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Greater China after the zero tariff: a new opening for South African wine and brandy

Since May 2026, South African wine and spirits enter mainland China free of customs duty, while Hong Kong has cut its tax on premium spirits and European brandy faces anti-dumping duties. For Cape producers, the alignment is rare. Converting it into lasting sales is another matter.

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A two-year window, opened on 1 May 2026

China now applies zero tariffs to imports from the African countries with which it has diplomatic relations. For South Africa, the preference covers goods cleared by Chinese customs between 1 May 2026 and 30 April 2028 [1]. The first consignment of South African wine cleared at Shenzhen Bay on the opening day: 6,000 bottles that would previously have paid between 14% and 20% duty [2]. The industry has responded quickly. Wines of South Africa calls the measure “a crucial opportunity”, and South Africa Wine describes it as “a market access reset”, with Chenin Blanc, Cap Classique and Pinotage at the heart of its promotional effort and a regional office in China [3].

The timing matters for producers. South African wine exports fell 4.7% in value in 2025, and the United States now applies a 30% tariff on South African wine [4]. Asia has become a priority market for diversification.

Brandy: an unexpected advantage

The opportunity is perhaps greatest in brandy. Since 5 July 2025, China has imposed anti-dumping duties of up to 34.9% on European brandy for five years; the large cognac houses escaped them only by committing to minimum export prices [5]. South African brandy, which previously paid the standard 10% duty on grape spirits [6], now enters at zero. Its credentials are established: KWV was named Brandy and Cognac Producer of the Year at the 2024 International Spirits Challenge, for the sixth time, and Van Ryn’s 15-year-old potstill brandy won “World’s Best Wine Brandy” at the World Drinks Awards in 2023 and 2024 [7][8]. In a

category where consumers know the cognac reference, a brandy of comparable quality at a lower shelf price has a credible story to tell.

Hong Kong: the showcase of Greater China

Hong Kong remains the place where the region discovers wine. It has charged no duty on wine and other drinks up to 30% alcohol since February 2008 [9], and since October 2024 it taxes spirits worth more than HK$200 at only 10% on the portion of value above that threshold, against 100% previously [10]. Wine imports reached HK$6.53 billion in 2025 and rose a further 16.2% in the first eight months of 2026 [11]. With an average import price of €27.16 per litre, Hong Kong is the most expensive wine market in the world [9]: a market for quality, not volume.

Its role is changing, however. Re-exports of wine fell 20.4% in value in 2025 [11], and analysts now see the city less as a transit hub for the mainland than as a destination market in its own right [9]. For a South African producer, Hong Kong is therefore a showcase and a market for premium wines, and a base from which mainland buyers can be met, rather than a back door into China.

Market and product	Customs duty (South African origin)	Other taxes at import
Mainland China, bottled wine	0% until 30 April 2028 (previously 14–20%) [1][2]	10% consumption tax and 13% VAT [12]
Mainland China, brandy	0% until 30 April 2028 (previously 10%) [1][6]	20% consumption tax plus ¥0.912 per litre, and 13% VAT [6]
Hong Kong, wine	None since 2008 [9]	No duty up to 30% alcohol [9]
Hong Kong, spirits above HK$200	10% on the portion above HK$200 [10]	100% on spirits valued at HK$200 or less [10]

Rates as reported by the sources cited. Exporters must confirm the tariff line and origin status of each product.

What the tariff does not settle

The duty has gone; the rest of the work remains. Every South African consignment must carry a certificate of origin issued by SARS, travel directly or under customs control, and avoid the lines subject to tariff-rate quotas [1]. Every winery and distillery must be registered with China's customs administration under Decree 280, in force since June 2026 [13], and labels must be in Chinese. The importer bears legal responsibility for the product on the mainland.

The market itself has contracted sharply: according to South Africa Wine, China's wine market is now about a third of its size five years ago, and South Africa has fallen to seventeenth place among its suppliers [3]. Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Georgia already enjoyed zero tariffs before South Africa [12]. And two years is short: finding and vetting an importer, completing registration, adapting labels and building a first round of reorders can absorb most of the window.

The decisive choice is therefore the partner: an importer with real access to the channels that matter for the product, whether banqueting and on-trade in tier-one cities, specialist wine shops or cross-border platforms; with the financial solidity to pay on time; and with a commercial plan that extends beyond April 2028.

THE FIRST EDIT AFRICA APPROACH

First Edit Africa in Cape Town and its sister company First Edit Asia in Hong Kong were built for this corridor. On the South African side, we help producers select the wines and brandies with the best chances in Greater China, prepare origin and export documentation, and define a price structure that holds from cellar to shelf. On the Chinese side, First Edit Asia identifies and vets importers and distributors, checks registration and labelling requirements, organises meetings in Hong Kong and on the mainland, and negotiates distribution agreements. Having opened brands in Shanghai and Hong Kong as well as in Cape Town, we bring producers a rare double perspective at the moment it matters most.

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