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*“They bring their wives and children in their ships  
and they always live inside them”:*

Images and Representations of the Overseas Chinese in Portuguese and  
Spanish Sources, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries

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Previous remark: this paper is a brief presentation about the importance of Iberian sources to the study of the Chinese trade communities in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Southeast Asia. The term used is the general “Overseas Chinese”. So, I will not discuss specific issues about the notions generally involved, namely the idea of Diaspora, the term *huaqiao* and other concepts that are part of the general discussion and debate.

In a classic article about 17<sup>th</sup> Century Batavia, the historian and scholar Leonard Blussé starts his writing with the following remark: (quote) “Among historians, Southeast Asia’s Overseas Chinese have never enjoyed much popularity. They are in many respects a «People without a History», having left behind no substantial deposit of experience and having failed to produce a school of historians to write their own history from the insider’s perspective” (end of quote). He adds some further information: the Overseas Chinese traditionally played an intermediate role within different territories, as middlemen or brokers, which were activities marked by privacy and discretion and therefore elusive to others.

In fact, there is a simple explanation (a doubled-one, actually) for the Chinese communities to have been kept in the shade for centuries. From the point of view of Southeast Asian states, ports or sultanates, they were considered as foreigners, and were therefore absent on local chronicles and historical records.

Meanwhile, in China, the official policy enforced by the Ming Dynasty of closing maritime borders and forbidding private trade with the outside world had caused significant problems to Chinese merchant groups established in the “South Seas” for centuries. From the official point of view, they were considered as outlaws, taken as pirates or smugglers and, therefore, kept outside the official records. It was a rooted tradition. As Blussé remarks on the same article, even later Chinese historians tended to consider Overseas Chinese as victims of Western capitalists or (quote) “unfilial souls who have forsaken their own ancestors and the mother country” (end of quote).

Prof. Blussé wrote these lines in the 1980’s. Since then, the world has changed and also the relationship between China and the rest of Asia and the world. Nowadays, the Chinese Overseas issue is an important topic on Chinese foreign affairs policy towards their Southeast Asian neighbours. In Malaysia, in the Philippines, in Indonesia or elsewhere, identity problems concerning the minorities of Chinese origin, their allegiance to national policies, their weight in general elections or their economic role in the business world are current topics in the news. The Chinese Diaspora in the United States or in Europe draws the attention of both the media and scholars; since 2005 there is a *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, an international refereed journal published by the Nanyang Technological University of Singapore, which includes academic articles on the subject worldwide. The problems felt by those who visit China and the land of their ancestors and are regarded with suspicion as foreigners by locals are just another side of a long rooted and complex issue involving Chinese migration, Western colonial power, internal changes in China and the post-colonial landscape after World War II.

However, from a historical point of view, and despite the recent attention this general issue has raised in academic *milieu* and in the media, the Chinese presence in Southeast Asia remains an obscure subject, namely in Early Modern age. In other words, the Chinese immigration phenomenon in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have been extensively studied in the recent decades, and an abundant literature from the colonial times is also available, but the period previous to the 18<sup>th</sup> century is still scarcely studied, by the motives mentioned above.

It is in this context of a doubled-twilight zone in which the Overseas Chinese lived, in Ming and early Qing periods, that the European sources may shed some light. The Europeans were foreigners under the eyes of the Malay-Indonesian sultanates or the

mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms, as were the Chinese. They recorded and debated the issues that were important to their own interests. That is why Catholic missionary sources are important to both Portuguese and Spanish, and also the reason why the Portuguese data on this issue are scarce, fragmentary and mostly frustrating to historians.

Portuguese records on Southeast Asia, a region where official presence was centred in Melaka, are generally poor. There are two main reasons for this: the losses in Portuguese archives caused by the major earthquake in 1755 is one of them, but there is another one: most official correspondence, preserved in Lisbon or Goa archives, are focused on diplomatic issues, military problems, fiscal worries, or simple administrative questions. The Asian landscape did not cause particular curiosity to the governors or captains of Melaka, official trade agents or viceroys themselves. Southeast Asia, being the privileged field of action of Portuguese private trade, was out of their scope. There is an exception: the initial reports in the years that followed the capture of Melaka, the discovery of maritime Asia that spread beyond the city, the process of learning the realities involving ports, routes and commodities required a particular attention on Asian details. That is why the official letters of the decade of 1510 are so impressive and important; and, of course, the accurate vision and curiosity of Tomé Pires, just to mention the most important example, also helped.

So, one of the issues that amazed the Portuguese, when they captured Melaka, was the number and diversity of merchants found in the city. One of the most important communities was the Chinese. The data are known and there is no need to move into further details: they supported the Portuguese against the Malay sultan, offered help and worked as couriers, delivering letters from the Governor to the king of Siam, and provided knowledge, know-how and support to the first Portuguese sent to China and other regions. However, the initial high expectations the Portuguese had about those friendly and wealthy Chinese merchants did not realize. The greed of the Portuguese captains, who constantly interfered in commercial activities, and the shifts on regional trade routes, eventually compelled the Chinese to avoid Melaka and divert their attention to other ports, namely Johor and Banten. The partial lift of the ban trade by the Ming, applied to Fujian ports in 1567, seems to have sealed this fate.

Therefore, there is a short period, say the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia have some relevance on Portuguese sources. The most important references are from the initial period, when the Portuguese made their first attempts to reach the Chinese shores and established commercial partnerships with the Chinese merchants of Melaka: Tomé Pires, Duarte Barbosa, Jorge de Albuquerque, the Italians Giovanni da Empoli and Andrea Corsali registered their impressions on this strange people, who looked and dressed like Germans, whose wives were similar to the Spanish women, who lived in their ships and ate all sorts of food (including dogs) and use chopsticks. They carried important amounts of pepper to their homeland and were skilled merchants like the Venetians in Europe. This note is particularly curious, because the Chinese of Banten and Batavia were later compared to the Jews. Their trade network was spread throughout the whole region, with an important connection in Siamese ports, and the captains of Melaka expected they would continue to attend the city.

Unfortunately, their names are not mentioned. The only exception, as far as I know, is the character the Portuguese called “Fulata” or “Cheilata”, an important merchant of Melaka that helped Afonso de Albuquerque in the aftermath of the capture of the city. He was probably a member of the Xu clan, for some Xu brothers would later be imprisoned by the Ming authorities under the charge of smuggling in collusion with the *folangji* (say, the Portuguese). This is definitely a case study that would deserve further research. I don’t think it would be possible the level of detail achieved by Prof. Blussé in his study about Jan Con, the Chinese merchant established in Batavia in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it surely worth a try.

Later on, detailed information simply vanished from Portuguese sources and shifted to simple laconic mentions; a symptom of lack of interest to the Portuguese or just a sign of discretion and elusiveness.

Unlike the Portuguese, the available information about the Overseas Chinese is abundant in Spanish sources. Established in Manila since 1571, the Spanish were unable to settle on the seacoast of China – like the Portuguese did in Macau – but the capital of their Asian empire did attract a growing number of Chinese merchants, farmers and craftsmen from the Fujian province. Locally known as *sangleys*, the Chinese provided the needed connection to the success of the so-called *Manila Galleon*, the long maritime

route that linked Manila and Mexico across the Pacific Ocean, not only supplying textiles in exchange for the Bolivian silver but providing all sorts of services in the port, carrying supplies to Manila and working as farmers, fishermen and craftsmen.

The *sangleys* were omnipresent in Manila; there is no need to dig in the chronicles, the missionary reports or the official correspondence sent to the viceroy of Mexico to find extensive information concerning demographics, social differences, places of settlement, notably the *parián* or Chinese district of Manila, fiscal regime, missionary impact – I mean the distinction between Christian and infidel *sangleys* (*sangleyes cristianos y sangleyes infideles*) – but also different perceptions on their defects and qualities (according to Spanish standards, of course), way of life, habits, etc.

To the Spanish administration, the *Sangleys* were mostly a source of income and trouble; of income, because it was necessary to tax their most profitable commercial activities and to collect the fees of those who were resident and definitely settled; of trouble, because there were too many and they kept coming to Manila despite the repression and the bans.

Spanish source materials reflect this dual perspective, and the work produced by Spanish historians are commonly focused on this, too: how many they were throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, where were they settled, what was the income to the *Hacienda Real*, what was the impact of Catholic missions, why did they rebel against the Spanish in 1603, 1639 and so on. A perspective on the Overseas Chinese of Manila and the Philippines in the general frame of Asian trade and the connections with other Southeast Asia ports and routes, the impact of the prosperous trade between Manila and South China ports and the fundamental role played by the *Sangleys* was, and still is, much neglected. Spanish sources, unlike the scarce, fragmentary Portuguese ones, may allow a closer insight of this “People without a History”, referring to the expression by Leonard Blussé I mentioned at the beginning, on their dynamical approach to the opportunities presented by the Spanish settled in Manila, the reorganization of their trade networks after the partial ban lift on South China ports, the challenge posed by the Dutch and the impact caused by the decline of the Ming dynasty. Finally, the issues involving identity problems around sojourning vs. settlement or conversion vs. loyalty to their ancestor beliefs, preserving “Chinese” identity vs. adopting language, habits and social rules of the place of destiny.

Let me give you a final information. Recently, Prof. Juan Gil has published the outcome of his long-term research and archive work in the Archivo General de Indias, in Seville, about the Chinese of Manila in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In an 800 page volume, he takes a scrupulous snapshot of this issue, with statistics, social frames, political impact, fiscal regime, detailed descriptions of Spanish perceptions and images of the *Sangleys* and extensive information through this two centuries period. Among other available information, and completing the previous work by Pierre Chaunu, he presents a complete list on Chinese ships that came to Manila, including taxes paid, ports of origin and the names of the captains, from 1591 to 1700. The book was published in Lisbon, naturally in its original language and no English translation is expected soon, as far as I know.