

Macao and Manila in the context of Iberian-Dutch rivalry in the South China Sea

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The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive on the South China Sea, right after they had established solid strongholds in strategic points of the Indian Ocean, such as Mozambique Island, Hormuz, Goa, and Malacca. They immediately got involved with the pre-existing trading networks, since their main purpose in sailing East, through a direct maritime route, was to try and get hold of a part of Asia's trade in luxury goods, such as rare drugs and spices, precious gems, scented woods and fine textiles. By 1513 they had already reached the Chinese southern coast, and, through the intelligence gathered, China was immediately perceived as the main political, economical and cultural East Asian power.

From an early date, the Portuguese overseas enterprise in Asia developed according to two different systems. On the one hand, there was a state sponsored empire, displaying a powerful naval and military apparatus, later styled Estado da Índia, that tried to gain access, by armed force or by peaceful treaty, to a fair share of the overall trade in Asiatic luxury commodities, in order to channel it into Europe, through the tightly controlled *carreira da Índia*. On the other hand, there was a *shadow empire*, blooming on the fringes of the enterprises of the Portuguese crown. This informal empire was fuelled by the private initiative of Portuguese soldiers and merchants, who had discovered that a fair profit could be earned on the Eastern scene by the enterprising individual who had some sort of valuable commodity to offer to the local markets, be it some sort of trading ship, a small investment capital or a technical expertise in the fields of navigation or warfare.

So, while the Portuguese crown officials were building a vast network of fortresses and factories all along the Indian Ocean shorelines, during the first half of the 16th century, in the

South China Sea, Portuguese adventurers tried to establish a trading base somewhere along the coast of the southern Chinese provinces, from whence they could organize their exchanges with their Chinese counterparts. The China trade had been found to be a most lucrative enterprise for all parties involved, not the least so because the Middle Kingdom central authorities were then going through one of those periodical phases of opposition towards external affairs and had discouraged, or out-rightly forbidden, most maritime contacts between the Chinese and the outside world. From their base in Malacca, then, the Portuguese regularly sailed to the Chinese southern coasts, bringing spices, scented woods, silver and guns, and coming away with rich cargoes of silks and porcelains.

The arrival of the Portuguese in southern Japan, which first took place around 1543, brought about huge new trading opportunities. The Land of the Rising Sun was then going through a long and violent period of internal upheaval, and all official relations with China had been discontinued. But it so happened that the Japanese were very much interested in obtaining Chinese silks, which they were prepared to exchange against their abundant supplies of silver; and China, of course, had always been the world's best buyer of silver. So, the Portuguese immediately grabbed the opportunity and became indispensable middlemen between China and Japan. Their involvement with Japanese trade made the need for a safe harbour on the Chinese mainland, from where they could conduct their affairs, much more urgent. Meanwhile, for a number of reasons, the Chinese officials in the Guangdong province for once welcomed the Portuguese approaches, and authorization was granted for the establishment of a Portuguese base in the Macao peninsula by 1557.

The using of the word *Portuguese*, in the context of the South China Sea in the 16th and 17th centuries, needs some comments. Quite often, it is difficult to tell exactly what the European sources mean when they mention the Portuguese.

- Sometimes, people originally born in Portugal, who travelled to Asia on official or private business, are meant.
- Other times, the same term designates people born in Asia, of Portuguese or Portuguese/Asian parentage.
- Other times still, more unfrequently, the sources refer to Christianised Asians, living in Eastern territories controlled by the Portuguese crown or in Asian port-cities within a Portuguese informal community.

So, the word had a rather large application, depending on the specific context. But, in most instances, the first two meanings cover the usage of the term 'Portuguese'. For instance, when mention is made of 'Portuguese traders' in the southern shores of China, most certainly the expression would apply to a multinational group, including some individuals born in Portugal, but many more born and raised in Asia, of mixed origins.

Macao, under Portuguese patronage, soon became an extremely busy and quite prosperous port-city, connecting Canton [Guangzhou] with sundry marts in the South China Sea, and way-beyond. Chinese products, such as silk, porcelain, musk, rhubarb, copper, ginseng, tea, etc., on board Portuguese ships, found their way into Japan, Indochina, Siam, the Indonesian archipelago, and other destinies much further afield. Of course, the Portuguese were not the sole exporters of China's goods, because Chinese junks were also linking the southern provinces, and especially Fujian, with the many ports in the South China Sea where Chinese overseas communities existed, such as Patane, Brunei, Manila, Banten, and so on. The Portuguese were, in fact, the *only Europeans* involved in the China trade. But not for long, because news of the establishment of Macao soon reached Spain, which at the time was one of Europe's foremost political and military powers.

The Spanish had, since the 1519-1522 expedition of Magellan, and from their territories in America, been trying to establish a foothold in the Spiceries or in the Luzon archipelago, from where to launch trading expeditions to the rich marts of East Asia. But had been unable, until then, to find a feasible route between the New World and the East Indies. When they heard the news of the Portuguese settling on the China coast, they immediately launched an intelligence gathering operation, coordinated by their ambassador in Lisbon, which soon had as a result the organization of a new naval venture that in 1564 reached the Philippines. While the islands were slowly but steadily occupied by Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, the pilot Andrés de Urdañeta, using a Portuguese assistant, found for the first time the maritime route back to Acapulco, opening up the way to a Spanish settlement on the shores of the South China Sea. In 1571 the newly arrived Europeans were firmly established in Manila, from where they extended their views towards China and Japan, which until then, from a European point of view, had been the private trading ground of the Portuguese.

Some changes took place in the South China Sea. By 1575 the Spanish were already trying to get Chinese permission to establish a base similar to the one the Portuguese possessed. To no avail, as such authorisation was never granted. The Spanish, however, had brought a strong argument with them, namely huge quantities of silver they had available in their American mines. Manila became a busy port-city, with Chinese junks calling in from Fujian, annual galleons sailing to and from Acapulco, and the odd Portuguese ship coming over from Macao. Although through indirect means the Spanish were able to secure a significant part of China's exports, the Portuguese maintained their trading privileges in Macao and also in Nagasaki, where they had settled in 1571. The *Great Ship from Amacon*, as it had done since the early 1550's, continued to sail the South China Sea undisturbed, except for the occasional typhoon, making the fortune of many a Portuguese captain. Mention must be made, of course, to the scores of other sailing craft – Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Siamese – that continued to travel the same routes. But the sea-lanes that crossed the South China Sea, at this juncture, seem to have been rather safe, perhaps due to the superior firepower of the Portuguese ships.

The year 1581 has a special meaning for Iberian interests in East and Southeast Asia, and also elsewhere, since it was then that King Felipe II of Spain also became ruler of Portugal, due to a tragic chain of events that left the Portuguese ruling house heirless. According to royal ordinances, both the Portuguese and the Spanish overseas empires were supposed to follow their own separate paths. But the interests at stake in the South China Sea were so valuable that the citizens, and often the authorities, of Macao and Manila were unable to keep their hands off each other's businesses. Repeated orders to the contrary coming from the Iberian crown only assure us that the Portuguese voyages to Manila were frequent, as frequent were the Spanish expeditions to Japan and to the China coast. Which means that trade with Manila must have increased significantly in the period of the *União Ibérica*.

The unification with Spain, however, was going to have dire consequences for the Portuguese, because the Northern European enemies of Felipe II were soon to launch a formidable attack on the Iberian overseas empires. Until then, the Dutch had had access to Asian goods through Portugal, but now that this country was out of reach to them, they decided to go directly to the Eastern sources. And, using the intelligence gathered by Jan Huygen van Linschoten during his residence in Goa, in 1596 a Dutch fleet under the command of Cornelis de Houtman sailed directly to the Indonesian archipelago, precisely the area where the Portuguese presence was thinner. The expedition was a success, not the least because it proved the monopoly of the Cape route could be broken. And in the following years, dozens of Dutch ships sailed east, challenging the Iberian monopoly of contacts with the South China Sea.

It didn't take the Dutch long to figure out, as the Portuguese had done nearly a century earlier, that the Asian trading routes had their own logic. If they wanted to buy spices in the Maluku islands, they had to barter them with Indian textiles; if they wanted to acquire Chinese silks and porcelains, these had to be exchanged against spices and scented woods from Southeast Asia; if they wanted to get their hands on the Japanese silver, they could only get it in return for Chinese silks; and so on. The involvement with the Eastern trading world had to be global to be lasting and profitable, the Dutch had to establish factories all over maritime Asia, as the Portuguese had done before them. And the Middle Kingdom, of course, was seen as the most important partner in the context of the South China Sea. So, the Dutch tried hard to get a foothold on its fringes.

The first Dutch visit to the Philippines came as early as 1600, when a fleet under the command of Olivier van Noort cruised the archipelago and appeared in front of Manila. The Spanish response was quick and the assailants were defeated, while some Dutch prisoners were hanged. There was no question that in Spanish controlled areas the Dutch were to be treated as dangerous foes. What about the Portuguese controlled areas? The following year, a fleet under the command of Jacob van Neck anchored off Macao and landed a small party of men, most of them being later killed by the Portuguese. There had been previous Luso-Dutch skirmishes in the Indonesian archipelago and the Portuguese were quite aware that the European newcomers

were set on taking control of any part of the Asiatic trade as they could get their hands on. They also knew that any foreign intervention in Macao, besides their own, was due to spoil their friendly relations with the Guangdong mandarins. They didn't want anyone else mixed in their dealings with the Chinese, because the balanced situation that existed in Macao had been very hard to build.

The Macao episode has been seen as a turning point in Luso-Dutch relations in Asia, because, it is alleged, after Van Neck's return to Europe, the next Dutch expeditions became openly hostile not only to the Spanish, but also to the Portuguese, initiating a series of deliberate attacks on Iberian interests and positions. However, contemporary sources testify not only that hostilities had already started before, but also that the Dutch skippers had explicit orders to antagonize Portuguese and Spanish interests in Asia by whatever means they deemed appropriate, even launching war against them. The situation was bound to worsen in the following years, because neither were the Dutch giving up on their intents to establish solid trading relations with the East Indies, nor were the Portuguese, or the Iberian Crown for that matter, willing to allow them to do so.

After 1602, and the founding of the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, usually known as V.O.C., Dutch activities in Asia became more coherent and organized, depending, as they did, on a centralized direction. Annual fleets departed from the United Provinces bound for the East Indies, with ever increasing human and material resources on board. Dutch strategy was simple and straightforward, not completely dissimilar to the one the Portuguese had adopted a century before:

- to occupy key positions in the Indonesian archipelago and elsewhere in the South China Sea, wherever possible;
- to control a substantial quota of the Asian trades in luxury goods;
- and to antagonize, by any means available, their European and Asian competitors alike.

So, in the first decades of the 17th century, important changes took place in maritime East and Southeast Asia.

The Portuguese being viewed as the most important target, the assault on their fortresses and ships became a dominant feature of Dutch behaviour. In 1603, the *Santa Catarina*, a Portuguese ship coming from Macao laden with valuable merchandise worth about 30 tons of silver, was captured near Patane; the following year, a Dutch fleet dared to blockade the sea entrance to Goa, while several other Portuguese ships were captured in places as far apart as Surate, Cochin, and the Java Sea; and in 1605 the Portuguese fortresses of Ambon and Tidore were conquered. If we mention that between 1596 and this last date (1605) about one hundred Dutch ships sailed to Asia, the magnitude of the threat on Iberian positions will be evident. An analysis of the available data suggests several explanations for the success of the Dutch entry into Asian affairs:

- The Dutch had done their homework, gathering all the information about Asia available in Europe, namely the ones collected by Jan Huygen van Linschoten and Cornelis de Houtman.
- So, then went directly to the Indonesian archipelago, where spices and drugs were a-plenty, while, at the same time, the Portuguese presence was less significant than in other Eastern regions, and the Asian polities were more fragmented and less powerful.
- They soon sought alliances with Asian rulers that had some sort of grievance against the Portuguese. And, unlike the Iberians, they never mixed material affairs with religion, their attitudes towards the Asians being not dependent on the latter's adoption, or not, of Christianity.
- Surprise was an important factor, because, although the Portuguese had received intelligence indicating that the Northern European powers were going to try and brake the Cape route monopoly, no one had anticipated such a vast and quick assault.
- The Dutch possessed well-built and well-armed ships, being, at the same time, able navigators and expert gunners. The only match for them, in terms of nautical warfare, would be the Portuguese.
- But the Portuguese, accepted as they were as routine partners everywhere in the Asian seas, had almost but given up all heavy artillery on board their ships, carrying only lighter guns.
- In the meantime, their warfare methods had 'gone native' and they were more used to man-to-man combats than to artillery duels. Also, their vessels, besides being usually laden with merchandise to full capacity, carried more peaceful passengers than armed soldiers. They were caught by surprise in the first confrontations with the Dutch.

The Dutch, in fact, although steadily gaining positions in the East, also triggered a strong reaction among the Portuguese, introducing a whole new set of commercial, military and naval problems that had to be dealt with, if the Portuguese presence and influence in Asia was to last. Repeated Crown orders, sometimes with corresponding human and material support, were shipped to Goa, and also to Manila, urging the reorganization of the defences of the *Estado da Índia* and the launching of strong counterattack measures. And, in the following years, Portuguese fortresses were rebuilt and supplied with fresh troops, new cannons were cast, better quality powder was mixed, men-o'-war and also lighter trading vessels were built, safety procedures were adopted in maritime routes, efforts were made to conquer new positions, alliances with former enemies were tried, fleets were launched in prolonged naval campaigns. And, everywhere throughout maritime Asia, the Dutch were relentlessly chased and engaged.

The Dutch were especially successful in continental and insular Southeast Asia, where they set up their most important bases (Jambi, Jacatra, Patane, Ayuthia, Ambon, etc.), always

in areas where they could contact junk shipping originating in the Middle Kingdom. But the mechanics of the South China Sea trades, as already mentioned, forced them to look further a-field. And China, of course, was always paramount on their horizon. Which meant they had to get a foothold either on the Chinese coast, as the Portuguese had done in Macao, or someplace where the existence of Chinese overseas communities made Chinese commodities widely available, as the Spanish had done in Manila.

- The Dutch repeatedly tried their hand in Manila, which they attacked or blockaded on a regular basis, from 1609 on. But always with poor results, since the Spanish were able to resist on all fronts: the capital of the Philippines maintained its inexpugnability and the Acapulco galleons always kept out of reach of the Dutch ships. These had no alternative but to raid the powerless Chinese junks coming every year from Fujian province.
- Next, the Dutch made their advances on Macao, which, despite its lack of consistent military defences, also managed to remain untouched. Duly famous was the 1622 Dutch assault on the Luso-Chinese port-city, when a powerful expedition of eight ships and nearly eight hundred men, under the command of Cornelius Reyersen, disembarked in Macao, in what was supposed to be a swift and easy military occupation. The Portuguese offered strong resistance, joining all their resources, and the invaders were completely defeated, suffering heavy losses. Once again, the Dutch found an alternative in the capture of Chinese or Portuguese junks bound for or leaving Macao, and in the occasional blockading of this harbour.

Meanwhile, since 1609 the Dutch had obtained authorization to open a factory in Japan. And, unlike they had done in other Asian regions, they maintained a very low profile, adopting a diplomatic approach towards the Japanese and never harassing the Japanese ships they encountered in the South China Sea, bound for Siam, the Philippines, or Tonkin. Perhaps their intelligence reports had mentioned the problems the Portuguese were facing vis-à-vis the Japanese central authorities. In fact, the Catholic missionaries who came to Japan mainly from Macao, but lately also from Manila, were becoming increasingly unpopular, because the Japanese government saw the existence of a large Christian community as a major obstacle in the process of national unification then under way. As a result, in 1614 all Christian proselytising in Japan was forbidden. And the Portuguese merchants from Macao that traded in Nagasaki were never able to dissociate themselves completely from the missionaries who came in their ships. In the medium run, the Portuguese were in trouble, and maybe the Dutch could take their place as intermediaries in the China-Japan trade, because they were not interested in religious activities, but solely on commercial ones.

Without a constant supply of Chinese silks, any factory in Japan would be almost useless. So, in face of the impossibility of occupying either Macao or Manila, the Dutch decided to settle first in the Pescadores (Penghu) and then in Formosa, off the China coast. These islands

didn't have a silk production of their own, but it was supposed that Chinese junks coming from mainland China towards Japan or the Philippines could be attracted to a European settlement closest to their homeports, by force or by other means. They established a base in Taiwan, a peninsula on the west coast of Formosa, but business was slow, except for results of privateering activities, until in 1633 the famous pirate Zheng Zhilong (Nicolas Iquan) started supplying the Dutch with silk and other Chinese commodities. In spite of these overtures, the Dutch settlement in Formosa never became a busy international port-city, capable of rivalling with Macao or Manila, as it was supposed to. Instead, it turned into a colonial establishment based on the taxing of local agricultural activities, which would soon be abandoned by the Dutch (1662).

The short period between 1639 and 1641 was to be a decisive one for the Portuguese, at home and in Asia, through a series of simultaneous political changes and upheavals.

- In 1639, after a series of threats from the Japanese government, concerning continued disrespect for the prohibition to bring missionaries to Nagasaki, the Portuguese were completely banned from Japan. From the point of view of the shogunate, which held supreme military power over most of the Land of the Rising Sun, the Christians were jeopardizing the Japanese efforts towards national unification. For the merchants of Macao, the ban from Japan meant the end of their oldest and most lucrative enterprise.
- In 1640, back in Lisbon, Dom João, the Duke of Bragança, organized a coup-d'état and unilaterally declared the Portuguese independence from Spain. Regardless of other more dire consequences, this also meant that the Macao ships, from then on, had to stay clear of Manila, also not a very good business perspective.
- In 1641, after years of blockades and assaults, the Dutch finally conquered the Portuguese stronghold of Malacca, so vital for the connections between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Once again, this could only mean further difficulties for Macao, because future relations with Goa and with the *Estado da Índia* would be utterly compromised.
- Last, but not the least, momentous changes were also taking place in the Middle Kingdom, where the Ming were soon to fall under the advances of the Manchus, which took Beijing in 1644, inaugurating the Qing dynasty. For decades to come, the southern provinces of China would be in turmoil, with evident negative consequences for Macao.

But, in spite of all the odds, the Portuguese in Macao held their ground, perhaps adopting the Chinese motto that says 'when the typhoon blows, the bamboo bends'.

Despite their many successes in the South China Sea, the Dutch, with all the naval and military resources they could muster, were never able to oust the Portuguese from Macao, nor the Spanish from Manila. Furthermore, they were incapable of establishing a permanent base in mainland China and they weren't accepted as credible partners by the Chinese authorities till

decades later. The Portuguese, in spite of all the losses suffered in other parts of Asia, namely in Ceylon and in India, firmly maintained their position in Macao, being recognized by the Chinese, for many years to come, as their only European interlocutor. Some credit was due, of course, to the Jesuit mission established in Beijing since the early years of the 17th century, which often acted near the Chinese imperial court as supporter to the Macao interests. And also to the Manila authorities, that often sent over military aid. But the Luso-Chinese port-city, in spite of constant Dutch harassment, continued to play an important role in the South China Sea, thanks to its easy access to the markets of Canton and through the diversification of its trading options, that included places as far apart as Tonkin, Siam, Java, Macassar, Timor, and the Philippines.

On the other hand, Spanish Manila, apparently with no significant problems, was capable of enduring constant Dutch pressure, while at the same time increasing its control over the Philippines. Meanwhile, the Acapulco galleon was maintained fully operational, establishing regular and lucrative contacts with Mexico. Trading connections of the Philippines with China never ceased, thanks to the Manila *sangle* community, which kept business running with its large junk fleet, and also thanks to the Macao ships, always present during the period of the Iberian Union and even after the *Restauração*. The Spanish authorities, in order to counter the Dutch threat in the South China Sea, repeatedly sketched ambitious plans contemplating a military alliance between Manila and the *Estado da Índia*. But these never came to be. First, because the Goan authorities were much too concerned with events taking place in the Indian Ocean, where the Dutch were slowly gaining control of ports and areas formerly under Portuguese hegemony. And then, because the Macao Senate, which, being so far from India, had a large autonomy over the territory's administration, never saw any real advantages in a closer alliance with Manila. The strengthening of political ties with the Philippines would mean a significant loss of autonomy for the citizens of Macao, and also an expected interference by the Spanish merchants and missionaries in the China affairs.

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