

Macau in the eyes of a border scholar

Places are created by the interplay of people and geographical space. Their identity is shaped by these people and by geographical factors, which determine the opportunities, limitations and conditions for human place-making. Macau as a unique place is mainly defined by two geographical factors: the sea and the border to China. The significance of the sea is most apparent from the fact that about two thirds of the current land surface has been reclaimed from the sea. It is also apparent from the role of fishermen, seafarers and other maritime trades in Macau's history, from the imaginary of the Praia Grande, bridges and the Guia Lighthouse, and from the cultural diversity of a former port city and colonial outpost. Macau has always been a maritime and an international place.

Werner Breitung



AT THE SAME TIME, Macau has also always been a border city and gateway to China. She is mainly built and populated by border-crossers from the Cantonese hinterland and shaped by a multitude of cross-border flows. Her economy and unique culture are derived from the geographical identity as a border city. This notably refers not only to the connecting functions of the border, but also to the counterforce of separation and difference. Macau always benefitted from differences in laws and regulations *vis-à-vis* China, which allowed trade and businesses to flourish when they were banned elsewhere. This is most obvious for the gambling industry, but we could also think of the production of fire crackers. The current back bone of Macau's economy, tourism, is also based on difference – in this case a different culture and heritage, as well as a different gambling legislation. The combination of proximity and difference, of connection and separation is essential for the place identity of border cities in general and of Macau in particular.

As much as the understanding of the border can help us to understand Macau, Macau can also help us in the conceptualisation of borders. The field of border studies has flourished in the past 20 years, when globalisation and the end of the cold war saw the number of independent states and thus also international borders grow, and simultaneously the functions and openness of these borders change.¹ These developments called for a more differentiated account of bordering processes, dynamics of permeability and of the meanings borders have for the state and for border communities. In accordance are the number and diversity of emerging case studies from fields such as anthropology, geography, international politics and economics multiplied, and – more importantly – new theoretical conceptualisations of borders.²

The case of Macau is very illustrative for this new, more differentiated understanding of borders. Recent studies of this border city show how the meanings and functions of the border have constantly been constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and renegotiated by local and more distant actors, even if the border has not changed in space. The case of Macau also shows that the old fixation on international borders, as lines between sovereign countries, does not fit the reality of a world with globalised flows and graduated sovereignties. International borders can become localised by everyday practices of border-crossing and petty trade; and local borders can become internationalised when state control is enacted in train stations and airports or when the campus of the University of Macau is surrounded by a quasi-international border. Whether Macau's border is, or ever was, an international border can be answered based on constitutional considerations and inter-state relations, but for the reality and the actual meaning of the border other categories such as permeability and identity are much more important. They can disclose not only the detailed and layered constituents, but also the dynamics of the border.

Ambiguity in space and character: history of Macau's borders

When in 1557 the Portuguese were allowed to settle in Macau, it was not meant as a transfer of territory or sovereignty. Therefore, no treaty was signed to specify any boundaries. In practice, the Portuguese settled in the southwest of the Macau Peninsula between Penha Hill and Monte Fortress. Between this settlement and the long and narrow isthmus connecting the peninsula to the mainland were fields and small Chinese settlements.³ Macau was under the administration of Xiangshan, today Zhongshan,

in Guangdong. While allowing the Portuguese to settle and conduct trade in Macau, the Chinese rulers upheld their claim of sovereignty over the whole area and the jurisdiction over the Chinese living there.⁴ The Portuguese had to pay a ground rent and customs taxes, and they were only allowed to exercise jurisdiction over matters within their own community. Based on a close liaison between the local mandarins and Macau's Senate, sovereignty was shared more along ethnic lines than along geographical boundaries.⁵

However, physical boundaries in space have also always existed. The first border structure in Macau was a wooden wall erected by the Portuguese. In 1573, the Chinese built a Barrier Gate, so they could cut off the peninsula from the mainland. In 1605, the Portuguese built a city wall about 2 km south of the Barrier Gate. None of the two structures was intended to demarcate the territory of Macau, but merely to serve practical purposes such as containing crime and controlling access. They were also not fortified. The current Barrier Gate is from 1870, when the Portuguese military destroyed the original gate to replace it with a western style building.⁶

This was the time when other colonial powers, most notably the British, had established their presence in China with better conditions forcibly obtained from the weak Qing Government. In this environment, the Portuguese also raised demands, such as full sovereignty over Macau and territorial expansion. The notorious governor Ferreira do Amaral in the 1840s unilaterally closed the Chinese customs posts in the city, stopped paying the ground rent and levied taxes on the Chinese citizens of Macau. Furthermore, the Portuguese jurisdiction was extended to the whole area up to the Barrier Gate. Ferreira do Amaral is until today remembered by the Chinese as an evil colonialist.

The Macao Barrier Gate (Portas do Cerco) was built in 1870. In 2004 an immigration and customs building (Posto Fronteiriço das Portas do Cerco) was erected during the renovation of the area, and now towers over the nineteenth century gate. (Image courtesy of flickr)

His grand statue had to be removed and returned to Portugal before the handover in 1999. However, the key link between Macau and the border to China, the former isthmus leading to the Barrier Gate, is still called *Istmo de Ferreira do Amaral* in Portuguese, in remembrance of the fact that this was where the governor was beheaded by angry Chinese. This name is acceptable because the Chinese name refers to the Barrier Gate, not to Ferreira do Amaral. Again, the boundary here is not so much territorial, but cultural. Two different, even opposing sets of memory share the same space, divided only by the mutually unfamiliar languages.

Territorial expansion also started during this time. Portugal seized the two islands of Taipa in 1851, Coloane in 1864 and Ilha Verde in 1890, and claimed Montanha (Big Hengqin), Dom João (Small Hengqin) and Lapa (Wanzai), which lie to the west of the Inner Harbour. Their annexation promised to resolve the problem of the divided harbour and provide land, water supply and protection for the port. The Portuguese built houses and even a cemetery on these islands. In Montanha they reportedly also collected taxes.⁷ Chinese historians, however, emphasise the resistance by the Chinese on these islands against Portuguese occupation during the Qing dynasty and especially under Kuomintang rule.⁸

Sino-Portuguese negotiations to delineate the border were held in 1862, 1887, 1909 and 1928,⁹ but all of them failed. The 1887 agreement included the confirmation of “perpetual occupation and government of Macau by Portugal”, but this treaty has never been ratified by China.¹⁰ In 1979, after the Carnation Revolution, Portugal established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China and, in a secret note, gave up the claim of sovereignty.¹¹ Both sides agreed to the formula “Chinese territory under Portuguese administration” – basically meaning Portugal did not claim sovereignty and China did not exercise it – but even then definition of territory and demarcation of boundaries were avoided. In the words of Cremer “neither the borders nor the questions of nationality, sovereignty and government have ever been as clearly defined as for other countries. Even the formula of ‘Chinese territory under Portuguese administration’ (...) does not really clarify the status of Macau. Rather this formula confirms that Macau is unique and that it is difficult and perhaps not appropriate to define Macau in familiar legal terms”.¹²

While international relations were often difficult, local interactions with the surrounding Chinese districts were generally less complicated. Macau depended on the China trade and on food and water from the mainland. In 1887, Zhang Zhidong wrote: “merchants from the districts of Nanhai, Panyu, Xiangshan and Shunde, exceeding tens of thousands, come and go between Macau and the province. They frequently set up livelihoods and establish businesses in both places, unrestrained by the borders, which causes excessive lawlessness among the people. Their endless traffic is like the weaving of cloth”.¹³ In fact, this description of cross-border flows sounds very familiar from today’s perspective.

Such close interaction later facilitated political infiltration in both directions. Sun Yatsen’s 1911 revolution in China benefitted strongly from contacts and supply from Macau. Sun himself was born in Macau’s hinterland and had close connections to the city. Inversely, during the Cultural Revolution in 1966, violent protests erupted also in Macau. They were met with much less opposition than in neighbouring Hong Kong. During the cold war, Macau was a centre of espionage and the border was a cold-war border, but it did not represent the same ideological divide as the border of Hong Kong or the Iron Curtain in Europe.

From conflict to tacit agreement: post 1999 cross-border cooperation

When China retreated from ideology and opened up, cross-border contacts started to flourish. With the establishment of the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone in the 1980s and Macau’s handover in 1999, cross-border contacts and integration have grown further.

Politically, Macau became a Special Administrative Region of China, following the example of Hong Kong. While the sovereignty lies with the People’s Republic of China, a high degree of autonomy is guaranteed. Macau can join international organisations, has an independent judiciary and administration and issues its own currency. All these are actually important aspects of sovereignty, which lie with the Macau government, not with the sovereign in Beijing. The Chinese army has a garrison in Macau but does not recruit soldiers there; the Special Administrative Region does not engage in foreign, but in external affairs – an arguably rather vague difference – and the Central Government is not directly involved in the selection of leading officials, but in reality it determines the outcome. Therefore, sovereignty is uncontested, but it is still de facto shared and not very clear-cut.

Even the boundaries are still not clearly defined. In 1999, the Chinese State Council published a map and related text (Annex to Decree No. 275) to define the territory of Macau. The former, however, does not show any boundary, neither at sea nor at land, and the latter only states: “The area of the Macau SAR includes the Macau peninsula and the islands of Taipa and Coloane. The Northern Zone of the Macau SAR borders on the terrestrial area of Gongbei in the City of Zhuhai in Guangdong province. To the south of the Arch of Barrier Gate the jurisdiction is exercised by the Macau SAR. The form of administration of the land between the front Tower of the Banner of the Gongbei (Zhuhai) Frontier Post and the north of the Arch of Barrier Gate is maintained unchanged. The Macau SAR maintains its jurisdiction over the former Macau maritime area”.¹⁴ This carefully circumvents the two unclear issues: the so-called no-man’s land between the Gongbei Frontier Post and the Barrier Gate, whose administration “is maintained unchanged”, whatever this means, and the so-called traditional waters, which have never been defined.

The issue of the no-man’s land became important with plans for new border control facilities, due to increased demand. A new checkpoint on the Zhuhai side opened in 1999, but the Macau counterpart could not expand without encroaching into the no-man’s land. Only after the handover of Macau could an agreement with the mainland be reached to lease 2.8 ha of land between the two checkpoints. The lease will expire after 50 years.

The issue of the maritime border is even more important in a city that has gained most of its land by reclamation. Macau and the surrounding Chinese islands have grown several times their original size. Maritime space is rapidly turned into land on both sides without any clear agreement as to whom the sea actually belongs. Since the maritime border is fluid in any sense, the solidification of land also means a solidification of territorial claims. Therefore both sides have eagerly reclaimed land vis-à-vis each other, and the distance between them kept shrinking. The most extreme case of this can be observed around Ilha Verde (Green Island), which is now surrounded by reclaimed land of both jurisdictions. It is quite symbolic that this was later the place to turn competition into co-operation and set up a cross-border industrial zone.

Macau officials treated both the agreement on the no-man’s land and the industrial park as trial balloons for the bigger project of jointly developing Zhuhai’s Hengqin Island, which is more than twice the size of Macau. Hengqin, less than 200m away from Macau’s Taipa and Coloane Islands, is closer to Macau than to urban Zhuhai. Macau has always had an eye on Hengqin, but the mainland side did not want to appear as belatedly accepting old Portuguese claims. Other more practical hindrances were military installations on that island, complicated land-use arrangements between Zhuhai and Shunde¹⁵ and unresolved issues of how to control access, how to define the legal status and what exactly to build on this land. Plans and works are now under way to build a business hub at an extremely ambitiously scale, several leisure and tourism facilities and, as the first completed complex, the new campus of the University of Macau. This cross-border university campus symbolises and perpetuates a centuries-old tradition of shared sovereignty in Macau.

Border guardhouse on Hengqin, the mainland PRC island directly adjacent to Macau. (courtesy of Werner Breitung)



Permeability and meaning: the view from the ground

Border regimes are determined not only by inter-state relationships, but also by everyday practices of border communities and by the representation of borders in peoples’ minds. Since the early 1980s, the Macau-Zhuhai border became increasingly permeable for Macau residents. Due to the ease of border-crossing, the proximity of Zhuhai to the Macau urban core and existing contacts especially with Zhongshan, border-crossing became a feature of Macau people’s life. In 2002, the average Macau resident crossed the border around 40 times per year. The overall number of border-crossings between Macau and the mainland reached around 30 million in 2000 and then surged to 63 million in 2004.¹⁶ The reason for this accelerated increase was the counter-flow of visitors from the mainland to Macau, which only really started in the early 2000s.

Although the immigration checks on both sides are very strict, the border is not really experienced as a barrier, but merely as an entrance gate. It still has a strong symbolic function. Interviews and surveys by the author¹⁷ have shown a strong sense of difference regarding places and people, which is symbolised by the border and the action of border-crossing. Despite the actual similarity in culture and national self-identification, most respondents would be opposed to the removal of border controls. The most common fears were a loss of security, excessive population growth and a more competitive labour market. Even a Chinese who recently moved to Macau in search of opportunities herself, said: “The security would be bad. Everyone could enter Macau if they want. Many poor Chinese people would come to Macau and search opportunities to become rich.” A recurrent theme in many of the more emotional statements was that of a “crowd of people that would come.” It was often linked with crime, bad behaviour or even diseases. Additionally, many interviewees saw the border as a symbol of Macau’s autonomy, which needs to be preserved: because of differences in identity and culture, because of the better political system or because of economic advantages.¹⁸

Even though the border is guaranteed to remain in place for 50 years following the handover, and changes in the actual border regime have been very gradual, the meaning and permeability of the border has changed tremendously. The dynamics of change have been driven by both changes on the political level and local agency of border communities. The interplay of these two factors and the related ambiguities throughout the history make Macau an intriguing study field for border studies.

Werner Breitung is Professor in the Department of Urban Planning and Design, Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, Jiangsu, China. (breitung@gmail.com). The research for this article was funded by the Cultural Bureau of the Macau SAR Government and has earlier been published in more detail (see notes below).

Notes

- Newman, D. & A. Paasi. 1998. ‘Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 22(2):186-207.
- Brunet-Jailly, E. 2005. ‘Theorizing borders – an interdisciplinary perspective’, *Geopolitics*, 10:633–649.
- Calado, M., M.C. Mendes & M. Toussaint. 1985. *Macau – Memorial city on the estuary of the River of Pearls*. Macao: Government of Macau.
- Wai Hing Yuan. 1999. 有關粵澳關係史研究的若干問題 [‘Some questions related to the history of research on the Guangdong-Macau relationship’], *Journal of Macau Studies* 10:66-94.
- de Pina-Cabral, J. 2002. ‘Between China and Europe. Person, culture and emotion in Macao’, *London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology*, 74. London/New York: Continuum.
- Shipp, S. 1997. *Macau, China – A political history of the Portuguese colony’s transition to Chinese rule*. Jefferson(USA): McFarland.
- Gunn, G. 1996. *Encountering Macau*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- ibid., Wai 1999
- ibid., Shipp 1997
- ibid., Gunn 1996
- Edmonds, R.L. 1989. ‘Macau’, *World Bibliographical Series*, 105. Oxford: Clío Press.
- Cremer, R.D. 1987. ‘Introduction’, in R.D. Cremer (ed.) *Macau, city of commerce and culture*. Hong Kong: UEA Press, pp. 1-4.
- Porter, J. 1996. *Macau – the imaginary city. Culture and society 1557 to the present*. Boulder (USA): Westview Press; p.52
- Região Administrativa Especial de Macau. 1999. ‘Aviso do Chefe do Executivo n.º 7/1999’, *Boletim Oficial*, Serie 1, no. 2, Segunda-feira, 27.12.1999.
- Breitung, W. 2007. *Overcoming borders, living with borders – Macau and the integration with China*. Instituto Cultural do Governo da RAE de Macau.
- Breitung, W. 2009. ‘Macau residents as border people – a changing border regime from a socio-cultural perspective’, *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs - China aktuell*, 38(1):101-127.
- ibid., Breitung 2007, 2009
- ibid., Breitung 2007