharma deals accelerated: in 2025 there were 18 licensing/asset deals with Chinese biotechs (US\$57.3b total, US\$3.9b upfront). For example, AstraZeneca is investing US\$15b in China through 2030. Mainland biotech IPOs (STAR/ChiNext) and Shanghai/HK dual-listings have also flourished.

M&A and partnerships: Chinese firms are increasingly in-licensing assets and out-licensing innovation. Pfizer licensed a bispecific from 3SBio for US\$1.25b (2025). US and EU companies (Merck, Amgen, GSK, etc.) have accelerated collaborations, drawn by China's large trial capacity and low costs. Hong Kong can capture this trend by incubating such collaborations locally and providing exits via its stock market.

Outlook to 2026: Despite recent market volatility, trends point to continued growth. Analysts expect a rebound in deals as funding climates normalize. Hong Kong's biotech market cap grew from US\$5b (2018) to US\$119b (2022), evidencing investor confidence. The development of derivative products (HS Biotech Index ETFs, futures from Nov 2025) will deepen the investor base. We project sustained inflows (regional funds, sovereign wealth, venture capital) into

Hong Kong's life sciences sector, supported by government R&D grants (>50 schemes) and matching funds. A chart of Greater China biotech funding (2020–2025) would show Mainland VC far exceeding HK IPOs, but HK's edge is in liquid IPO exits and access to international capital.

Talent Supply & Mobility

Hong Kong's **talent pool** is smaller than China's but highly trained. In 2024 HK had ~47,200 R&D personnel (up from 43,400 in 2023) HKSTP's science park alone hosts ~14,000 R&D workers. Universities (HKU, CUHK, HKUST) churn out STEM graduates and postdocs each year. Nonetheless, local supply falls short of industry's aspirations.

Mobility programs are addressing gaps. In 2023 HK introduced the *Top Talent Pass Scheme* to fast-track visa approvals for global talent (Categories A–C up to 36 months). The *OASES* initiative (launched 2022) has attracted 30+ life-tech strategic enterprises (including GSK, top pharma) to HK, boosting HQ setups. Meanwhile, Mainland scientists benefit from multi-entry GBA visas (for “scientific research talents”) to work in HK and GBA labs. This bidirectional flow is vital: Mainland returns (reverse brain drain) and international researchers are incentivised to come to HK's renowned clinics (HK's hospitals have top-trained physicians)[\[34\]](#)[\[35\]](#). HKSTP and universities run talent-scouting and internship programmes (“Talent Quest” gamification, career expos) to spark interest among students.

Regional comparison: Shenzhen and Shanghai have far larger R&D workforces (e.g. Shenzhen had ~474,000 R&D staff in 2024, compared to HK's ~47,000). Singapore has ~9,500 professionals in biomanufacturing. Hong Kong compensates by drawing on Mainland and foreign talent. The ongoing GBA integration will facilitate more cross-border hiring. For example, GSK and Tigermed cite HK's ease for launching innovation into China[\[1\]](#)[\[33\]](#). *Figure: Talent pipeline comparison* could chart HK vs Shenzhen R&D personnel (47k vs 474k)[\[6\]](#)[\[37\]](#), highlighting scale differences.

Infrastructure (Labs, Incubators, Trials)

Hong Kong boasts modern **R&D infrastructure**, especially at Hong Kong Science Park and Cyberport. HKSTP reports (FY2023–24) detail: 1,700 tech companies (1,100 startups), 6 unicorns and 15 IPOs, with 700,000 lab-hours used. New facilities have been added: **01LABS@Hong Kong** (14,000 ft² for gene/cell therapy, opened Jan 2024); Forever Cheer's Neuroscience Centre (Nov 2023); MGI's AI+Bio eLab (Sept 2023)[\[42\]](#); Simcere and Sirnaomics innovation centres (late 2023). These expansions enhance HK's lab capacity for cutting-edge biotech.

Hong Kong also has incubators/accelerators (HKSTP InnoCentres, Cyberport, university incubators). Public hospitals (43 in Hong Kong) are computer-networked for clinical studies[\[43\]](#). In 2024 HK announced the *Greater Bay Area International Clinical Trial Institute* in the Shenzhen–HK innovation zone, a one-stop platform for multi-centre GBA trials. The HA (Hospital Authority) is creating a *Cluster Clinical Research Support Office* to streamline trial approvals. Together with existing CROs and clinical networks, HK's trial capacity is growing. For instance, a 2025 report shows nearly 40% of global trials include a Chinese site[\[26\]](#); HK stands to benefit via the GBA trial engine.

In **Greater China, Shenzhen and Shanghai** have gigantic biotech campuses. Shanghai's Zhangjiang Sci&Tech Park (“Pharma Valley”) alone generated RMB163b (US\$22b) revenue in 2023, with 200+ tech platforms and 100+ CROs. It hosts 94,000 bio-pharma professionals[\[46\]](#) and seven of the world's top 10 pharma firms. Beijing's Zhongguancun cluster (“Life Valley”) similarly concentrates institutes (NIBS, CAS institutes) and large Pharma (Beijing completes R&D, like BeiGene in oncology). However, HK's advantage is in cross-border lab access and GBA synergy.

Regulatory Environment & Stability

Drug and device approval: Historically, Hong Kong's registration was slower, but reforms are underway. In 2023 HK launched a “**1+**” **mechanism**: novel drugs (with overseas approval + HK clinical data) can register via one reference agency rather than two. By early 2026, 19 new drugs cleared this way (seven on HA formulary)[\[10\]](#). HK will soon introduce a “primary evaluation” system (target 2030) and establish a consolidated medical products regulator (CMPR). Also, HK has observer status at the ICH (regulatory harmonization) from Oct 2023. These changes shorten timelines and align HK with US/EU/ICH standards.

In **mainland China**, the NMPA has dramatically cut review times (median ~15 months post-reform) and now offers priority pathways (e.g. for rare diseases). Notably, Circular 53 (Nov 2024) introduced data exclusivity and marketing protection for orphan/pediatric drugs, reducing regulatory barriers. Mainland also opened FTZs (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong) for advanced therapy research (stem cells, gene therapy)[\[50\]](#). Together with faster inclusion in the national reimbursement list,

these reforms make China increasingly attractive for R&D. The GBA “regulatory sandbox” explicitly allows HK trials to feed into Chinese approvals.

Data/privacy regulation: Hong Kong follows its Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance, generally seen as robust and aligned with OECD norms. In contrast, Mainland’s Personal Information Protection Law (PIPL, 2021) is strict, raising concerns for foreign companies. Cross-border data flows remain sensitive: China increasingly monitors biotech data. For HK firms engaging in Mainland trials, clear legal frameworks are still evolving.

Geopolitical/financial stability: Hong Kong benefits from a well-established rule-of-law, simple tax system, and the HK\$-US\$ peg (low currency risk). Its AA+ rating and deep finance sector underpin stability. However, HK operates under “one country, two systems”; while integration with China is policy, US-China tech tensions inject uncertainty. For example, US export controls on Chinese biotech (genomic equipment, etc.) and China’s recent push for “self-reliance” may constrain some collaborations. Investors should note these geopolitical dynamics, though HK’s diversified legal framework (common law) and strong institutions remain an advantage over many peers.

IP Protection and Incentives

Hong Kong has **strong IP protection** (common-law system, high enforcement). China’s IP regime has improved (2021 Patent Law amendments, Circular 53’s exclusivity) but still trails international norms. Singapore also has top-ranked IP laws and aligns with US/EU standards. Thus HK and SG are often preferred for early-stage innovation requiring security of patents and trade secrets.

On the fiscal side, HK offers generous R&D incentives: a *super-deduction* (300% tax deduction on the first HK\$2m R&D spend, 200% thereafter) and a flat 16.5% corporate tax[53]. Singapore provides 250% R&D deductions and priority assistance from EDB. Mainland grants national “High-Tech Enterprise” status (15% tax rate) and ~175% R&D tax super-deduction. Table:

Aspect	Hong Kong	Shenzhen/China	Singapore
Biotech IPO funds	US\$17.5b (2018–mid-2025)	Major onshore IPOs (e.g. Shanghai STAR)	US\$0.082b (2025)
Biotech companies	260+ listed (2026)	1,930 high-tech in Zhangjiang	~70 life-science firms
R&D spend (2024)	HK\$35.8b (~US\$4.6b)	RMB245.3b (~US\$35b)	S\$16.8b (2019, total R&D)

Aspect	Hong Kong	Shenzhen/China	Singapore
R&D/GDP	1.13%	6.67% (Shenzhen)	~2.5% (2020)
R&D personnel	47,210	474,000	9,500 (biomanuf.)
Drug approval	"1+" scheme (1 regulator + HK data)	~15mo. NMPA review	~12–18mo. HSA (aligned with US)
IP regime	Common-law (strong)	Evolving (new patent laws, data protection)	Common-law (strong)

(Sources: HK govt and HKEX; China MOH/MED sources; industry reports)

Hong Kong also runs dedicated funds (e.g. Life Sciences Fund) and offers grants through the Innovation and Technology Commission (50+ schemes for biotech R&D/talent. Corporate R&D in HK can also tap the government's Technology Voucher Programme and Strategic Tech Fund. Singapore offers similar RIE grants (committing S\$37b for 2025–30^[56]). Meanwhile, China grants include special fund subsidies for innovative drugs (e.g. under Made in China 2025/Healthy China). Overall, **Hong Kong's tax and grant environment is competitive**, encouraging startups and multinational R&D centers to base advanced work here.

Key Biotech Policy And Market Evolution In Hong Kong (2018 To 2026)

2018:

HKEX introduces Chapter 18A, enabling pre revenue biotech companies to list and transforming Hong Kong into a global biotech fundraising destination.

2019:

Launch of the Hang Seng Biotech Index strengthens investor visibility and creates a benchmark for tracking biotech sector performance.

2021:

Introduction of the *æ, æ³⁴è?¥æ¢°é??* scheme allows Hong Kong approved drugs and devices to be used in Greater Bay Area hospitals, accelerating cross border healthcare access.

2022:

Government launches the OASES initiative to attract strategic life sciences and health technology companies into Hong Kong.

2023:

HKEX introduces Chapter 18C to support listings from advanced technology sectors including AI and diagnostics. The 1 Plus drug registration pathway is also launched to streamline approval processes.

2024:

Establishment of the Greater Bay Area International Clinical Trial Institute in the Hetao Zone strengthens regional clinical research capabilities. Hong Kong also gains observer status in global regulatory harmonisation frameworks.

2025:

Hong Kong biotech listings reach approximately 73 companies, reflecting growing market scale. Mainland China simultaneously advances biopharma expansion through free trade zone initiatives.

2026:

Hong Kong is expected to solidify its position as a global biotech hub, supported by expanded regulatory frameworks and new institutional bodies such as the Hong Kong Centre for Medical Products Regulation.

Strategic Implications (2026 Outlook)

- **For Companies:** Hong Kong provides a unique **springboard** into the Greater China market. Firms can access global capital via HKEX (e.g. Chapter 18A/18C listings) and run multi-center trials through GBA networks. International biotechs should consider locating R&D or Asia HQ in HK to benefit from its regulatory alignment (ICH observer), bilingual workforce, and ease of doing business. Chinese companies should use HK listings for valuation re-rating and global partnerships. The regulatory sandbox (æ, ¯æ¼³è?¥æ¢°é??) means companies can validate products in HK and roll out rapidly in the GBA.
- **For Investors:** HK's thriving biotech listings (growing 260?260+ with HK\$4.8T cap[1]) offer exposure to China's innovation at a regional scale. Patients' low recruitment costs (trial costs ~30–40% lower than US/Europe[26]) and large population make HK/GBA trials highly scalable. Investors should monitor follow-on fundraising (HK healthcare FOs doubled in 2025) and consider new instruments (Biotech Index futures from Nov 2025) as hedges. Vigilance on geopolitical risk is needed, but diversification via HK can partially hedge against Mainland volatility.
- **For Policymakers:** Continued integration and support are key. Hong Kong should press ahead with the remaining “**primary evaluation**” reforms and solidify the CMPR to realize a streamlined approval pathway. Ensuring data/infrastructure security (amid global tech decoupling) while maintaining openness will be crucial. Attracting talent remains a priority: expanding schemes like TTPS and enhancing local training pipelines will sustain growth. Further tax or land incentives (as proposed in the 2026 budget) could cement HK's attractiveness. Coordination with GBA partners to align regulations and sharing of clinical data will amplify HK's comparative advantages.

Data gaps & assumptions: Precise VC figures for HK are piecemeal (we rely on IPO tallies and reports) and Mainland data is often aggregate. We assume ongoing policy support and no major disruptions (e.g. new trade restrictions). Talent counts exclude cross-border flows. The comparative table mixes HK vs major hubs, but Shanghai/Beijing have their own metrics (beyond scope). All figures (e.g. funding totals, R&D spend) are drawn from official reports or industry analyses.

Between 2018 and 2026, Hong Kong has systematically built its life sciences and biotechnology ecosystem through a series of coordinated policy, market, and regulatory interventions. The journey began in 2018 when HKEX introduced Chapter 18A, allowing pre revenue biotech companies to list, fundamentally transforming Hong Kong into a viable fundraising destination for global biotech firms. This momentum was strengthened in 2019 with the launch of the Hang Seng Biotech Index, which provided investors with a structured benchmark to track sector performance and increased market visibility.

The focus then expanded beyond capital markets into cross border healthcare integration. In 2021, the introduction of the æ, ¯æ¼³è?¥æ¢°é?? scheme enabled Hong Kong approved drugs and medical devices to be used within select hospitals in the Greater Bay Area, accelerating patient access and commercial adoption. This was followed in 2022 by the launch of the OASES initiative, signalling strong government commitment to attracting life sciences and health technology companies into the city.

By 2023, Hong Kong had moved into a phase of regulatory and technological expansion. The introduction of Chapter 18C extended listing eligibility to advanced technology sectors including AI and diagnostics, while the 1 Plus drug registration pathway streamlined approval processes, reducing time to market for innovative therapies. In parallel, Hong Kong strengthened its clinical and regulatory positioning in 2024 with the establishment of the Greater Bay Area International

Clinical Trial Institute in the Hetao Zone and its recognition as an observer under global regulatory harmonisation frameworks, reinforcing its credibility as an internationally aligned regulatory environment.

Entering 2025, the ecosystem began to show clear scale, with approximately 73 biotech companies listed on HKEX, alongside complementary Mainland China initiatives such as biopharma expansion plans in free trade zones. By 2026, Hong Kong is expected to consolidate its position as a global biotech fundraising and innovation hub, supported by further regulatory enhancements and institutional developments such as the Hong Kong Centre for Medical Products Regulation. Collectively, these milestones reflect a deliberate strategy to position Hong Kong at the centre of the Greater China biotech ecosystem, bridging global capital, regional innovation, and accelerated healthcare access.

Disclaimer: This article is intended for informational and analytical purposes only. The views and interpretations presented are based on publicly available information and industry observations at the time of writing. They do not constitute financial, investment, regulatory, or professional advice. Readers are advised to conduct their own due diligence or consult appropriate experts before making any business or investment decisions.