

After Hong Kong, China will regain another city-state

Macao, communism and champagne

Four centuries of Portuguese rule. From colonial decadence to the dream of becoming "Monte Carlo of Asia".

Between ancient Catholic churches and modern casinos, the contradictions of an unlikely Chinese democracy.

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Silk against opium, trade rather than war, the "corrupt" Latin indolence instead of "puritanical" Anglo-Saxon enterprise: the fate of Macao was written since 1557, when the greatest navigators of the time (the Portuguese) landed on the coast of China without bloody battles or imperial dreams, but using the import-export.

Lusitanian explorers had already got in India (Goa) and in Malaysia, where they founded the center of each following expedition: Malacca. It was from this seaside town that Jorge Alvarez, the first European to touch the China seas, landed in a bay that the Chinese had consecrated to the goddess A-Ma, lady of the water and mistress of the wind: A-Ma - Gao, "A-Ma bay", which became "Macao".

Since the early years, the silk trade joined the work of evangelization. "Many people, in these places, now are not Christians only because no one makes them Christians" writes St. Francis Xavier, the first of the great Catholic missionaries in the Far East, to St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, in 1544. A relic of St. Francis Xavier (whose body was miraculously saved from decomposition) is preserved on Coloane island, one of the two "appendices" (the other is Taipa island) of Macao.

The missionaries arrived here did not try to impose Catholicism as in Africa or South America. They realized immediately that Chinese culture was developed and refined, and that to penetrate it, they needed to know it.

Matteo Ricci, arrived in Macao in 1582, was one of the pioneers of "inculturation", translating the Scriptures into Chinese and texts by Confucius into Italian (he was judged entirely compatible with the Christian message). At a purely quantitative level, the evangelization results were not spectacular (Catholics in Macao are now only 23 thousand), but the soft approach between East and West gave the cultural "chromosomes" of this unique city.

Centuries and centuries of peaceful coexistence, even cannon defended against the most formidable rivals of the Portuguese of the time in this part of the planet, the Dutch. Not even British arrival in Hong Kong, following the cruel "Opium War" (1840) which put China on its knees, changed the reality of Macao, which continued to live and prosper in trade. But the coming of the steamboat condemned to decay Lusitanian port city, which had shallow water, better suited to sailing ships. Portugal had already disappeared from history, the Victorian England of the second industrial revolution dominated the world, and Hong Kong became the "Pearl of the Crown" of Her Britannic Majesty.

In Macao, now provincial town forgotten by the rest of the world, remained the memories and "saudade" of many seaside towns in Portugal: an eternal sunset.

Only during the Second World War with Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, the city (neutral territory) lived a muddy redemption because of trafficking, espionage and political asylum, to return then to the usual indolence.

Portugal lived in the limbo of Salazar dictatorship first and of Caetano's one then, namely the most lasting fascist regime ever seen in a European country.

The "Carnation Revolution" of 1974 changed everything: the regime had fallen by military defeat in African colonies (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Capo Verde, Sao Tomè), every residual trace of colonialism had to be canceled, they had to return Macao to China, to the People's Republic of China.

Unbelievable but true, the city was "rejected" by the Communist leaders, grappling with the difficult succession of Mao Zedong.

Macao became "Chinese territory under Portuguese administration", without great resonance and big worries: it seems absurd compared to the spectacular return of Hong Kong to China. Yet, while in Hong Kong the Union Jack was already lowered, the red-green flag of Portugal continues to fly on top of the "*Fortaleza da Guia*", the highest point of Macao, until December 20, 1999.

Two years for spying on the future of the Republic of China, to understand the pitfalls of the project laid out by Deng Xiaoping: "one country, two systems". Communism and capitalism. Or democracy and totalitarianism. Ie, the third way - most likely - 200 million wealthy and modernized Chinese compared to one billion poor people in a Third World country like so many others. Without real political rights for anyone.

In Hong Kong the short democratic experience is already over: the parliament elected by universal suffrage was replaced by an assembly appointed by Beijing. For the financial world it is fine, even if the opposition led by Martin Lee promises battle.

Seen from Macao, the future looks less alarming. Especially from the perspective of young people, students, potential players of the future. There is not a real generational conflict: on the one hand the older generations seem to better accept the barter between civil liberties and economic well-being, on the other the memory of Communist oppression is still very strong, so much so that some families (especially wealthy Portuguese-speaking ones) emigrate.

At the University of Macao, independent and public since 1988 (previously belonged to individuals in Hong Kong), the atmosphere is quiet: in modern and well equipped, American style classrooms, students do not seem to fear the China handover of Jiang Zhemín.

"After the events in Tiananmen Square we were all shocked, but now I'm not afraid. Macao has always been China, it is normal to come back to the motherland " There is a bit of nationalist pride in Yvonne Wong, 20, a student of Social Sciences, and she is also very realistic: "The changes required in 1989 were excessive. We must proceed gradually, step by step to get democracy".

Her friend, Joanne Loi, agrees: "We must not infringe the law. I do what I want, without hurting anyone. I can fight for my dream". That is studying, finding a job, living in this small town, much quieter than bustling Hong Kong.

In fact, going around Rua da Praia Grande and the A-Ma Temple, coming down from the church of "Nossa Senhora da Penha" to Leal Senado square, you see happy faces: the Salesian school kids playing soccer, the elders dancing the "*tai chi*" in Lou Lim Ieoc gardens, mothers with children in the unfailing "MacDonald's", elegant girls on scooters.

The question is inevitable: is democracy a Western obsession?

"Participation in political life is very poor. At first free elections in 1988, voter turnout was 30 percent. Business matters, politics does not": Father Albino Bento Pais, director of the weekly journal "*O Clarim*", seems resigned. "Chinese community opposed a law that guaranteed greater press freedom. The people of Macao are nationalist, they did not develop autonomy as Hong Kong. Their leaders, like Edmundo Ho, are linked to Beijing, they are often members of People 's Congress".

Smooth transition, then, provided that they do not touch the well-being.

It is not supposed to be difficult, since the rate of economic growth after the boom of the eighties, is stable around 4-5 percent per year, unemployment is below 5 percent and Portuguese administration has a surplus budget for a billion and a half "*patacas*", with a population of 425 thousand people.

Macao is being proposed primarily as a city of advanced services, with the characteristics of the "free port" for commercial and financial activities. Compared to Hong Kong, it offers very low prices for both buildings and for qualified personnel, and a higher quality of life.

A little paradise, daily assaulted by thousands of Chinese workers who come to Macao from "*Portas de Cerca*", the border with China, to work in city's numerous construction sites or factories of textiles and electronics. People who can, with a rent that is one fourth of an average salary, look

for a hole in the most densely populated district of the world: Yao Hon.

The poor skyscrapers of the city, the concrete buildings built side by side without any urban planning criteria, are chopped inside into hundreds of apartments or rooms, often not different from the infamous Hong Kong "cages".

It is the dark side of the economic miracle that is still less striking here than in other cities, even for the Lilliputian size of Macao (only 21 square kilometers).

In this border area a young Italian missionary, Father Corrado De Robertis works: "Most of the Macao people consist of the contract workers who stay a couple of years and then try to open a business in homeland. It is clear that these people can not feel part of a community".

But the real problem lies elsewhere: "The Chinese are traditionally terribly pragmatic. Communism and especially the Cultural Revolution of 1966 destroyed the individual consciousness. The message of the party today is to get rich, the rest is rhetoric. For this reason the moral degradation is incredible. In 1999, nothing will not change: gambling will go quietly. Mao would turn in his grave".

Gambling is the backbone of Macao economy, it is 40 percent of GDP and covers 58 percent of the municipal budget. Portuguese administration and the STDM (Society for the Macao Tourism and Amusement) practically live in symbiosis: the political power of the governor, Vasco Rocha Vieira joins the economic one of Stanley Ho, 75, director of STDM, which since 1962 has managed eleven casinos in Macao and the main tourist facilities.

Roulette, blackjack, slot machines, horse and dog racing, lotteries combined with the Formula 3 Grand Prix: in Macao you can ruin yourself easily, fluorescent light tubes of pawnshop compete with those of jewelry and fashion stores. Yet life goes on as in a quiet provincial town, perhaps because everything is so intimate here, you learn to live with.

A stone's throw from the Church of St. Agostinho there are prostitutes of Rua Guimaraes; beside the Casino Lisboa, the municipal library; soccer fields are adjacent to the porn clubs managed by Thai; and from "Canidrome", where are greyhounds bred in Australia run, you go to the fish market, with ships moored in a port more and more steady.

The frenzy of Hong Kong or Taipei has never come here: live and let live, it seems to be the motto of these almond-eyed Portuguese. "Communist" China, on the other side of the Pearl River estuary, seems more distant than ever. At least as the millennium.

Cesare Sangalli

The government and opposition representatives speak

Chinese style Democracy? Yes, no, maybe

The agreements between China and Portugal grant "Western" institutions in Macao. But the city has never experienced a true democracy. And the Communists are coming in 1999. Meeting with the protagonists of the transition.

Mr. Kwok Cheong is gentle, precise, dynamic. Twenty-nine years old, graduated in economics at the University of Hong Kong, he looks more like one of many managers you can meet in Macao than a charismatic leader: the tone of voice is calm, moderate ideas, contained impulses. Yet he is the leading figure of the opposition, the most loved by young people (who especially appreciate the great work, the ability to apply himself for the people), "Macao Martin Lee". He leads "Union for Democratic Development", a political association and not a real party, which in the last election got 20 percent of the votes. Like many young men of his generation, began to engage in politics in the eighties, but the involvement itself started after the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

What does Tien An Men, the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations of Chinese students, weigh in the collective conscience of Macao people?

"The events of 1989 created above all a feeling of fear. Everyone thought that what had happened in Beijing could have happened here. Tien An Men protest had the merit of forcing everyone to take a position regarding requests for renewal that came from the society. The demand for changes in the Chinese political system is strong, and Macao people would like that reforms cycle, started in 1987, went on".

How do you explain the low participation of citizens in political life?

"With the strong influence of traditional powers: executives, entrepreneurs, representatives of the category. Their attitude is extremely conservative. Even in Hong Kong, where civil society is more developed and open, the financial elite lined up unanimously against any democratic change. Here in Macao, 75 percent of information is in the hands of conservative classes: we are unable to make our views known".

You are Catholic, a member of Caritas in Macao. What is the role of the Catholic Church, in this transition?

"The Catholic Church is still suffering by the shock represented by the Cultural Revolution in China in 1966. The attitude against religious practice was so hostile that Catholics withdrew completely from public life, choosing the line of full compromise. Here in Macao, Catholic associations, often led by older people, are more than prudent. But the importance of the Catholic Church is felt very much at school: it is no accident that more than half of the intellectuals of Macao was trained in Catholic schools. This is also true for Hong Kong, if you think of a leader like Martin Lee".

In Europe, imagining the future of China is difficult. What is the correct attitude to have towards the People's Republic?

"Speaking of China, you must always remember that the vast majority of Chinese are poor and live in rural villages, while Europeans think of a model of rich and urbanized society. Democracy in China will grow with economic development. It is important to keep in mind however, that about fundamental principles, human rights, no "Asian way" to democracy can exist. Only the model of political organization may be different".

Macao, with its peculiar history, is ahead or behind compared with China and Hong Kong in the process of democratization?

"Ordinary people are apolitical, they have not yet realized the importance of participation. If civil society delegate all to politicians, the most vulnerable people are to pay. We are working to improve the civic conscience, and things are slowly changing; the television, for example, contributed positively: in Chinese families now they talk much more than before. I think the biggest problem for Macao is the lack of true leadership, a political class with sufficient experience. Of this lack, the Portuguese administration has unquestionably the biggest responsibility".

Hard to find a response in official positions of the directors. Governor Rocha Vieira has an attitude of Viceroy, he deny himself even to Portuguese speaking press, he is almost unreachable. The legal coordinator of Portuguese Government, Dr Nuno Calado, by contrast, is open and available, ready to tackle any issue without hesitation, with his assistant, Sam Chan I, 37, a teacher of law at the University of Macao.

Why did a real democratic life not develop in Macao?

"For the ethnic composition of the city, first of all. If you want a democratic life, you need a feeling

of belonging to the city: in Macao two-thirds of population have arrived in the last twenty years. For the Constitution only people with Portuguese citizenship could vote. Since 1989, it was decided to give citizenship to those who resided in Macao for at least seven years. Today, voters are about one hundred thousand in a population of half a million people".

But the turnout was depressing (30 per cent to the first real elections) and only one third of the seats is elected...

"It is true, the democratic model adopted in Macao is widely imperfect. But keep in mind that Chinese tradition is consensual, it is very difficult to find the society conflict to which we are accustomed in Europe". "We're not ready - added Sam Chan Io- to a harder comparison. Our tradition of harmony is related to Confucianism, which the doctrine of Marxism thought we could eradicate, but which has re-emerged stronger than ever. Deng understood this, and began to gradually reform. Young people I meet at the university begin to have a different mentality but it will take time and, above all, graduality".

It seems strange that the people of Macao in 1997 would be less ready than Italy, for example, in 1948...

"I believe that civic consciousness is mainly linked to the existence of a middle class and its state of development. This is the problem of China and, conversely, of Hong Kong, where there is a strong and progressive middle class. Macao is in between these two realities".

Economic development, therefore, will also bring democratic development?

"The process is not easy, nor automatic. But if a person can choose, even partially, where to live and what job to do, a conscience begins to form . If the State or the Party choose for you, your conscience is castrated".

Do you worry about Macao future?

"No, because all the rights provided in the Portuguese Constitution will be fully applied in Macao, as required by the agreements of 1986".