

Pull-out supplement

theFocus



The Ruins of St. Paul's Church, Macao. Completed in 1637, it was the biggest Catholic Church in East Asia at that time. The Church caught fire during a typhoon that hit Macao in 1835 leaving only the front façade and the grand stone stairs. (Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy flickr.com)

The ongoing story of Macao

In the late 15th century, Portugal's age of discoveries inaugurated the contemporary world system that finds its form today in 'globalization', directly contributing to the establishment of mercantile empire, the rise of the nation-state, and the formation of the modern imaginary. In 1557 the Portuguese claimed Macao, the first (and ultimately, the last) European territory in Asia, which would serve mainly as a center for trade and Catholic missions into China. Macao joined the far-flung Portuguese colonies that traced the empire's maritime explorations from the Azores and Madeira, to Senegal, Cape Verde, Guinea, Mozambique, Brazil, India, Malacca, Timor-Leste, and Nagasaki. Macao has effectively bookended the global era of the last half millennia and today the tiny city continues to play a rather remarkable role in the circulations of subjects, cultures, and capital through China.

Tim Simpson

The ongoing story of Macao *continued*

Macao's ambiguous territory and sovereignty

Throughout the nearly 450 years that Portugal exercised some claim to Macao the city's sovereign status was opaque, and this strategic ambiguity was opportunistically exploited by both China and Portugal. When the Portuguese first settled in Macao, China did not formally yield power to the Europeans, and "there was no agreement whatsoever specifying the size of the territory and its boundaries".¹ To some extent those unclear boundaries still exist today, especially in regards to the territorial rights to the seas that surround Macao and which are the site of the ongoing expansion of the city through large-scale land reclamation projects. Werner Breitung's geographical contribution to this Focus section highlights this territorial ambiguity. There is a lack of clear historical records regarding the exact administrative agreement forged between the Chinese and Portuguese in relation to Macao, and the territory never clearly belonged exclusively to one or the other power. Indeed what existed in Macao might best be understood as a unique form of shared sovereignty through which both Portugal and China extended limited authority over different dimensions of the city and its population. Cathryn Clayton refers to this status as Macao's "sort-of sovereignty", a designation she explores in her ethnographic contribution to the Focus.

Because of its informal definition, Macao's liminal identity proved useful to various state and non-state actors. Macao served as a conduit for not only commerce between Europe and China, but for China's illicit trade with Japan, which was otherwise forbidden by imperial edict. Not to be outdone, Britain also had interests in the enclave, which are discussed by historian Rogerio Puga in his contribution here.

Macao has been long known for tolerating vices that were forbidden in surrounding territories; such questionable commercial activities included smuggling, gambling, prostitution, opium production, and the coolie trade. Between 1850 and 1875, more than 70% of all Chinese indentured servants were recruited on the mainland and exported around the globe from Macao.² After Mao Tse-Tung's ascension to power in the PRC, one of Macao's roles was to function as a business and financial conduit for the Communist Party. The city facilitated various partnerships between the Chinese left and right, the overseas Chinese diaspora and the world beyond the PRC. Due to the economic blockade of China by western powers in the 1950s, Macao became "the conduit for huge quantities of products that were indispensable to the survival of the Maoist regime: petrol, metals, automobiles, chemical products, etc., which were purchased by the People's Republic of China's representative in the territory, the Nam Kwong Consortium".³

Macao's post-war role as a gold market likewise exploited the enclave's ambiguous status. Since Portugal refused to sign the post-war Bretton Woods Agreement, which tightly regulated the price of gold on the world market, Macao became a global hub for the gold trade. In 1948, the *Miss Macao*, a small seaplane transporting gold cargo between Hong Kong and Macao, became a historical footnote as the site of the first recorded air hijacking. From 1949 to 1973, 934 tons of gold were legally imported into Macao and presumably smuggled out again (though no official records document this process). "If all that bullion had stayed in Macao," mused Pina-Cabral, "the city would now be paved in gold".⁴ Visitors today to Macao's glittering megaresorts might not find that sentiment so far-fetched.



The contemporary transformation of Macao

Macao's ongoing, dramatic economic transformation is motivated by the expansion of the casino tourism industry. Gambling has been legal in Macao since 1847, and traditionally operated as a monopoly concession granted by the government administration to a private entrepreneur in exchange for a percentage of the revenue. Hong Kong billionaire Stanley Ho held that monopoly for 40 years prior to Portugal's return of the territory to China in 1999. After the handover the government liberalized the casino monopoly and opened it to investment by foreign gaming companies from North America, Australia, and Hong Kong, which have poured billions of dollars into the city. As a result, Macao has become the world's most lucrative site of casino gaming revenue. By 2010 Macao's casino revenue was quadruple that of Las Vegas, and Macao's 2012 gaming revenue totaled \$38 billion, an amount larger than was collectively generated by the entire commercial casino industry in the United States. The local government collects 40% of this revenue in gaming taxes. These enormous profits are driven by tourists; 28 million people visited Macao in 2012 alone, more than half of them from mainland China. When Chinese workers can serve as the engine of such unprecedented economic growth and of fabulous personal wealth for foreign entrepreneurs operating out of a shabby exterior ex-colonial enclave – and do so not as producers but as consumers – we are surely witnessing one of the major “epochal shifts in the constitutive relationship of production to consumption, and hence of labor to capital”.⁵ Macao's significance today, in the post-socialist transformation of China, parallels in some ways the city's autochthonous role in global trade.

Urban phantasmagoria

Transnational investment has created a phantasmagoric cityscape of iconic glass towers and themed casino resorts that sit alongside colonial-era buildings and monuments. Macao is undergoing a period of remarkable development; however, ‘development’ implies temporal progress, and the term obscures how history essentially stands still in Macao. Spatial production, not linear temporal evolution, defines the city. Macao is a palimpsest on whose surface is written the various historical stages of capital development and accumulation, from mercantilist maritime colonial expansion to neoliberal marketization. The spaces of the city have been endlessly reclaimed, reproduced, engineered, and commodified. For example, the same year that the labyrinthine city center of Macao, composed of old Portuguese government buildings, piazzas, and Catholic churches, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, investors broke ground nearby on a huge \$154 million Fisherman's Wharf featuring themed reproductions of a Roman Coliseum, Tang Dynasty Chinese architecture, buildings from Amsterdam, Lisbon, Cape Town, and Miami, and a simulated volcano.

The current construction trend tends towards an interiorized, encapsulated, and air-conditioned urbanity, as massive integrated resorts like Venetian Macao – the second largest building in the world – Sands-Cotai, and City of Dreams, constructed on reclaimed land between the islands of Coloane and Taipa, offer themed pseudo-metropolitan spaces in a completely privatized indoor locale. For its part, the Venetian includes the world's largest casino, 3000 hotel rooms, 350 retail shops, three indoor canals plied by Puccini-singing Filipino gondoliers, a 15000 seat auditorium for concerts by Beyonce and the Black-Eyed Peas, 1.2 million square feet of conference facilities, a large clinic offering a patented form of dental reconstruction surgery, and an off-campus facility of the University of Macau. With residences, shopping, dining, entertainment, a waterway, and medical and educational facilities, the Venetian constitutes a city unto itself, an enclave within an enclave.

“Nothing serious could ever happen here”?

Ordained by poet W. H. Auden in the 1930s as a city where “nothing serious could ever happen”, and whose citizens were described only thirty years ago as “among the most unrepresented, forgotten people in Asia”,⁶ Macao is now experiencing a remarkable resurgence. Nevertheless, today the Macanese and Portuguese communities combined comprise only a small percentage of the population. The Macanese or ‘Sons of the Earth’, those unrepresented indigenous residents of Macao, and their disappearing Patuá (Macao Creole), are the subject of the contribution to this Focus by Elisabela Larrea.

Macao's recent economic development has understandably been the catalyst for rapid growth of the local population, which increased by 27% between 2001 and 2011. With 552,503 people in a land mass of only 26.2 square km, Macao is now the most densely populated territory in the world. Significantly, 59% of the population was born outside of the city, including more than 107,000 non-resident workers currently living in the city on short-term work permits as well as many first-generation immigrants from the mainland. More than half of the local workers are employed in service industries: casinos, hotels, restaurants, and retail. This largely temporary and transient population, with many members who have no enduring civil commitment to the city – along with the significant influence of the ubiquitous gaming industry on local politics – creates challenges for establishing a civil society and normalized everyday urban life for the heterogeneous population. These topics are addressed respectively in the Focus contributions by Sonny Lo and Andy Fuller.

Macao's unique qualities have prompted increased interest from scholars working in a variety of academic disciplines, many of which are represented in this section: History, Anthropology, Political Science, Performance Studies, Geography, Communication and Cultural Studies. Rounding out this Focus on Macao Studies is a contribution by eminent historian Roderich Ptak, who reviews a four-volume reference work recently published by the University of Macau, arguably the most comprehensive resource available for Portuguese literate scholars interested in the city.

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Macao Skyline.
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Notes

- 1 Breitung, W. 2007. *Overcoming Borders/Living with Borders: Macao and the Integration with China*, Macau: Instituto Cultural, p.33.
- 2 Eadington, W.R. and Siu, R.C.S. 2007. 'Between law and custom: examining the interaction between legislative change and the evolution of Macao's casino industry', *International Gambling Studies* 7(1): 1-28.
- 3 Pina-Cabral, J. 2005. 'New age warriors: negotiating the handover on the streets of Macao', *Journal of Romance Studies* 5(1), p.6.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Comaroff, J. & Comaroff, J. 2000. 'Millennial capitalism: first thoughts on a second coming', *Public Culture* 12: 291-343, p.293.
- 6 Dicks, A.R. 1984. 'Macao: legal fiction and gunboat diplomacy', in Göran Aljmer (ed.) *Leadership on the China Coast*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, London and Malmö: Curzon Press, p.90.