

Memory Plaza: Encounter and Missed Encounter

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Abstract: This paper is a personal account of the ethnic context of Macau in the 1960s and 70s. Examples such as the school system, street names (both in Chinese and Portuguese), and cases of the parallel occupation of space are used to illustrate how memory is inscribed in the physical environment and how different communities could converge in space and diverge in identity. Street names therefore provide an excellent index of the topographies of memory, both synchronic and diachronic. By evoking selectively different memories of the same spot, each community negates the other and appropriates that space in the reproduction of its own identity.

When, at some social gathering, someone clearly looks foreign, the conversation very often starts with the question: “Where are you from?” And the answer expected in this context is one’s country or nationality. This is a simple question for most people, but in my case, whenever this question comes up, I am faced with the following difficulties:

1. Macau, which is where I am from, is not a country associated with a nationality in a matter-of-fact way. It is a tiny city where sovereignty has always been an ambivalent matter; in fact, many people do not even know where it is. This has improved quite a bit since the handover, as the ceremony did draw some attention

to the territory, but what has made a difference is its subsequent unprecedented growth into a global amusement park for gamblers.

2. I do not feel right to say simply that I am Chinese because I was born and brought up in Macau. The distinction is important because I have never lived in China proper and have thus been spared all those decades of intense social and political turmoil, and was given an education completely different from that received by people of my generation in China.

3. If people then call me Macanese, I will feel obliged to correct them and tell them that I am a Chinese from Macau but not exactly a Macanese. That term is reserved for the Eurasians who consider(ed) themselves Portuguese of the Orient.

4. If people ask about my nationality then I will have to tell them that I hold a Portuguese passport, although I feel uncomfortable about calling myself Portuguese because ethnically I am Chinese. All my cultural references are Chinese, my mother tongue is Chinese, I never learnt a word of Portuguese at school and I only went to Portugal for the first time as a tourist when I was already a grown-up.

People are puzzled by my profuse and paradoxical answers to such a simple question. As I find myself obliged to give all these explanations, I realize that there are so many things that I once took for granted, so many questions that I never bothered to ask, and so many silent witnesses of the past that existed in my day-to-day physical environment whose significance escaped me completely. Neither did anyone ever bother to explain anything. Throughout my primary and secondary school education, I did not have a single lesson or discussion about the history of Macau, nor was I ever taken on an excursion to any local historical site. There certainly was some sort of tacit understanding, a complicity based on cultivated indifference and “constructed silences” among the Portuguese, Macanese and Chinese communities who had been living side by side in Macau for centuries and still do, though in different numerical proportions under altered power dynamics.¹

This paper is a personal account of the ethnic context in which I grew up in the 1960s and 70s, of how it was inscribed in the physical environment, of the encounter of the different communities in space and of their missed encounter in memory.

The System of Parallel Schooling

Education in Macau has always been dominated by private schools and never at any instant was there a common curriculum. The government only began

to have some say in the matter when it started subsidizing private schools in the 1980s. In the 1960s and 70s schools of different linguistic media, religious convictions and political ideologies coexisted parallelly, each being quite free to define its own educational programme. The prevailing climate in the territory then was that of ethnic differentiation, in opposition to that of approximation today. The Macanese and the Portuguese expatriate civil servants, who made up the Portuguese-speaking population, sent their children to the fully subsidized public schools, which followed the syllabus of metropolitan Portugal. The Chinese had a very bad opinion of these schools, and preferred to send their children to private schools that were divided into two categories: Catholic schools, either Chinese- or English-speaking, and the communist ones, which were only Chinese-speaking. Parents who sent their children to Catholic schools did so not so much for religious conviction but as a strategy to ensure better job opportunities and access to universities outside the territory, as Macau would only come to have its own university in the 1980s. People sent their children to the communist schools either for ideological or financial reasons since, for many, Catholic schools were too expensive. Only a very small number of Chinese people, for the same financial considerations but opposite ideological reasons, sent their children to the Portuguese public schools that were not only free of charge but that would also provide good prospects for a job in the public administration.

Of all of these, communist schools were the only ones that actively ensured a systematic ideological education: all the others did so in a highly erratic manner. When I think back on my own education, particularly in relation to history, it was really ridiculously confusing. I went to a Chinese Catholic primary school where all we did in history class was to learn by heart the epochs and names of the reigns of a long list of Chinese dynasties and emperors. I undertook my secondary school education in an English Catholic school with a programme based on the GCE examination requirements, which meant that the contemporary history syllabus covered the period between the French Revolution and the Second World War. As a result, not only was the history of China taught in a completely Eurocentric light, China being no more than one of the foreign countries with which Europe had dealings, but I was also obliged to memorize all the Chinese historical figures by their translated names, which do not always ring a bell in Chinese, thus rendering assimilation much more difficult. After all, names like Kublai Khan and Koxinga have little in common with their equivalents in Chinese.

Macau was inevitably mentioned in the period of the Discoveries, but never on any occasion were China, Portugal and Macau referred to within the context of the reality around us. Time stopped at the end of the Second World War, followed by a great silence about the recent history of China. It should be remembered that I am talking here about the 1970s, when memories of the 123 incident,² a repercussion of the Cultural Revolution in China, were still fresh, and the power balance between China and Portugal within the context of Macau on the one hand, and between the different ethnic groups in the territory on the other, was being readjusted. There was great uncertainty regarding the future of the territory. No school, except for the communist ones, would venture to mention sensitive topics such as sovereignty, colonialism, communism, etc. As a result of this silent self-censorship and the lack of a consistent programme concerning language and content, what was taught at school was completely alienated from our surrounding reality.

This alienation was made worse by the mobility of the population of Macau, drained by regular exoduses³ throughout its history but constantly replenished by newcomers from the mainland, the original inhabitants being increasingly outnumbered by the new immigrants. My own father came to Macau during World War II to flee the Japanese invasion; I myself and many friends of my youth left to study abroad and never returned. As a result, the majority of inhabitants had very short and disconnected memories of Macau to transmit to the next generation and were in no way more able to reproduce a legacy of local historical references than schools were. This should still apply in the Macau of today, a place where people just pass by.

Street names

Something people easily overlook in their daily surroundings are street names, simply because they have always been there. Often the result of a long-past popular consensus as to how to refer to a particular place, they may evoke some physical characteristic (e.g., a tree or a fountain), its use (e.g., market, factory), a historical incident (e.g., a battle), personalities of special relevance, or even myths and legends, etc.⁴

Each name is embedded in a particular time in the past. These references, temporally dispersed and geographically situated, design the topography of memory of a territory, which is perpetually subjected to erosion by a process of updating and adjustment, normally gradual, in accordance with the physical transformation of the territory and its social and political evolution. Each

new generation has new causes to celebrate and old regrets to forget. Only at times of rapid changes, when there is a rupture with the past, will this topography be subjected to radical alteration. For example, it is common practice for a new regime to give new names to places after a revolution. However, it is also common knowledge that the population is extremely resistant to adopting these new names, not necessarily because they object to the alteration, but rather because things that constitute one's primary cognitive world are often the most deeply ingrained and for this reason also the most difficult to alter or eradicate. So, however void of signification they might become for later generations, street names provide an index of the memory of a population, both collective and selective, inscribed in its physical environment.

In Macau all streets have both a Chinese and a Portuguese name. The main roads and streets in newer districts generally have names that correspond in the two languages, which are often Portuguese proper names of people that have no significance for the Chinese population. However, a random stroll in the city will immediately reveal that the two names of many streets have absolutely nothing to do with each other, are totally distinct in reference. The following are a few examples translated into English:

Portuguese	Chinese
Almeida Ribeira Avenue	New Avenue
Ferreira do Amaral Street	Road of East Bay View
S. Lazaro Church Street	Road of the Mental Asylum
Our Lady of Amparo Street	Road of the Customs Office
Duck Alley	Back Alley of the Hospital
Palm Tree Street	Street of the Spotted Face
Camões Garden	Garden of Pigeon Nests
Port Area	Ama Temple Area

The list is endless. The very same spot could be invested with totally distinct temporal, affective and symbolic significance. On the whole, the Portuguese names are much more commemorative, reflecting a lack of lived memory and an active endeavour to mark presence and intervene in the inhabitants' future memory, whereas the Chinese names are much more physiographic, suggesting a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the Portuguese presence and a censorship of ideological connotation. Just to complete the picture, there are the names given, immediately prior to and after the handover, to the new streets in the latest

reclaimed area: virgin terrain with no memory, thus an excellent site for instituting new references. They are mostly named after cities in China.

A Horse with No Name

There is no better illustration of these cross circuits in memory and parallel appropriations of space than the Ferreira do Amaral statue, known to the local Chinese community as “the bronze horse statue,” once one of the most representative landmarks of Macau. It used to stand in a very prominent place by the se—before land reclamation totally modified the contours of the city—opposite the main entrance of Hotel Lisboa, which then housed the most popular casino of Macau. For a long time the hotel overtook the statue as Macau’s main point of reference until recently when, rather ironically, the hotel itself was outranked by its rivals in the gambling sector. As for the statue, it is no longer there, erased from the landscape of Macau. It is quite inconceivable that something so present throughout my childhood could just vanish like that.

People at one time used to walk to that landmark on summer nights when it was too hot and stuffy to stay at home, and afterwards they would often stop for a drink at one of the open air cafés nearby. A merry-go-round was once put up just next to it, creating the funny impression that the angry bronze horse and its rider were being teased by the silly plastic horses and the noisy crowd below them. Children used to play hide-and-seek around it and I still remember lying on its base between two steps, trying to melt into the warm concrete. Of course, all the Japanese and Hongkongese tourists (no tourists from mainland China at that time) had to have a photo taken there.

It was only much later that I came to know that this statue had been erected in 1941, that it was the object of huge dispute between the Chinese and the Portuguese authorities, and that the man on the horse had tried to impose a real colonial regime on Macau in the mid-nineteenth century and had, for this reason, been assassinated, his head and hand taken to Canton. I was also to learn that the Chinese government had always found the presence of the statue very offensive, so much so that in 1991, a few years before the handover, the statue was removed and is now standing in a lonely square somewhere on the outskirts of Lisbon. The way that the Chinese community completely ignored its political and historical implications and made the site a playground is an act of ultimate rejection and negation, an excellent example of “how memory enters into contextual dialogue with identity.”⁵

People's Trees

There is no place in Macau dearer to me than Largo do Lilau ("Square of Granny's Well" in Chinese), for the sole reason that I grew up there. It was where I used to play and run about, learned to ride first a tricycle and then a bicycle. I only discovered much later that it was a huge privilege to have grown up there, not only because it was, and still is, a beautiful place, but also because it is a place of great relevance for both the Chinese and the Macanese communities. It is the heart of an important heritage site that has been left relatively undamaged by the ruthless real estate sector, although up to a certain point one could argue that the territory is so tiny that in order to build one has to destroy to make room.

The square is surrounded by nineteenth-century houses built in the "Portuguese" style, which used to be the residences of the most prestigious Macanese families. However, what makes it so fascinating to me today is that it is a place where the Chinese and Macanese communities really lived, and still do, side by side. From my house, the ground floor of a modest two-storey house on the less posh side of the street, I could see my Macanese neighbours' dining room where they received the priest's visit every week. Here I must add that in Macau, the different communities used to live in distinct areas. Lilau definitely was once a chic Macanese residential area and has gradually been infiltrated by people of more humble origin. Nevertheless, the presence of the Mandarin's house in the area suggests that the Chinese infiltration began with the privileged upper classes as well.

The Portuguese designation "Casa do Mandarin" indicates the social position of its original owner, whereas its Chinese designation "Zheng's Residence" gives us his family name. This huge compound (some 4000m²) was built in 1881 by Zheng Wenrui, an honorary mandarin, although it is his son, Zheng Guanying, who is remembered for his philanthropic deeds and modernist ideas as well as for his personal friendship with the activists of the reform movement, which included Sun Yat-sen, the founding president of the First Republic.⁶ By the time I was born, this piece of fine Chinese architecture had been reduced to a ruin of divided ownership, occupied legally and illegally by hundreds of tenants, sub-tenants, squatters and even factories, and was regularly ravaged by fires. The kitchen window of my house faced its main entrance. Even as a child I could tell that the occupants of that house belonged to a very low social stratum. It was also not difficult to understand that there were illicit activities going on inside, such as clandestine gambling, for every so often there would

be a raid and I would see my neighbours being hauled away in cage-like cars. The place was a real hotchpotch of people: policemen, prostitutes, gamblers and people from all walks of life cohabiting within its confines.

In short, there were Macanese on one side and Chinese on the other in real physical proximity in Largo do Lilau, as viewed from the different windows of my house. A square is by definition a place for people to get together, so how did these people, who are from distinct ethnic and social backgrounds, share the use of that space?

In the middle of the square there were three, now only two, gigantic banyan trees in a row, their shade providing a haven to two food stalls that were separated by the central tree. One stall was owned by a Chinese brother and sister, and the other by a Macanese widow with a powerful voice. They served pretty much the same things: tea, coffee, sandwiches and quick noodles, but the clientele was completely different. My grandmother, like many others of her older Chinese neighbours, would have breakfast at the Chinese stall and chat her mornings away. The Macanese in the neighbourhood, at that time mostly lower-ranking civil servants who were allocated part of one of those grand houses to live in by the government, would have breakfast at the widow's stall instead. The few remaining "aristocrats" in the square seldom took part in this street life. There was a strong internal class barrier within each community. Only children, among them myself and my playmates from both communities, would disregard this divide and cross the invisible boundary, announcing and contributing to the process of ethnic approximation, at least along the social class line.

Concluding Note

This account is a mixture of nostalgic recollections and an attempt to make sense of some of the inconsistencies in my upbringing. The ethnic picture today is largely different. The handover of Macau back to China has obliged the local Chinese and Macanese communities to reformulate their identities and terms of relating to each other. The mutual approximation of the two communities, which began in the 1970s, has been accelerated in the last decades by force of circumstance, but also by a sense of common fate. The Macanese, who used to consider themselves Portuguese, now claim their "bothness" and uniqueness—being both and either. All references, for instance architectural and gastronomic, to the colonial past of Macau are now promoted as part of the cultural capital of the territory, by the two communities alike, and greatly exploited by the tourist industry. Every day, thousands of tourists from

mainland China flock to Macau, mostly because of its casinos. The Macau of my childhood is long gone, only the street names are still there, serving as an index of the overlapping synchronic and diachronic topographies of its memory.

Notes

¹ See Pina-Cabral, *Between China and Europe*, especially chapter 6, "Stone silences: organized amnesia," which elaborates extensively on these "constructed silences."

² The Cultural Revolution in China provoked an outburst of patriotic and anti-colonialist feelings among the Chinese population of Macau, which gave rise to a series of violent demonstrations that culminated in an open confrontation between the Chinese demonstrators and the Public Security Police on 3 December 1966, hence the designation "123 Incident." See Fernandes, *Sinopse de Macau*; chapter 4, "A 'Revolução Cultural' em Macau, 1965-1974," provides a detailed chronological account of the incident.

³ The most recent exodus took place during the transition period, between the undertaking of the negotiation between China and the Portuguese post-1974 Revolution regime regarding the future of Macau and the actual handover in 1999. A recurrent phenomenon in its history, there had been others in the past provoked by crises such as WWII and the 123 incident. See chapter 1, "O contexto histórico de uma identidade étnica," in Lourenço and Pina-Cabral's *Em Terra de Tufões*.

⁴ See 布衣 (Pu Yi), 澳门掌故 (*Old Tales of Macau*). This amateur historical study accounts for the Chinese names of a number of streets and districts in Macau.

⁵ Pina-Cabral, *Between China and Europe* 53. Chapter 3, "Hollering in bronze: memory and conflict," analyses in detail the symbolic significations of this statue and the dialectics between memory and ethnic identity.

⁶ See 徐新 (Xu Xin), 澳门的视野 (*Panorama of Macau*). In this collection of essays of diverse interests on Macau, there is one in the first chapter that precisely speaks about the Zheng's Residence and the deeds of Zheng Guanying.

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