

# Macau's 'sort-of sovereignty'

As you stroll through the exuberantly neon-drenched architectural massifs that line the streets of downtown Macau and Cotai in 2013, the city's history of Portuguese rule may seem like a very distant memory. Fourteen years after the handover to Chinese administration and a decade after a change in the regulatory framework allowed a massive flow of foreign capital into the casino economy, the city's orientation toward mainland China and its affinities with other 'tourist utopias' like Las Vegas and Dubai<sup>1</sup> may seem to have overwhelmed all but the most superficial Iberian influences. But dig a little deeper, listen a little harder, and it is evident that two of the questions that provoked the most anxious debate among Macau residents in the waning years of Portuguese rule still resonate today: What is the nature of Macau's difference from its Chinese neighbors? And to what extent is that difference attributable to the city's history of Portuguese rule?

Cathryn H. Clayton



## Identitarian project

In the mid-1990s, with the knowledge that more than four centuries of Portuguese rule would be coming to a negotiated end in a few short years, the Portuguese administration mounted a massive campaign to convince Macau residents, 95% of whom identified as Chinese, that they could lay proud claim to an identity that made them different from all other Chinese people: an identity that had resulted from the 450-year history not of colonialism, but of a kind of shared sovereignty that was unique in the modern world. This project required a thorough transformation of the dominant image of Macau as a colonial backwater, a seedy, decaying 'city of sin', and of the Portuguese administration's image as a corrupt and inept colonial power that had presided over—and benefited from—this decay.

In the years just prior to the handover, the Portuguese state's project became one of convincing both its own residents and observers around the world that Macau's history and culture should be sources of pride to its current residents. Macau was the earliest and most enduring site of respectful, amicable relations between Chinese and Westerners. It was an exemplar of multicultural tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Its residents were not abjected and corrupted by centuries of collaboration with the forces of European imperialism; instead, their experience of Portuguese rule had made them the bearers of a kind of Chineseness that was at once more rooted and more cosmopolitan than any other. In promoting this identitarian project, the Portuguese government had to cut through powerful anti-colonial nationalist ideologies of the coterminousness of blood, land, language and sovereign power, and create instead a unified Macau identity fashioned around allegiance to the place, Macau, and to a particular understanding of the history that had made that place what it was today.

## Recasting the narrative of Macau history

This attempt to effect a transvaluation of values in terms of how Macau was viewed in the modern world may seem like little more than a colonial government's self-serving attempt to deny its own colonialism and whitewash the otherwise dreary effects of its presence; yet it garnered tacit support from the staunchly anti-imperialist Communist Party of China (CPC) in Beijing. Macau was to be incorporated into the Chinese nation-state under the rubric of the 'one country, two systems' policy, in which both Macau and Hong Kong would maintain the political, economic, social and cultural 'systems' they had evolved under European rule, at precisely the same time that China was gearing up for closer and more formal integration into the global capitalist economy (its bid to join the WTO was successful in 2001). If Macau's 'system' could be defined as a harbinger of China's role in bringing about harmony and prosperity through the civilizing effects of international trade—rather than as the outcome of the exploitation, racism, and 'national humiliation' associated with colonialism—it would not only justify Beijing's decision to effectively exempt two major cities from the policies that applied to the rest of the nation, it would prove to the world that in China, the roots of capitalist globalization ran deep, and thus that China deserved to be treated not as "a problem for world trade,"<sup>2</sup> but as a valued partner in the creation of global prosperity.

As a result of this convergence of interests between Lisbon and Beijing, the project of recasting the narrative of Macau history took palpable form in the city. In the last decade of its administration, Macau's Portuguese administration spent millions of dollars creating ten new museums, restoring historical buildings and monuments, and publishing (in Chinese, Portuguese, and English) hundreds of books and magazines dedicated to valorizing the glories of the past, when Macau had been an anchor for trade routes that spanned

the globe from Lisbon to Acapulco and had played host to scholars, poets and playwrights such as Matteo Ricci, Luís de Camões and Tang Xianzu. It sponsored dozens of academic conferences and staged an impressive number of cultural events, all aimed at establishing Macau's historical role as a precursor of globalization and at re-imagining the city as a kind of heroic, subversive alternative to the "Anglophone hegemony"<sup>3</sup> of modernity that had relegated both Portugal and China to its margins.

## Different from all other Chinese

Among the residents it was directed towards, this project had mixed results. Some Macau residents found the celebration of Macau's early cosmopolitan stature to be a refreshing change from the usual view of Macau as a washed-up, second-rate Hong Kong. Others disagreed with the state's views of what Macau's 'true' identity was, but found that the conversation about what made Macau unlike other Chinese places was worth having. And many others, it must be said, dismissed the 'identity' project as the pathetic fiction of a morally bankrupt colonial administration. Yet the sheer volume of ink and concrete that were expended on the goal of convincing Macau residents that they were different from all other Chinese, because of their experience of an *alien rule that was not colonial*, raised real questions about the meaning of sovereignty (what was 'sovereignty', such that Macau's past could be construed as 'not colonial?'), of Chineseness (what was 'Chineseness', such that the Chinese in Macau were 'different?'), and of the intersection between them.

The answer to these questions, and which was promoted in government-sponsored museums and publications, defined sovereignty in terms of military, political, economic and cultural supremacy; by this definition, the Portuguese had not been colonizers because they had never held such supremacy. They had not used force to wrest Macau from Ming control; the Portuguese settlement there had been the result of negotiation and compromise. For three hundred years, they had paid ground rent to the Chinese authorities in return for permission to maintain a settlement on the Macau peninsula; when requested, they had provided valuable military aid to the Ming and Qing governments; their representatives had performed the kowtow to the emperor and had accepted titles indicating that they had been incorporated into the imperial bureaucracy centered in Beijing. For three hundred years, they had governed only themselves, inside the walls of the city, while recognizing their total dependence on the emperor and his subjects for even the barest necessities like water and food. Indeed, on several occasions, at the first sign of Portuguese truculence, the Chinese authorities had ordered all their subjects to evacuate the city, effectively starving the Portuguese into submission.

## A 'half-liberated area'

Yet, the argument went, this did not mean that the Portuguese had been mere vassals of the Chinese empire. Often, the Portuguese crown had acted as if it *were* supreme ruler of the territory. In 1586, for example, the Viceroy of Goa, acting on the assumption that he, not the Ming emperor, had jurisdiction over Macau, elevated its administrative status from a settlement (*povoação*) to a city (*cidade*). In 1846, Lisbon sent Governor Ferreira do Amaral to unilaterally assert Portugal's formal sovereignty over the entire territory by refusing to recognize the authority of any Qing official within Macau's borders, and claiming jurisdiction over land and people (Chinese as well as Portuguese) far beyond the existing city walls. And in 1887, Qing officials had been compelled to sign the Sino-Portuguese Treaty of Friendship and Commerce, which recognized "the perpetual occupation and government of Macau and its dependencies by Portugal". But even then, the argument continued, when Portugal's formal claim to sovereignty over Macau had apparently been recognized by international law, the Portuguese had never imposed their language, religion, political ideologies or educational standards upon the Chinese people under their rule. Thus the history of the Portuguese presence in Macau was presented as one of shared sovereignty, a 'sort-of sovereignty', in which the answer to the question "who's in charge here?" was entirely contextual and often deliberately ambiguous.

This historical narrative and this conception of the nature of Portuguese rule did not go unchallenged during the transition era. Some Macau residents maintained a more common-sense definition of colonialism as simply any foreign occupation of Chinese soil; they pointed to the structure of the city's political system, which consistently advantaged Portuguese people and Portuguese speakers, to argue that the entire history of Portuguese presence had been colonial in nature. Some historians suggested that the 'colonial' period had begun only with the arrival of Ferreira do Amaral in 1846 when, influenced by the example of the British in Hong Kong, Portugal had begun to insist that the existence of a self-governing Portuguese settlement on Chinese soil was itself evidence of Portugal's *de facto* sovereignty over

Above: Neon Macao. (Photo reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of flickr.com)

## ... and the contested meanings of cultural heritage

the territory. Others suggested that, regardless of when it had begun, the colonial period had ended in 1966, when Maoist-inspired demonstrations and boycotts had forced the Portuguese administration to accede to a series of demands that had made Macau, as the saying went, a 'half-liberated area'.

### Hybridity and illegitimacy

But more intense debate surrounded the question of how Macau's past had shaped residents' sense of their own Chineseness. In the government's narrative, this history of 'sort-of sovereignty' had made Macau residents 'sort-of Chinese' – "Latin Chinese", as one publication put it.<sup>4</sup> This transculturation was evident in the hybrid architecture of the buildings they created, the hybrid cuisine they developed, and the notably 'laid-back', tolerant character – and the intimate, small-town feel – of the city they inhabited. During the transition era, Macau's small community of ethnically mixed residents, known as the Macanese, became the symbol par excellence of this hybridity: in phenotypical, linguistic, culinary, religious and genetic terms, they were the ultimate expression of the spirit of peaceful, generative exchange between diverse peoples that the Portuguese administration was trying to claim as its legacy.

At the same time that the government was promoting this image of Macau as a land of peace and tolerance, however, the triad gangs who controlled access to the most lucrative VIP rooms in Macau's ten casinos entered into a turf war that was waged as much in the media as it was on the streets of downtown Macau. In 1997 and 1998, newspaper reports of drive-by shootings in broad daylight, rashes of car and motorcycle bombings, and a mounting homicide rate were matched only by the coverage of Broken Tooth Koi, the flashy and flamboyantly unapologetic lord of Macau's underworld, who gave interviews to *Time Magazine* and produced a thinly veiled autobiographical film featuring some of the best-known artists of Hong Kong action films. As tourists began staying away in droves and Macau's economy came to a stand-still, residents began to measure the Portuguese administration by a standard of sovereign power that was calibrated not just in terms of the monopoly on legitimate force, but in terms of a monopoly on symbolic authority: the government was illegitimate because it could control neither the criminals on its streets nor the way those criminals were represented in the international media.

Broken Tooth's film, like triad lore more broadly, drew on long-standing mythologies of righteous outlaws that mobilize some of the core symbols of Chinese political, religious, and literary culture to portray the triads as reluctant heroes in a corrupt world. The Portuguese state played right into this

Above: Triads' Revenge: in the late 1990s, arson attacks on motorcycles became a common tactic in the triad turf war, and a symbol of a more ruinous interpretation of the effects of Portuguese rule. (Photo by Cathryn Clayton, used by permission)



Below: Leal Senado Square, 1999: the "peaceful coexistence of East and West" took palpable form in the city, as the state spent millions to restore picturesque old buildings. (Photo by Cathryn Clayton, used by permission)



narrative by responding to the street violence with a degree of passivity that most Macau residents found unacceptable. Portuguese officials tried to downplay their inability to stop the violence by suggesting that the triads were an endemic problem in Chinese society that 'outsiders' could do nothing about; they tried to calm the public's nerves by suggesting that law-abiding citizens had nothing to worry about because the triad hit men were professionals who never missed their target. They suggested (only obliquely in public, but quite explicitly in interviews with me) that the surge in violence must be due to gangsters from over the border in China, since Macau's own homegrown thugs were of a more gentlemanly type who would never resort to such ruthlessness. Even though many Macau residents actually agreed with some of these sentiments, the fact that they had been uttered out loud by some of the highest representatives of the state simply confirmed the view that the Portuguese government was an alien and illegitimate regime, and that the 'sort-of sovereignty' it was claiming to have invented was nothing but an excuse for its incompetence, corruption and complete inability to govern.

### A prosperous post-handover future?

In the late 1990s, then, it seemed that in its attempt to make Macau and its history a source of pride for its residents, the Portuguese administration was fighting a losing battle. Many Chinese residents I spoke with did find some aspects of this project meaningful – the representation of Macau's past in the Macau Museum, for example, was remarkably popular, and I spoke with numerous people who worried that if the uniqueness of Macau's 'system' were not clearly defined and defended, the city would lose its autonomy and become little more than an appendage of neighboring Zhuhai. But for the most part, anger and impatience over the triad situation, frustration with the economic stagnation, the surge of nationalist discourse in conjunction with the handover, and uncertainty about the post-handover future combined to make Macau residents singularly unreceptive to the message that they should take pride in their history or in anything Portuguese about their city.

Macau's Portuguese past was not something upon which a prosperous future could be built; it was something that had to be overcome in order for prosperity to arise. Some people hoped, and others feared, that with the departure of the Portuguese, the process of overcoming that past by dismantling all traces of it in the present would commence in earnest. Within a decade, Portuguese observers predicted with despair, Macau would become indistinguishable from any other Chinese city.

Which brings us back to Macau in 2013. What Portuguese observers could not have predicted was that in the decade following the handover, Macau weathered a casino-driven economic boom that has given it not just the highest per capita GDP in Asia, but also corruption scandals, mass protests over imported labor and soaring housing prices, and a near tripling of the number of tourist visits per year (well over 20 million, compared to an average of 7-8 million in the late 1990s). The pace and direction of this change has led to renewed anxiety over the same questions posed by the Portuguese administration in the 1990s: what is it that makes Macau Macau, and is that something under threat of disappearing?

The new administration's answer to these questions bears striking resemblance to the Portuguese discourse of Macau identity. Publications and speeches by representatives of the SAR administration are studded with sentences that could have been lifted verbatim from the writings of the last Portuguese governor, Vasco Rocha Vieira: sentences such as "having experienced the peaceful coexistence of multiple cultures for more than 400 years, Macau has become a melting pot where the Chinese culture and other cultures are mutually accommodating, and the ethics of tolerance, openness, and diligence flourish".<sup>5</sup> As Lam Wai-man points out, the post-handover narrative has a more nationalistic bent, which claims Macau residents as fully and proudly Chinese rather than just "sort-of" Chinese.<sup>6</sup> But the end product – an official discourse on Macau's unique identity that credits the history of non-colonial Portuguese rule for having created a community characterized by cultural hybridity, ethnic diversity, and peaceful coexistence – certainly appears to be a continuation, and thus validation, of the romanticized narrative of Macau history that had fallen on such deaf ears when it was promoted by the Portuguese.

This time, however, the narrative seems to be meeting with more success. A survey done in 2007 showed that some 66% of Macau residents felt proud of being from Macau (compared to just 38% in 1999); the local Chinese-language newspaper, which before the handover had been a vocal critic of all things Portuguese, now runs articles extolling the 'charms of Europe' that can attract both tourists and residents to revitalize the older parts of the city. Now that Beijing has indicated that capitalizing on Macau's ties to the Lusophone world could benefit both the city and the entire Chinese nation; now that the local administration has made public security and well-being a priority; now that the frustrations with Portuguese rule have been replaced with new frustrations and realities; and now that the sleepy, small-town quality of life in Macau becomes increasingly difficult to find, it seems that many Macau residents have found new meaning in the once-discredited vision of how Macau's past could form the foundations for its future.

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### Notes

- 1 Simpson, Tim. 2012. *Tourist Utopias: Las Vegas, Dubai, Macau*. Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 177, February 2012, [www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm](http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/pub/wps.htm).
- 2 Rofel, Lisa. 2007. *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, p.178.
- 3 Ptak, Roderich. 1998. 'Macau: China's Window to the Latin World?' Paper presented at the International Symposium on the Culture of Metropolis in Macau, 14-18 Sept. 1998, Macau.
- 4 Direcção dos Serviços de Turismo e Comunicação Social do Governo de Macau. 1979. *Macau: Um Vislumbre de Glória (Macau: A Glimpse of Glory)*. Hong Kong: Ted Thomas.
- 5 Lam, Wai-man. 2010. 'Promoting Hybridity: The Politics of the New Macau Identity.' *China Quarterly* 203:656-674; p.669.
- 6 Ibid., p.670.