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Macau's Handover—A Personal Account

João de Pina-Cabral

Abstract: This paper is a brief personal description of the Handover Ceremony for Macau when it ceased to be a Portuguese colony after four and a half centuries, on 20 December 1999. The description aims to highlight the political, economic and ethnic complexity of the event.

Macau—The Evening of 20 December 1999

The spotlights make everything shine brighter. Artificially induced wind, blowing from inside sophisticated metallic flag posts, keeps the colours of China and Portugal fluttering as if at a breezy seaside—the red and the gold mix together, punctuated by flashes of dark green. Beneath them, neatly dressed soldiers and sailors take up their positions in elaborate alignments and trumpets sound. Politicians solemnly take their seats.

Around me in the select audience, people have gathered in political groups, avidly checking out who is where and with whom. Many of us in each national camp know each other, since to have been invited to this ceremony at all you had to have played a public role in one way or another in Macau in the past few years. In my case, I was the author of a published ethnographic monograph on the city's Eurasians.¹ We also know many of the guests in the opposite national camp. Some people even surprise everyone by the camp they have chosen to sit under.

Beneath the flags, the politicians make their largely circumstantial speeches, but for all the grand moral terms they may use, none of the big shots feels

anything much for the city. The Portuguese president (Jorge Sampaio), a soft-spoken, upper-middle-class lawyer whose red hair signals his British ancestry, shows that he is full of all sorts of good intentions. This is, he says, the ceremony making the last of the Portuguese Empire and bringing to an end a process that started in the early fifteenth century. In Macau alone, subjects of the Portuguese crown have lived and died since the late sixteenth century. The way he puts it, this is a grand victory morally for Portugal. The truth, however, is that for this man, born in Lisbon and raised in London (where his father was a university professor), whose life has had nothing to do with distant imperial lands, these are only vague notions with little human content—there is no flesh to his well-chosen words, no bitter post-colonial taste of broken allegiance.

In their turn, for the politicians who have come from faraway Peking—whose personal roots are in the Shanghai local government—Macau is a distant outpost, a mere question of protocol to be resolved in the face of a new world order in which they know perfectly well they are going to be major players. They are there merely to assume formally the overlordship that they have exercised quietly ever since they took up the red flag from the dying hands of Mao, roughly two decades before. All this is part of their carefully executed plan to take back to Shanghai the economic hegemony that Hong Kong temporarily exercised after the Second World War.

For nearly five centuries Macau has been a marginal territory, a frontier between empires. The agreements on the basis of which this border is drawn and kept stable are seldom explicit. Usually peace reigns. Now and then, however, when it becomes necessary to change the terms of these unstated (and often equivocal) agreements, violence erupts. These are Macau's famous *incidentes*, as regular in their return as unpredictable in their timing.

For the Portuguese the final years were especially difficult. After the Hong Kong handover in 1997, Macau became a battlefield where Southern China gangsters regrouped their forces with a view to the changes that were coming ahead. The city's residents turned into unwitting witnesses to a spectacle of blazing guns and burning motorbikes. Predictably, this came to a sudden halt in November 1999, precisely a month before the handover. After that, no one could seriously believe that the Peking overlords had any intention of ending the Territory's marginal status. The only difference being that, from now on, Macau will be on the Chinese side of the border. In any case, if it were to lose its position on the border between China and the world, its reason for survival would vanish into thin air. So, as the Portuguese left, the Las Vegas gambling

cars took on the economic leadership of the city, integrating Macau into their transnational empire. But this I was only to discover later, in 2002, when Macau's economy suddenly boomed thanks to gambling tourism; a spurt of economic growth that, five years later, has not yet peaked.

For at least two of the men meeting on the ceremonial stage, however, all this had much more meaning than for distant politicians. The similar grey suits of the two governors (the outgoing, General Vasco Rocha Vieira, and the incoming, Edmund Ho Hau-Wah) seemed designed to hide the truly colourful difference between them. These are men placed on the border, but whose hearts have nothing of the border in them.

On one side, there is the Portuguese general, whose unswayable sense of personal glory was the only thing that kept him going through those three dark years at the end. As he holds the folded flag in his arms and expresses deeply felt emotion at leaving this little strip of land, he seems to be the final enactor of that fate that has plagued all Portuguese colonial officers I have happened to meet both in Macau and, in my youth, in Mozambique. They desperately held onto the pitiable shreds of official prestige that their position bestowed on them—the flags, fine china, uniformed guards—but their power seldom went beyond the palace walls. Soon after they arrived at their posts, their voices and their pens learnt to spell out the orders of those who held the real power: South Africans in Mozambique and the Chinese in Macau. Here, the last Portuguese governor who tried to act independently—Jaime Silvério Marques—had to be taken hurriedly back to Portugal under armed escort. A nervous wreck, he had to escape from the father of the man to whom the general was now handing over the reins of Macau (Ho Yin). In the years after that *incidente* (1966–1967) all hell broke loose in Macau until the people in Peking decided time had come for a cooling down.

This particular general, whose adult life started as a soldier in a colonial war in Africa—a war the Portuguese lost politically—is now ending his public career in a grand ceremony, where he is pathetically unlamented. His hope for a political future in Portugal, one he tries to promote through the lavish use of his dubious earnings, is vaguely ridiculous to most of his contemporaries back home. The days of ceremonial grandeur and pompous political generals and admirals have long come to an end in Portugal. What use does a democratic European country have for such people? Long gone is the dictatorship that churned them out. Ironically, although he and his colleagues helped to bring down the dictatorship and its colonial dreams, this particular general seems incapable of shedding its outmoded ways.

Across the stage from him, Macau's "crown prince" finally comes into the heritage that has evaded him for all these years. On the whole, throughout the drawn-out decade of negotiations (1987-1997), he revealed a talent for waiting, although he never managed to show any understanding of the difficult role imposed upon his Portuguese partners. In the 1960s, when his father was given the control of Macau's underworld by the colourful Timorese-Chinese-Portuguese boss who had controlled the rice trade during the hungry war years (Pedro José Lobo), no one could have predicted that his family would go so far. But, by the end of the 1970s, with Mao and his henchmen on their last legs in Peking, Ho Yin (the governor's father) had so successfully exploited the commercial opportunities offered by the UN blockade of communist China, and had so thoroughly frightened the Portuguese governors he fawned upon, that the present outcome came to be a foregone conclusion.

As the ceremony proceeds, the Portuguese anthem begins and the Portuguese flag starts to come down—this is actually the moment we have all come here to witness, the formal end of the "Portuguese expansion." On my feet yet frozen by a sense of surprised fascination, I become aware that the man next to me, a well-known right-wing television commentator from Lisbon, is sobbing profusely into his handkerchief—his face awash in tears! My own sense of emotion, which I am trying to decipher—without much certainty—as to what it consists of precisely, is sidetracked by this man's apparently gratuitous feelings. Is he also an ex-colonial, I wonder—one of those whose sense of belonging will be forever marked by deep allegiance to a land and a condition that no longer exist? Why do I find his emotion distracting—is it because I am suspicious of it? Perhaps it is because I think it might be part of things I do not want my own emotion to be part of.

The notion comes to me that maybe he is mourning the loss of empire. But if that is it, his emotion is wasted. For the real question to ask is—what empire? As we are Portuguese, all our imperial nostalgia can only be for a doomed empire, a form of political violence that does not offer real power but only the soft and pleasant trappings of tropical success—a condition somewhat akin to the brother-in-law of a rich magnate whose life as a house-guest stretches itself out pleasantly into some undetermined future without any chance of it ever turning into home ownership.

Much like the Portuguese president, I want to think that the emotion I feel is due to the moral grandeur of the moment—a rare occasion when an imperial nation willingly hands over to its inhabitants the control of a land which

was not its own. That is, at least the official formulation of the present event. And there is something to it. "Macau is Chinese," reminds my wife, who is Chinese and born in Macau. But, after all these centuries, what precisely does that mean to me, to her or to the people that continue to live in Macau? We all know that things are far more complex than that. In fact, people in Peking are as foreign to Macau as am I and the incoming economic overlords from Las Vegas, who have hardly ever visited the city. The vast majority of Macau's citizens will continue to be, as they have been for centuries, people on the move, either on their way into or on their way out of China. These days, as Macau's casinos prosper, the number of visitors entering the city every fortnight is greater than the number of its permanent residents.

As the ceremony ends, I notice, just two rows below me among the Portuguese guests, a Chinese lady I have known for a number of years. She is married to a Macanese bureaucrat who is a scion of a prestigious Portuguese Eurasian family. Showily dressed and pretty, she makes a point of listening to the ceremony through earphones (to hear the Chinese radio commentary, one presumes). She indicates by her posture that, unlike her husband and his friends around them, she feels a little assertive rather than downcast. As we all patiently move towards the exit, steered by the protocol people, she speaks loudly into her cell phone ... in Mandarin, please note, not her native Cantonese. A few months later, I was not surprised to learn that she had assumed an important position in the administration.

At dinner, I sit with a couple of friends, both of whom are architects with prestigious careers in Macau. He is from Portugal and she was born locally. Her father, however, a member of the Cantonese Republican elite, was a political refugee in Portugal during the heyday of Maoism, which means that she is a native Portuguese-speaker and does not read Chinese. With us sits the heir to one of Portugal's most successful building firms, also very active in Asia, as well as a Goanese millionaire, whose considerable business ventures in China bring him often to Macau. His Eurasian family has stopped speaking Portuguese for a number of generations. We naturally speak in English, interspersed with Chinese and Portuguese words and references, as we are all familiar with each other's contexts, belonging to a kind of Lusotopic nexus that criss-crosses the post-colonial world.

Finally, the events come to an end. We move through the halls towards an exit leading to a large empty square where one can see the backs of guests leaving rapidly in the penumbra towards their different destinations—some of us have friends to visit before taking the presidential plane back to Portugal,

others have decided to take a few days holiday and are on their way to Hong Kong. Others still want to walk around the city, only to be surprised to discover that the local inhabitants are not out on the streets; they do not really feel that this is an occasion worth celebrating.

As my turn comes to pass the narrow threshold of the hall, I am struck by a scene so poignant that, once again, I am compelled to examine my own response. There, on the other side of the gate, three men in a line are bidding farewell to Portuguese guests; given that the Chinese guests are leaving from the other side of the building. They are there, smiling in a sad and polite manner, shaking everyone's hand and saying a few words of goodbye: a lawyer who is Macau's best known novelist (Henrique de Senna Fernandes); an architect famous for his cultural leadership (Carlos Marreros); and the outgoing president of Macau's municipality which, after four centuries of proud existence as the *Leal Senado* (literally the *Loyal Senate*—a name bestowed on it as an honour in the mid-seventeenth century), then became a "temporary municipality" soon to be extinguished.

What immediately struck me was how naturally I decode their gestures from having seen this done countless times at the end of Portuguese funeral masses, when the main mourners stand outside the church door greeting and thanking those who came to honour their dead. The constrained smiles and the atmosphere of gloom that pervaded these men move me. They had been men of power during the past decade; they had held positions of influence as heirs to a centuries-old tradition. They were the mouthpieces of the *to saang chai* ("children of the land," in Cantonese), the *Macaenses* in the proper sense of the word.

This is because Macau, after having been a Portuguese outpost and then a commercial factory, had become a citadel and later a colony due only to the fact that these Eurasian families with their Malaccan roots had never left the city. Lisbon was very far away and seldom very interested in their fate. Being Catholics and subjects of the Portuguese crown, they kept the commerce and the administration going, which was all that separated Macau from the surrounding Chinese landscape. They held on tenaciously even during the most troubled times, such as when the Portuguese crown fell into Spanish hands (1580-1640), and later when a British Junta governed Portugal during the Peninsular Wars. In those far-off days, it was mainly thanks to these people that the British East India Company did not simply take over the city.

As I proceed to shake their hands and move on into the shadowy margins of the square, I feel moved. I too have never been able to cast off a sense of allegiance to the land where I was raised and which is no longer my own. As

it happens, I have lived closely all my life with people who, for one reason or another, have had to leave their land of origin and have never managed (nor wanted in some cases) to cast away the emotional dislocation that exile brings with it. To be an exile in one's own native territory, where one's ancestors were merchants, landholders and administrators for so many generations, must indisputably be a poignant condition.

I say poignant but note that I say no more than that, for none of this is all too serious: no one was to be killed or ill-treated in Macau, no one was to lose their livelihood, none of these people or their families were forced to move out. For some, carried away by the wave of newly found fortune that spread across the casinos of Macau in the years that followed, the loss might have even passed unnoticed. For others, who felt more closely the ebbing of their age old "privileges," as they used to call it, it might have been traumatic. Personally, however, I read these men's gestures as being akin to the legitimate sorrow one has when mourning the loss of an aged relative. Poignant as it may be, the mourning of Macau leaves one all the richer for the memory, for the links it promotes among people, for the knowledge and the wealth it leaves behind.

On the plane trip back to Lisbon I was seated next to a renowned Portuguese scientist whose father had been governor of Mozambique when my own father had arrived there as a missionary in the 1960s. We talked about Macau, about the coming changes in the Portuguese academic and scientific scene and about Mozambique, somehow sensing that the past respect our fathers had felt for each other created a link between us. Beneath the plane, as we passed the Arabic Peninsula, a storm raged. The sky around us was bright orange with the clouds forming a deep blue floor below. Every now and then, silent bursts of what looked like flattened flowers, shining brightly, emerged on this surface and then spread in all directions on their yellowy paths.

It was not to be my last trip to Macau, of course, but it was there and then that I decided that the time had come to move on to some other projects, at least for a while. I felt that, as an ethnographer and anthropologist, I needed to let some time pass in order to clear the air of bygone things.

Note

¹The author is a social anthropologist who worked on Macau from 1990 to 2000, concerning which he has published an essay of historical anthropology: *Between China and Europe: Person, culture and emotion in Macau*, London School of Economics Monographs in Social Anthropology (Oxford/New York: Berg/Continuum, 2002); a monograph on Eurasian family and ethnicity, *Em terra de nêdes: dinâmicas da etnicidade macaense*, co-author N. Lourenço (Macau: ICM, 1993); and a number of essays, among which a study of cross-cultural naming practices, "Personal Identity and Ethnic Ambiguity: Naming Practices among the Eurasians of Macau," *Social Anthropology* 2.2 (1994): 115-32; an essay on collective action among the Macanese elite, "How do the Macanese achieve collective action?" *Elites: Choice, Leadership and Succession*, eds. João de Pina Cabral and A. Pedroso de Lima (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2000) 205-25; and a paper on the troubled handovers of Hong Kong and Macau, "New age warriors: negotiating the handover on the streets of Macau," *Journal of Romance Studies* 5.1 (2005): 9-22. He wishes to thank Carole Garron for her help in revising this text.

João de Pina-Cabral is Research Coordinator at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon. He was Founding President of the Portuguese Association of Social Anthropologists and President of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. He has carried out fieldwork in Northern Portugal, Macau and Bahia (Brazil). His English language publications include: *Sons of Adam, Daughters of Eve: The peasant worldview of the Alto Minho* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); *Between China and Europe: Person, culture and emotion in Macau* (Oxford/New York: Berg/Continuum, 2002); *Europe Observed*, ed. with John Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1992); *Elites: Choice, Leadership and Succession*, ed. with A. Pedroso de Lima (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2000); and *On the margins of religion*, ed. with Francis Pine (Oxford/New York: Berghahn, 2008). E-mail: pina.cabral@ics.ul.pt