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Macau - A Backdoor Access to China (16th-17th centuries)

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In 1582, the former Governor of the Philippines D. Francisco de Sande wrote a letter to the viceroy of Mexico with the following statement: (*quote*) “thirty years ago, according to some people, [the Portuguese] passed to mainland China and settled in a place they call Amachán, to live there disguised as merchants from Siam or Melaka. And so they are today, without weapons, gunpowder or justice, under a Chinese officer who visits their homes to see if they have any of these things (...). Every three years, they pay a large sum of money to the new viceroy who arrives there and threatens them to leave the land; (...) The Chinese say this money is divided among the important people that surround the King of China, but they all say the King does not know that there are Portuguese people settled in his realm” (*end of quote*).

The words of D. Francisco de Sande interestingly show how the Spanish saw the Portuguese settlement in Macau: that is, living under Chinese rule and Chinese extortions, disguised as merchants, with no defences of self-administration. Something hard to accept by a Spanish *conquistador*. In a curious way, this information somehow reflects the official position from the Chinese authorities, that it, that Macau was a semi-clandestine settlement.

The reality was a little bit more complex. In fact, Macau was not destined to be a city. It was just a place where foreigners stayed in a temporary basis, as occurred in other places, like Shangzhuan, Langbaigao or Shuangxu, near Ningbo. There was a difference, however: they were all islands, while Macau was not an island, but a peninsula, therefore part of mainland China. In 1557, in an unexpected move, the Chinese

authorities did not force the Portuguese to destroy the huts they had built, after their annual stay. Three years earlier, and after three decades of official ban, the Portuguese had been finally allowed to trade in the coast of Guangdong. What was provisional became gradually definitive. Year after year, local officers did not act against the activities of these foreigners, from whom they got substantial profits. The small conglomerate of provisional huts extended and attracted a growing number of Portuguese, private merchants, missionaries, soldiers of fortune and so on. From the beginning, they all knew they were in Chinese soil, under Chinese administration, and that it was absolutely required to play according to Chinese rules and do not give any pretext of conflict or trouble.

And why was this essential? Because Macau was an absolute exception in the whole context of the Chinese maritime borders, a status it came to enjoy for more than a century. Apparently, Macau could be compared to any other port city in Maritime Asia, being the most apparent parallel, the one with the Malay sultanates. Being mostly occupied by foreigners and not by local merchants could be only a particular sign. However, reality was completely different and Macau was exactly the opposite of a Malay sultanate, for its functional role was not to attract merchants, but to confine them; not to be a cosmopolitan city, but a place of restrict access and movements. In fact, since the late 15th century that the Ming China enforced a policy of closing the South maritime border, the so-called *haijin* – literally “sea ban” – that strongly constrained external contacts. Trade activities with foreign countries were allowed only in the general frame of the “tributary system”, access to mainland China by foreigners was strongly supervised by authorities and limited to the city of Canton, and, finally, Chinese naturals were forbidden to leave the country.

In practice, there were exceptions to this general rule, and a long tradition of unofficial and parallel commercial activities did take place, with the complicity of coastal authorities. As long as their presence was temporary and limited to a few islands, groups of foreign merchants – the Siamese seem to have been the most numerous – were allowed to make business.

Therefore, Macau emerged in the context of an informal, unofficial tradition of trade contacts in the coasts of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang. It is its birth that is a surprise,

but its survival. Portuguese historiography tend to overstate the alleged good behaviour of the Portuguese established in Macau and the diplomatic abilities of the Jesuit missionaries that followed and took full advantage of this settlement. It is commonly said that the Chinese authorities just took a passive role in the process, they agreed, compromised, closed their eyes.

However, it must be stressed that it took place with their full knowledge. There was, in fact, a debate inside the Ming officialdom on what to do with the Portuguese. They had taken a vassal state – Melaka – by force or arms, they had been banned from Chinese shores due to their turbulence and danger, but they did not disappear. On the contrary, their ships were swift, their artillery was feared and, most of all, they were barbarians not to be trusted. Therefore, it was by all means convenient to gather them all in one single place where they could be supervised and their activities controlled. As long as they would pay the taxes and submit to the laws of the country, it would be preferable than to continue to leave them wander loosely. Moreover, the whole region was under considerable pressure from confederacies of smugglers and pirates that ravaged the coast. To make an agreement with these foreigners was a good option to prevent them to join the outlaws.

Because the Portuguese were mostly merchants, Macau became therefore some sort of a backdoor access to China, because it was a stable, authorized channel of import and export of commodities, being the most important the ones from the Japanese market. The relations between China and Japan were difficult at this point. In fact, they did not exist, since Japan had plunged into a civil war and several warlords had presented themselves with tributary missions to the Ming, claiming to be the legitimate lords of Japan, in a series of episodes that culminated in the official closure of China to Japan. The civil wars had also led the way to a rise of Japanese piracy on the region. Since the Portuguese had already established in Nagasaki, the most lucrative import of Japanese silver and the exportation of Chinese silk and other products were in the hands of Macau. The city thus benefited from an exceptional political situation that made the Portuguese the only authorized intermediates between two neighbouring countries. Its survival was, obviously, of their mutual interest. It was according to a delicate process of accommodation and diplomatic surveillance that Macau was able to survive

throughout the centuries, in a combination of mutual interests that has been called the “Macau Formula”.

Macau was not only an exception on the context of the Ming official policy. It was also a peculiar establishment in the context of Portuguese Asia. Located in the limits of Portuguese trade networks, Macau, like Nagasaki, was too far away from the core positions of Portuguese *Estado da Índia*. It was a long rooted tradition among the Portuguese in Asia that the Bay of Bengal and the Far East areas were zones of little intervention from the Crown of Portugal. There were other examples of spontaneous settlements, in the Coromandel Coast or in Bengal, that were beyond the authority of the Viceroy of India. But Macau was created from scratch and enjoyed a position that was unique.

For quite a while, the official interests were kept out of Macau. The Crown limited itself to create an illusion of authority, conceding power to the captain that annually would go to Macau and make the journey to Japan. While he was there, waiting for favourable winds, and on his return, he had all the Portuguese under his command. But in practical terms, it was only for a few months. Most of the time, the city lived in self-rule, controlled by an elite of powerful merchants and the Jesuit missionaries. In 1617, the Portuguese Crown made a nomination of a Captain General, a Governor to act as an official authority, as happened in other cities of Portuguese Asia. The merchants of Macau, through the chamber known as Senate, did not accept.

A few years later, the whole landscape would come under considerable changes. In 1622, the Dutch attacked the city. Macau had no protective walls, because the Chinese authorities did not permit any defensive structure. In Chinese territory, it was considered an intolerable violation of the sovereignty. Two year before, the Jesuits tried to build some structures in the neighbouring Ilha Verde (“Green Island”), causing a diplomatic incident that ultimately forced the Portuguese to remove them and to apologize for the insult.

Despite the Dutch failure, the siege put the city in a difficult position. In the next year, Macau had finally a Governor, D. Francisco de Mascarenhas. The same Senate that had previously rejected the presence of such officer was now the first to ask his coming to

the King. The new Governor started to build protective walls almost immediately and the tension with the Provincial authorities of Canton rose swiftly. There were two main reasons for the success of the Portuguese efforts: the Dutch did not respect the Imperial order – in fact, they were considered as pirates by the Ming at this time – and the Portuguese claimed their right to defend themselves, on one side, and the internal weakness of the Ming, with severe problems in the North frontier that would ultimately lead to the fall on the dynasty soon after.

From a provisional set of merchant huts, Macau had evolved to a prosperous city, with a powerful elite, a Governor, influent Jesuit missionaries who were excellent diplomats and cultural agents and defensive structures. The process of evolution to a regular “colonial” city seemed complete. Three moments occurred during the 17th century proved the opposite:

- the first one was the closure of Japan, in 1640; deprived from its main source of income and prosperity, Macau had to seek for alternative trade routes, namely to several Malay sultanates and, mostly, Timor.
- Secondly, in the context of the civil war that ravaged China in the mid 17th century, between the new Qing Dynasty and the rebellious “Southern Ming”, the Emperor ordered a complete ban on trade and the closure of the coast, with the re-settlement of all coastal population. Macau lived its most dramatic days, but survived without being evacuated.
- Finally, the Emperor Kangxi ordered the end of the *haijin* regime, that had previously been relaxed in a few aspects. In 1685, all foreigners were now allowed to trade directly in Canton under strict rules of supervision and taxation by imperial officers. This meant the end of the privilege that Macau had enjoyed since its foundation.

At the end of the 17th century, Macau was no longer the prosperous city that had made the fortune of the local elite. However, it was still the only city of European origin on the shores of China, and an important channel of contact with the exterior world. Macau still played a role that would definitely loose only after the foundation of Honk Kong, in the context of the so-called “Opium Wars”.