

Echoing alternative voices: the East Timorese in Macao¹

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Introduction

Administered by the Portuguese Empire and its inheritor states for almost 450 years, Macao has become, since 1999, a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China. The East Timorese living in Macao nowadays are the remnants of several waves of migration that reflect the historical links between Portuguese Macao and Timor-Leste, formerly East Timor (Carneiro de Sousa 2006). The geographical proximity between Timor-Leste and Macao has facilitated the movement of people between the two territories: convicts from Macao were sent to Timor-Leste, whereas the East Timorese wishing to complete secondary school studies, or become priests had Macao as their closest alternative, with its full-fledge Portuguese school and its Roman Catholic seminary. In recent years, the scholarship programmes of the Macao SAR and mainland China governments, alongside the close relationship between the two Dioceses of Macao and Dili, have contributed to sustain the coming of clergy and lay East Timorese to study in Macao, although this concerns only a small number of people every year. Understandably, migration patterns between these two territories have been scarcely documented in historiography — largely concentrated on the Portuguese administration and missionaries — and in the 20th - 21st centuries' social studies. However, the turmoil in Timor-Leste in the 1990s brought to Macao several waves of East Timorese refugees, which aroused some scholarly attention and subsequently led to one and only published study to the author's knowledge: Lisete Lumen Pereira (2006) interviewed some members of the East Timorese community living then in Macao and recounted their life memories, most of which revolves around the central figure and testimony of Fr. Francisco Fernandes, known as Fr. Xico (1936-2005).

Ten years later, given the new global context in which China has asserted itself as a development aid provider (China's Information Office of the State Council 2011 and 2014), and vowed to enhance cooperation with the Portuguese speaking countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014), Timor-Leste-China relations have become an object of academic interest and investigation (Storey 2009; Barreto Soares 2014; Talesco 2014) that ultimately addresses the issue of China's soft power in terms of working and effectiveness (Tran & Matias 2015). Hence, while (re)visiting the life memories of the members of the East Timorese community living in Macao, this paper also aims at informing about the latter's views on China's soft power deployment towards developing countries, and Timor-Leste in particular.

The East Timorese in Macao and China: A small and thus overlooked immigrant population

The issue of identity is one of the central questions in most work related to diasporas, and so is the case in the study of the East Timorese living outside Timor-Leste. The several waves of East Timorese refugees since WWII, migrating to notably Australia, have naturally compelled researchers to look into this locale the challenges of exile mainly from a sociological, anthropological and ethnographical angle, built upon the perspectives of the refugees. Taking on exploring not only the many facets of East Timorese diasporic identity, including the role of trauma and affective relations along with nationalistic feelings with the homeland, the scholarly production ultimately addresses the issue of community re-building (Askland 2005, 2007, 2009, 2014a, 2014b; Wise 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), but also the contribution of East Timorese refugees in Australia's local politics through the process of "marginalisation and empowerment" (Goodman 2000). With a different focus and in another locale, Goglia and Afonso (2012) studied multilingualism and language maintenance of the East Timorese

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diaspora in Portugal, spearheading a new scholarship on East Timorese diaspora from language resources and repertoires.

Regarding the migration trends into China, its new role as a country of immigration has attracted scholarly attention. By 2013 according to *The Annual Report on Chinese International Migration*, foreign residents in China accounted for 848,000 (Wang 2015), with a vast array of backgrounds and experiences (Pieke 2012). Whereas Chinese graduates and scholars abroad return in ever growing numbers (Wang & Bao 2015), traders and labour migrants from all the five continents are attracted by China's trading prospects, employment opportunities, together with relatively cheaper living costs, reasonable political stability and prosperity, coupled with comparatively lenient visa policies under the 1985 Law of Administration of Entrance and Exit of Foreigners (in Chinese: *Waiguoren Rujing Chujing Guanli Fa*) (Brady 2000; 2003). Although the new Exit and Entry Administration Law (in Chinese: *Chujing Rujing Guanli Fa*) introduced in July 2013, aims at stricter immigration control (Bork-Hüffer & Yuan-Ihle 2014; Haugen 2015), and despite some slowing down of the Chinese economy in recent years, the People's Republic continues to appeal to expatriates and migrants from all walks of life, professionals and students alike.

The East Timorese living in Mainland China are mostly concentrated in Beijing and comprise the Timor-Leste embassy staff and officials, along with a small group of East Timorese students, between a dozen to a bit more than 20 in university degree programmes (interview with Timor-Leste Embassy in Beijing, 2015). There are also groups of East Timorese professionals being trained in specifically oriented short-term programmes in the mainland under the cooperation agreements between China and Timor-Leste (Tran & Matias 2015).

As for Hong Kong and Macao, both territories were at the same time hotbeds of emigration and immigration. The waves of Chinese refugees fleeing the political upheavals that marked Mainland China's history throughout the 20th century literally populated both territories. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there are three new types of immigrant population: the economic and professional immigrants from Mainland China, the immigrant domestic helpers from South East Asia's lesser developed countries, and thirdly, the expatriate community. In Macao, the liberalisation of the gaming licenses in 2001 has tripled the number of gaming operations, and the SAR has been coping with a severe shortage of human resources at all levels and in all sectors. Hence, out of the 642,900 residents in Macao, 180,751 are non-resident workers, economic and professional immigrants from Mainland China (64.6%), the Philippines (13.2%), Vietnam (8%) and Hong Kong (5.1%), Indonesia (2.3%) and elsewhere (6.9%) (DSEC 2015). Besides, Macao has 10 tertiary education institutions (GAES 2013, 3) that have been attracting over the last decade an increasing number of overseas students, the last survey accounted for 10,872 foreign students (GAES 2013, 66). Thus, in Macao, a setting of intricate migrating patterns, the East Timorese live alongside hundreds of thousands of immigrants from all over the world, and whose tangible population size and socio-economic contributions have led to proportionally significant academic coverage. Albeit small, the East Timorese community of Macao form a distinct group with a variety of profiles: there are students, lay and clergy people, some of whom have become Macao residents, with characters whose personal life stories have been at times intimately tangled with history with a big H.

In this study are considered East Timorese those who identified themselves as such: regardless of their ethnic background, residency status or nationality, all the subjects interviewed asserted their East Timorese identity mainly because they were born in Timor-Leste and speak Tetum whenever the East Timorese community get together once in a while.

The discourses of East Timorese in Macao

For short periods of time, at the peaks of the refugee crises in the late 1990s when East Timorese fleeing the violence prior and after the 30 August 1999 referendum, had flocked to Portuguese Macao via Indonesia and Hong Kong by the hundreds, there were 500 to 600 East Timorese at once in the territory, according to Father Francisco Fernandes, who provided leadership and comfort to them and coordinated their onward journey. Indeed, then Macao was neither perceived as a land of opportunities for East Timorese refugees, nor even a safe heaven: because of the looming retrocession to China, it was rather a transit point. Thus, right before the handover to China in December 1999 most of the

refugees had left for Portugal, whereas some had gone to Australia. Only a small group have remained in the territory, which they now consider their ‘home’,

We live here now, my wife is Chinese, and so are my children. But I was born and I grew up in Timor[-Leste], so even today, I’m happy to mingle with East Timorese from time to time. We chat in Tetum or Portuguese and we have fun together!

There is no record or data that exactly account for the number of individuals who form this community: some interviewees estimated it to be between 25 to 50 individuals, with fluctuations year on year, mostly due to irregular cohorts of seminarian students. According to Fr. Domingos Soares, who heads the Grupo de Macao Rai Timor, an association founded by above mentioned Fr. Francisco (“Xico”) Fernandes to foster cultural exchanges, the last gathering to mark the creation of the association assembled 50 to 60 people.

The narratives of the East Timorese community, collected for the purpose of this study, convey themes and experiences that resonate with other East Timorese diasporic communities. Conducted from March to September 2015 in four research locales, the fieldwork in Macao kicked off with a visit to the Forum Macao² *cum* interview with the Timor-Leste representative, followed by interviews with 17 East Timorese in their 20s to 70s³. Further fieldwork interviews were performed in Dili and Lisbon with East Timorese and Portuguese authorities, and individuals who had lived in Macao. Lastly, a fieldtrip to Beijing allowed the researcher to meet and interview East Timorese embassy staff and officials, as well as a few East Timorese students in Beijing universities.

In Macao, the 17 informants, recruited through snowball sampling, include 7 male and 10 female, among whom 12 are clergy people and 5 are laypersons. 5 had arrived prior to the handover and have settled permanently in Macao, whereas 12 are non-permanent residents, on a student visa and undertaking undergraduate or graduate studies in Macao universities, in information technology (1), government studies (1), education (2), and theology (9). Besides the students, there were also 3 active people: 1 civil servant of the MSAR government, and 2 clergy people serving the Macao Diocese. Finally, there were 2 retirees: 1 musician and composer, and 1 businessman — the only ethnic Chinese-Timorese — who had passed on his trading company to his sons.

The interviews gave considerable space to narratives, and were conducted by the researcher herself. On one particular occasion, the researcher had to resort to an intermediary to pass on her interview questions to a group of East Timorese nuns and their feedback were returned through electronic mail communication.

The past

Healed, glorified, and moved on

Feeling singled out for once in a context where they are a tiny minority, the East Timorese community spent time and consideration to address the researchers’ questions. Especially, there were 2 members of the older generation, who happened to have actively participated in the resistance war against Indonesia. One recalled when preparing banners, how he debated with his peers on the wording to embody the entire East Timorese nation and avoid factional struggle between independence organisations. Both informants went into great length recalling their hardships — hiding in mountains with scarce food and water for weeks —, how more than once they had been doomed to be caught or even to die, and how ‘thanks to God’, they ultimately survived. One informant even recalled the hand-to-hand fights at the time of the guerrilla warfare, something he ‘would never be able to forget’, which rather contrasted with that informant’s current occupation as a priest, bound to go back to Timor-Leste

² Forum Macao (or Fórum de Macau in Portuguese) is the usually adopted short term to refer to the “Permanent Secretariat of Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation Between China and Portuguese-Speaking Countries (Macao)”. Established in 2003 with headquarters in Macao by the Chinese government, the Forum comprise 7 members: Angola, Brazil, Cape Verde, Timor-Leste, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Portugal. Under the leadership of China, the Forum Macao aims at facilitating multilateral cooperation to strengthen economic and business partnership between China and the Lusophone world.

³ The author expresses her deepest gratitude to the many East Timorese in Macao and in East Timor who gave their previous time to share lengthily with her.

upon completion of his master in education, in order to manage a catholic school. At the time of the interview, that informant was also proofreading his wartime memoirs in Portuguese to have them published.

Hence, war memories are still very present in the discourse of the generation who took part in the resistance. Proud of the role they had played then, they were thankful to have the opportunity to share their past life's unique experience outside of their usual social network. The integrated and balanced perception of their own history, and their social reconstruction afterwards typically indicate that those two interviewees were two resilient subjects, who had already processed comparatively smoothly the psychological consequences of their past wartime traumatic experiences.

Making history with a 'big H'

Another informant, Simão Barreto, who had migrated to Macao in 1958 to join the seminary, and eventually studied music and became a violinist in the National Symphonic Orchestra of Portugal, but also a composer who founded the Macao Conservatory, recalled the role of the East Timorese group in Macao, ahead of and during the East Timorese National Convention held in Peniche, Portugal, on April 23-27, 1998. Fr. Francisco Fernandes was indeed credited in his obituary to have played a role in creating the CNRT: 'He convinced the senate of Liurais, the country's traditional chiefs, to take part in the convention' (Jolliffe 2005), where he became a member of the political committee. Complementing the official account of that event with his own recollection, the interviewee shared his inside story of that event:

When Xanana Gusmao called the resistance groups to join their forces, the Fretilin in Mozambique and the UDT in Portugal had ceased to communicate with each other, hence they could never organise any convention. We, in Macao, were far away from both of them, and somewhat in between. We received a letter from Xanana Gusmao asking the Macao group to make the convention happen. The then governor of Portuguese Macao, Rocha Vieira, gave us his full support and allocated one million patacas to provide for all the expenses of the meeting, including travels to Macao, meals and accommodation for everyone. We worked on the logistical aspects. Eventually, the Macao group started to contact and invite everyone. So, through our preliminary effort and commitment in Macao, we showed that it was possible to forget our political differences for the sake of national unity and the independence cause. But the Lisbon group was annoyed to see that the meeting would be held, not in Portugal though. Eventually, it was decided that the convention would take place in Peniche. This would not have been possible if we, the [East] Timorese group in Macao, had not started to move things! And so, we went to Peniche, Manuel Tilman, Xico Fernandes, Tomas Jesus, Jaime Ximenes and myself, again with the support of the government who allowed us to take *paid* leave.

As one can see, the East Timorese community in Macao counts among its members some significant figures. Out of Macao's 5 delegates to Peniche, 2 were selected in the leadership team of the CNTR. Besides "Xico" Fernandes, whose memory lives on strongly among the East Timorese in Macao, Manuel Tilman became a member of the Executive Commission and the head of the Administration and Resources Department. Fr. Domingos Soares, who has been serving in the parish of Macao for the past 7 years, also participated in the Peniche Convention — as a delegate from Dili though.

Mixed feelings towards China

Unlike other immigrant groups in Macao who have migrated to the SAR for employment opportunities and plan to stay on, as long as they can make a living, the outlook of the East Timorese is radically different: when asked whether they would stay in Macao if they were to find placement in areas related to their training, the non-permanent residents interviewees, who arrived most recently, unanimously responded that they felt compelled to 'go back home' in order to help build up their country.

The nuns and priests follow the plans laid out for them by their superiors and religious congregations, which is to come to Macao for theology studies and then either return to Timor-Leste for any assignment decided for them, or to be dispatched in their congregation's houses throughout Asia.

I was working in a school before coming to Macao. My Bishop, Dom Basilio, sent me here for me to be properly trained in a master programme in education, so that upon my return, I can work in the school management of one of the Catholic schools.

My field is IT. In Dili, I was with the Ministry of Finance, but our IT system is so underdeveloped that we cannot do much. So I have applied for a scholarship and I am now studying computer science. When I return I can develop computer programmes for the Ministry of Finance.

Their strong desire to return is motivated by their ‘love for their beautiful homeland’, where ‘the lifestyle really suits [them]’. However, all expressed frustration and disappointment with the slow development progress in Timor-Leste since its independence, ‘the government is not doing enough’, some timidly mentioned possible corruption issues: ‘I gave my life for my country; I hope they, the ones in power, are not going to ruin everything.’

Living in Macao, with some benefiting from scholarship programmes from the Chinese government that has been providing development aid to Timor-Leste (Storey 2009; Barreto Soares 2014; Talesco 2014) in its attempt of “charm offensive” (Kurlantzick 2007, 109-111), some interviewees expressed their sincere gratitude towards China. In that respect, Beijing soft power diplomacy towards the Portuguese-speaking countries (Tran & Matias 2015) is indeed bearing its fruits. An interviewee further elaborated on the extent of China’s aid to Timor-Leste, that ‘is not new since China has never given up on Timor-Leste’, and recalled how China had supported financially the resistance, without any condition:

Not long after the Indonesian invasion, [Mari] Alkatiri and [José] Ramos-Horta went to Beijing to ask for support. Portugal, after the revolution, had other preoccupations, and no money to give us. We had absolutely nothing then. They met with the highest authorities, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. We’ll never forget that China gave us money then, that was used to pay for essential expenses such as travels and also the suits, so that our leaders could be presentable and go to the UN in New York, and elsewhere and plea for our cause.

However, while the Macao East Timorese community saluted the present contributions of China in Timor-Leste’s development, some of the interviewees also expressed concerns about the recent Chinese immigration into Timor-Leste, fearing that the latter would eventually take over the business in their country, thus preventing the locals to take the lead in those ventures:

You know, people talk and one can feel some form of frustration and resentment against the recent waves of Chinese immigrants to Timor[-Leste]. Some of us know how things have turned out in some places in Africa, so...There are so many Chinese now coming to Timor[-Leste]. Some of them arrange fake marriage with [East] Timorese to appropriate land. We are not automatically blaming the Chinese people it is also the responsibility of our government to prevent these abuses.

There are some 500 Chinese nationals working for Chinese firms in Timor-Leste, plus some 3,000 individuals in various enterprises and projects⁴. In a face-to-face interview with Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Roberto Soares⁵, he mentioned that Timor-Leste and China were working on a memorandum to address these hot immigration issues.

Further research

By studying the East Timorese community in Macao, this paper falls at the crossroads of several areas of recent social science research and literature and uncovers the field for further investigation with regards to, on one hand, development studies along with China’s assertive role as an aid provider; and on the other hand, to migration and diasporic studies on foreigners living in China, and the East

⁴ Mobile communications with officials of the East Timorese diplomatic corps based in Beijing and in Macao, February, 2016.

⁵ Dili, July, 2015.

Timorese community in particular. The potential for further research may comprise comparative analyses on issues such as identity perception or language maintenance by the East Timorese diaspora worldwide, including the one settled in Macao, who was overlooked due to its relatively small size. Nevertheless, precisely because that community lives in Macao, China, with a significant number of members benefitting from various cooperation agreements between the civil and clergy authorities of Beijing, Dili and Macao, the MSAR East Timorese community reflects the current state of relations between Timor-Leste and China.

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