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Macau: Ten Years after the Handover

Thomas Chung and Hendrik Tieben

This publication focuses on pertinent issues arising from Macau's recent development, namely the city's political economy, architecture and urbanism, heritage and tourism, cultural identity and cross-border relations.¹ Coinciding with both the tenth anniversary of the 1999 handover of the former Portuguese-administered territory and the less publicised thirty-year milestone since the resumption of diplomatic ties between Portugal and China, this publication's intentions are twofold. On one hand, there is an attempt to evaluate Macau's first post-handover decade, as framed within the city's historical background. On the other hand, through specific studies of current challenges and problems resulting from Macau's ongoing transformation and unprecedented growth, the aim is to identify prospective scenarios from within the particular fields of interest of individual contributors. To situate the publication within contemporary discourse on Macau, a concise summary of events and concerns in the run-up to and after the handover follows, in which fundamental themes and implications such as Macau's rapid urban and socio-economic changes, identity politics, administration legitimacy and re-integration with China will be introduced.

When Macau reverted to Chinese sovereignty on 20 December 1999 after over four centuries of more or less uninterrupted Portuguese presence and jurisdiction, the handover was significant to the parties involved for different reasons. For the People's Republic of China (PRC), its political importance lay not only in the retrocession of the oldest and ultimate foreign-influenced enclave on Chinese soil. Beijing insisted that closure for Macau was settled before the end of the twentieth century, so as to promptly follow Hong Kong's 1997 conversion to a Special Administrative Region (SAR) and the implementation of "One Country, Two Systems" – a governance model allowing a high degree of autonomy that was intended for eventual

1 The beginnings of this publication can be traced back to the conference session titled "Macau Beyond Gambling" at the International Convention of Asia Scholars 5 (ICAS 5) at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in August 2007. Co-convened by the editors of this issue, the organised panel owed much to the active contribution of Peter Zabielskis and Moisés Silva Fernandes. Sincere gratitude also goes to Dr. Karsten Giese, editor of this journal, for his subsequent invitation to edit this Macau issue and the anonymous reviewers whose comments and advice greatly contributed to the improvement of the articles published in this issue. Finally, the editors would like to thank the contributing authors for the productive discussion throughout the making of this issue.

application to Taiwan (Porter 1999; Edmonds and Yee 1999; Chan 2003). For Portugal, it was primarily a matter of honourable departure and lasting legacy imbued with symbolic meaning. In the Portuguese consciousness, Macau still occupied an eccentric “space of memory”, as trading outpost and “door of the Missions” of its erstwhile maritime empire simultaneously (de Saldanha 2003). In practice, it meant negotiating a smooth transition to maintain remaining Portuguese economic, political and cultural interests, and to guarantee Macau’s legal-judicial framework, external autonomy and international profile (Henders 2001; Fernandes 2003; Pereira 2003).

For Macau, the core questions concerned identity, autonomy and its very existence. Regarded by some as a historical anomaly – a place of convenience along the South China coast for the Portuguese to pursue their mercantile entrepreneurship in the early sixteenth century and later as a gateway for evangelism, this miniscule sliver of land at the southwestern tip of the Pearl River Delta had always thrived on its marginal location as a threshold bridging two empires. Its intermediary role as an entrepôt facilitated contact and the mingling of different cultures, from which a pattern of mutual tolerance, concession and co-existence gradually emerged. Scholars have argued that Macau’s survival is in fact predicated on this principle of “give and take”, or what has been termed the “Macau formula” from the Chinese perspective to regulate Sino-Western relations up to the Opium War period (Wu 1997; Fok 2003). While the 1987 Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration guaranteed in principle Macau’s qualified independence, with the Macau Basic Law subsequently passed in 1993 as its constitutional instrument, the actual practice of autonomy vis-à-vis the extent and pace of re-integration with China after the handover was inevitably, and continues to be, the subject of much debate, analysis and speculation (Lo 1995; Yee 2001; Cardinal 2008).

Related to this is the call to preserve Macau’s distinctive identity – as manifest in its culturally hybrid architecture, language, ethnicity and everyday culture – which, together with its connection with Lusophonic countries, is regarded as Macau’s competitive advantage. Various elements of Macau’s cultural heritage and identity have been studied, including cultural syncretism (Cheng 1999), remnants of the Portuguese chromosome, and the anthropology of the Macanese (Amaro 1993; de Pina-Cabral 2002; Flores 2003). In forging its future there has been, and still is, for Macau the dialectical tension between underscoring its remaining specificity to carve out a specialized cultural and economic niche, and accelerating its integration and cooperation with China but in the process risking losing its very distinguishing characteristics (Edmonds 1993; Hobson 1995).

It was well documented that in the final run-up to the handover there was a general worsening in Macau society that arguably lived up to its

notoriety as a seedy gambling backwater. While gaming and tourism lost momentum after 1993, the property market collapsed a year later followed by the Asian economic crisis in 1997. Deteriorating public order, escalating corruption and triad-related street violence exacerbated the legitimacy crisis of the Portuguese-Macau government. Such socio-economic uncertainties overlapping with the political transition occasioned much conjecture and general anxiety. There was the questioning of whether Macau will survive as a specific urban culture. How the city could retain its Portuguese-influenced culture (Wong 1994) and status quo given the precariousness of the societal situation? What indeed would Macau's *raison d'être* be? What of its future role in and contribution to China? There was almost a palpable fear that its unique identity, as a city founded on the logic of accommodating differences and cultural diversity, was being overwhelmed by the imminent onslaught from mainland China (Cabestan 2003). As for reflection and retrospect within academic circles, there was a renewed interest in historical research as well as other aspects of Macau studies.²

Ten years later, this special issue intends to build on existing Macau scholarship, drawing from the rich resources while addressing current dilemmas. The five papers examine aspects of Macau's political economy (Sonny Lo), urban development (Hendrik Tieben), cultural tourism (Hilary du Cros), cross-border relations (Werner Breitung) and urban conservation (Thomas Chung). They all touch on Macau's recent developments in view of post-handover changes that are in themselves as unparalleled and spectacular as the pre-handover events were momentous.

A major turning point for Macau came with the expiry of the casino monopoly and the opening up of concessions for additional gambling licenses in December 2002 that attracted abundant foreign capital inflow. A year later, after the SARS epidemic has subsided, the Chinese central government implemented the Individual Visit Scheme (IVS). This easing of travel restrictions resulted in a dramatic rise in mainland visitor numbers that in turn boosted the economy. In 2005, UNESCO's World Heritage listing of the "Historic Centre of Macau" further raised the city's profile as a tourist destination. Beyond gambling and heritage, Macau also began investing in the idea of becoming a leisure-entertainment hub as well as a magnet for

2 Publications took many forms, from single-authored books, compiled "snapshots" or collected articles (Cremer 1991; Gunn 1996; Berlie 1999; Liu and Liang 1999; Fernandes 2006), to proceedings of conferences and symposia (Ramos et al. 1997; Chen 2001; Macau Ricci Institute 2003; Wiarda and Cohen 2004). Local journals such as the *Revista de Cultura* (*Review of Culture*, *Wenbua Zazhi*) in its various editions, the *Journal of Macau Studies*, and the *Revista de Administração Pública de Macau* continue to be important platforms for Macau scholars.

international business conventions and exhibitions. The phased signing up to the Closer Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and the Pan-Pearl River Delta Cooperative Framework by 2004 served to advance the regional integration process (Yeung, Lee, and Kee 2008). This succession of decisions and events produced a major economic surge, and in 2006 Macau overtook Las Vegas in annual gaming revenues. Nevertheless, the proliferation of casino clusters together with unregulated and opportunistic property developments began to threaten the city's physical environment and urban heritage. Concomitantly, socio-economic repercussions also began to surface.

Then came the extraordinary corruption scandal of ex-Secretary for Transport and Public Works Ao Man Long (arrested in December 2006 and convicted in January 2008), at a time of rising social tensions despite the soaring economy. Civil unrest was triggered in the 2007 May Day labour protests which decried uneven wealth distribution, a widening income gap, excessive labour import and defective governance. By April 2008, Chief Executive Edmund Ho announced a gaming moratorium to stop new casino constructions to prevent further overheating of Macau's economy. In May 2008, the Guangdong provincial government decided to limit visits from two to one per month (further restricted to one visit every two months in July 2008). It is against this fluctuating background of urban change that the papers in this issue are set, with the period covered dependant on the authors' different foci.

In the first paper, Sonny Lo investigates the impact of the rapid gambling-induced growth on the legitimacy of Macau SAR government. After introducing the chronically weak legitimacy of Macau's politico-administrative state, Lo explains that during economic expansion, "casino capitalism" (understood here as the strategy of economic growth through the casino industry) positively strengthened the administration's legitimacy by increasing tax revenues, generating chain-effect growth in related sectors, creating jobs, and in turn raising income and living standards. However, negative repercussions include perpetuating "the powerful influence of the casino capitalists", widening income disparities between rich and poor, and breeding gambling addiction. Lo argues that casino capitalism also played its part in indirectly precipitating the Ao Man Long case, exacerbating social tensions between haves and have-nots, leading to widespread public distrust, labour protests and ultimately an "unprecedented crisis of legitimacy". Finally, he assesses the Chinese central government's political patronage and its multiple involvements after reunification. Lo observes that they range from initial endorsement to "open the doors" and modernize Macau's casino monopoly, macro manipulations such as mainland visitor control, calls for economic diversification, and the recent retrenchment policy arguably relating to

regional and even global geopolitical leveraging. For Lo, Macau's fluctuating regime legitimacy will continue to persist as long as there is over-dependence on casino capitalism, although he admits that Beijing's interventions and support are inevitable, and may prove increasingly decisive in the long run.

Changes in Macau's physical landscape with respect to the integration process and casino-related developments are analysed in the second paper (Hendrik Tieben) from the perspective of urban image construction. Issues of urban spatial production, mental and physical city-image creation, promotion and marketing, and the evolving constructions of meaning are discussed through combining detailed observations of architectural and urban transformations with analyzing relevant rhetoric in various media. Fluid, cross-scalar foci on particular cases that reflect fragmented, multilayered conditions are used to recount how Macau's variegated urban images are reciprocally made and marketed. The article remarks on the post-handover shift from perceiving Macau as "City of Culture" to "Asia's Las Vegas". While the influx of international casino corporations meant the rapid erection of new mega-casinos, equally problematic was the blurring of real and fake heritage, as exemplified in the opening of Fisherman's Wharf in 2006 (a prominent waterfront theme park boasting facsimiles of traditional street facades and classical monuments), just after the authentic historic city centre attained World Heritage status. The paper further highlights Macau's deteriorating urban quality, congestion and dislocation of the lived-in spaces of locals to contrast with sanitized images geared towards integrating gambling and heritage with tourism and consumption. The current global financial crisis is seen to offer an "opportunity" to rethink Macau's profit-driven and consumption-oriented image construction for the sake of a more balanced consideration for visitors and residents alike.

Emerging issues regarding cultural tourism in relation to Macau's casino boom, World Heritage status, increased visitor numbers and new tourist profiles are explored by Hilary du Cros in her paper. After an overview on the different histories and policies of heritage preservation in Macau and China, she presents findings of first-hand case studies conducted at the Institute for Tourism Studies (IFT) Macau that employed opinion surveys as well as observation and data collection. In her studies, du Cros addresses issues such as public awareness, authenticity, congestion and overuse of Macau's heritage sites. In view of Macau's long coexistence of gambling and cultural tourism, she advocates for more studies focusing on the experiences of tourists who visit both casinos *and* heritage sites. Although according to du Cros' surveys many visitors are only looking for shallow experiences on their Macau trip, she sees the chance and importance to offer them a deeper understanding of Macau's rich Eurasian heritage which can be facilitated by better site

management. Furthermore, she observes new emerging travel patterns of mainland visitors who, because of the IVS, are now increasingly able to define their own itineraries.

The changing cross-border relationship between Macau and the mainland is addressed by Werner Breitung. He uses a socio-cultural perspective that focuses on the daily experiences of people on both sides of the border. Breitung links the observations of the border with the question of the successfulness of the integration process. Therefore, he observes border-crossing behaviour, personal contacts and familiarity; and identities, prejudices and attitudes of the people on both sides of the border. His first-hand surveys show the extension of the activity spaces of Macau's population across the mainland border. Nevertheless, Breitung registers that personal contacts to people on the other border side did not increase. Similarly, despite easier border crossing, mainlanders had only a small number of personal contacts with Macau residents. While Breitung found that Macau and mainland people were both generally interested in visiting the other side, only a few of them were interested in living there permanently. He concludes that most people in Macau welcome the increase of cross-border collaborations but wish the border to remain, a fact that they regard less as hindrance than as filter and protection. Breitung notes that this accords with the general desire to preserve Macau's autonomy and difference in identity. Nevertheless, given the "temporary" nature of the border (with its own official expiry date fifty years after 1999), Breitung sees the need for increased cross-border activities so that the "top down" planned integration process can eventually progress in parallel with "bottom up" initiatives.

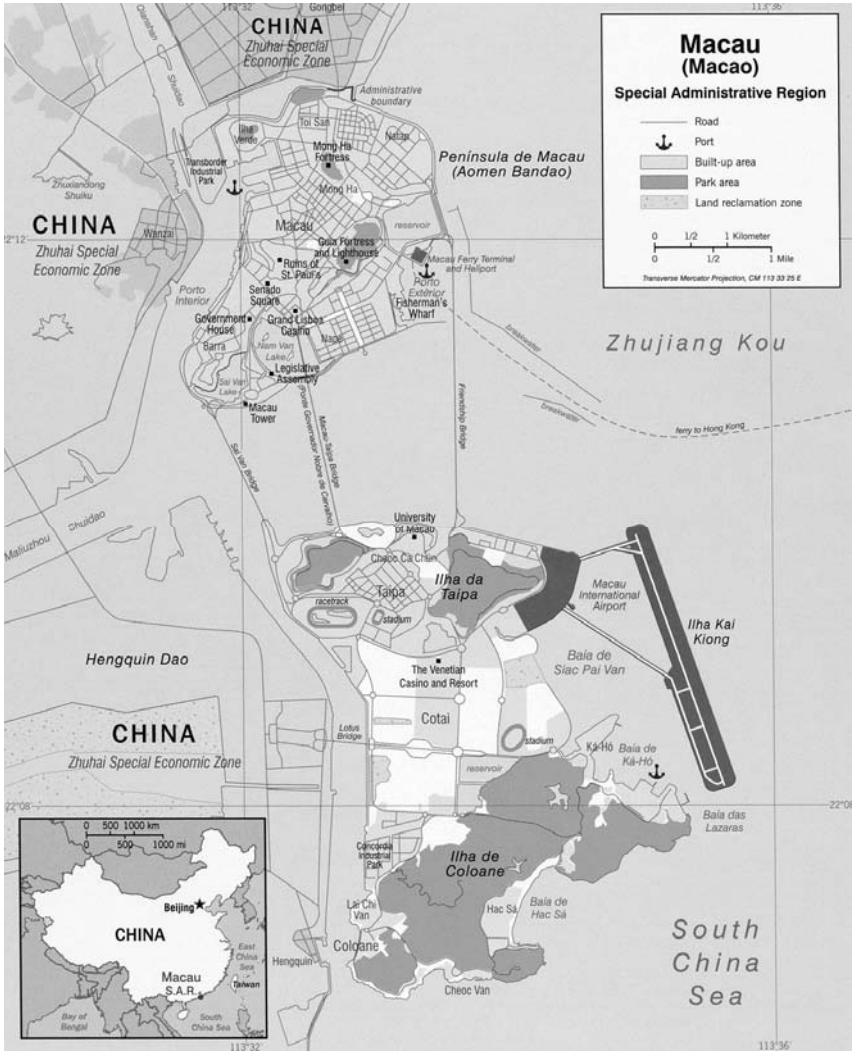
The final paper (Thomas Chung) reviews the evolution of Macau's urban conservation as framed within the discourse of value in heritage. By appraising conservation rationales and management strategies in successive epochs, the paper attempts to ascertain biases and balances, successes and contradictions of the conservation process. In the years leading to the hand-over, the paper detects a preoccupation with cultural remembrance and legacy that resulted in an instant heritage of new museums and monuments as "friendship" landmarks. The paper also notes that a rising heritage consciousness was informed by both international advice and local scholarship, particularly after the World Heritage inscription. Citizens began expressing their disapproval of heritage-related planning irregularities, especially after the 2002 gaming liberalization augmented development demands, further pressurising the already congested built environment. The article proceeds to examine the Guia Lighthouse controversy as a case of contested heritage, to weigh up current value imbalances and conflicts, ultimately contending that the high-

profile incident could serve as a valuable lesson for the ongoing conservation of Macau's urban heritage.

The five papers encompass several major concerns of Macau's rapidly changing post-handover society, shedding light onto various recent events and ongoing complexities. Often the issues and incidents mentioned overlap between papers, perhaps supporting the notion that due to Macau's diminutive size, and scarcity in resources and market conditions, the dynamics of urban change, whether it is yielding to external exertions or juggling internal differences, tend to percolate into most aspects of society. In fact, the ongoing global financial crisis is already marking a certain caesura in Macau's breathtaking development by the end of 2008. Direct consequences include suspension of major casino construction projects, retraction of foreign investments, massive redundancies and foreign labour repatriation. In the near future, Macau's gambling sector will face regional competition with the opening of casinos in Singapore and potentially Taiwan as well as other Asian cities. It is clear that as a place of multiple contradictory realities and social fluidity, the focus in Macau is constantly shifting to address evolving issues, including those on the topics covered in the papers.

Politically, speculations are set to persist until the election of the new Chief Executive later in 2009, although the current outgoing administration aims to maintain economic stability by executing a host of interventions and supportive measures. Eventually, Macau will also need to respond to calls for diversifying its economy beyond gaming and tourism. For urban development, the first "Outline for Macau Urban Concept Plan" presented for public consultation in 2008 may be an indication of moving towards planning for the strategic positioning of the city. Another consideration for urban growth is the decision to pursue the development of Hengqin island in neighbouring Zhuhai, west of Macau. For tourism, the recent announcement of record-breaking visitor numbers for 2008 is accompanied by various tourism products and promotions centering on World Heritage designed for coinciding with the 2009 handover anniversary celebrations. Regarding the integration process, Macau has just agreed to step up cross-border cooperation and enhance connectivity with Hong Kong and Guangdong in February 2009. This follows Beijing's official announcement in the previous month of a blueprint for strategic reform, development and planning of the Pearl River Delta from 2008 to 2020, a plan that embraces Macau's closer cooperation and integration with Zhuhai, Hong Kong and Shenzhen. As for conservation, the proposed Cultural Heritage Protection Bill will be made publicly available in April 2009. While the Bill expands the definition of cultural heritage to include intangible ones, the government is reiterating its sincerity to involve and collaborate with residents in the protection process.

Figure 1: Map of Macau



Source: University of Texas Libraries (no year).

In sum, this publication hopes to reflect on Macau's post-handover achievements occasioned by the upcoming ten year interval as well as advocate for a certain clear-mindedness to think beyond expedient reactions to immediate contingencies, especially in view of the current economic slowdown. It is hoped that the analyses and findings presented in the papers would stimulate further questioning, monitoring, and longer-term envisioning into the respective thematic perspectives, in order to better appreciate Macau's changing needs and uncertainties at a significant juncture, and perhaps contribute to the continuing effort of the city to reinvent its mediating role in cross-cultural interaction and geopolitical history.

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