Macau in the eyes of a border scholar

Places are created by the interplay of people and geographical space. Their identity is shaped by these people and by geographical factors, which determine the opportunities, limitations and conditions for human place-making. Macau as a unique place is mainly defined by two geographical factors: the sea and the border to China. The significance of the sea is most apparent from the fact that about two thirds of the current land surface has been reclaimed from the sea. It is also apparent from the role of fishermen, seafarers and other maritime trades in Macau’s history, from the imaginary of the Praia Grande, bridges and the Guia Lighthouse, and from the cultural diversity of a former port city and colonial outpost.

Macau has always been a maritime and an international place.

The case of Macau is very illustrative for this new, more differentiated understanding of borders. Recent studies of this border city show how the meanings and functions of the border have constantly been constructed and reconstructed, negotiated and renegotiated by local and more distant actors, even if the border has not changed in space. The case of Macau also shows that the old fixation on international borders, as lines between sovereign countries, does not fit the reality of a world with globalised flows and graduated sovereignties. International borders can become localised by everyday practices of border-crossing and petty trade; and local borders can become internationalised when state control is enacted in train stations and airports or when the campus of the University of Macau is surrounded by a quasi-international border. Whether Macau’s border is, or ever was, an international border can be answered based on constitutional considerations and inter-state relations, but for the reality and the actual meaning of the border other categories such as permeability and identity are much more important. They can disclose not only the detailed and layered constituents, but also the dynamics of the border.

Ambiguity in space and character: history of Macau’s borders

When in 1557 the Portuguese were allowed to settle in Macau, it was not meant as a transfer of territory or sovereignty. Therefore, no treaty was signed to specify any boundaries. In practice, the Portuguese settled in the southwest of the Macau Peninsula between Penha Hill and Monte Fortress. Between this settlement and the long and narrow isthmus connecting the peninsula to the mainland were fields and small Chinese settlements. Macau was under the administration of Xiangshan, today Zhongshan, in Guangdong. While allowing the Portuguese to settle and conduct trade in Macau, the Chinese rulers upheld their claim of sovereignty over the whole area and the jurisdiction over the Chinese living there. The Portuguese had to pay a ground rent and customs taxes, and they were only allowed to exercise jurisdiction over matters within their own community. Based on a close liaison between the local mandarins and Macau’s Senate, sovereignty was shared more along ethnic lines than along geographical boundaries.

However, physical boundaries in space have also always existed. The first border structure in Macau was a wooden wall erected by the Portuguese. In 1573, the Chinese built a Barrier Gate, so they could cut off the peninsula from the mainland. In 1605, the Portuguese built a city wall about 2 km south of the Barrier Gate. None of the two structures was intended to demarcate the territory of Macau, but merely to serve practical purposes such as containing crime and controlling access. They were also not fortified. The current Barrier Gate is from 1870, when the Portuguese military destroyed the original gate to replace it with a western style building.

This was the time when other colonial powers, most notably the British, had established their presence in China with better conditions forcibly obtained from the weak Qing Government. In this environment, the Portuguese also raised demands, such as full sovereignty over Macau and territorial expansion. The notorious governor Ferreira do Amaral in the 1840s unilaterally closed the Chinese customs posts in the city, stopped paying the ground rent and levied taxes on the Chinese citizens of Macau. Furthermore, the Portuguese jurisdiction was extended to the whole area up to the Barrier Gate. Ferreira do Amaral is until today remembered by the Chinese as an evil colonialist.
His grand statue had to be removed and returned to Portugal before the handover in 1999. However, the key link between Macau and the border to China leading to the Barrier Gate, is still called Ata de Ferreiro do Amoré in Portuguese, in remembrance of the fact that this was where the governor was beheaded by angry Chinese. This name is acceptable because the Chinese name refers to the Barrier Gate, not to Ferreira do Amal. Again, the border is not much territorial, but clearly, opposing sets of memory share the same space, divided only by the mutually unfamiliar languages.

Territorial expansion also started during this time. Portugal seized the two islands of Taipa in 1851, Colaane in 1864 and Bha Verde in 1890, and claimed Montanha (Big Heengin), Dongdo (Small Heengin) and Wancal (Wan chai), which lie to the west of the Inner Harbour. Their annexation promised to resolve the problem of the divided harbour and provide land, water supply and protection for the port. The Portuguese built houses and even a cemetery on these islands. In Montanha they reportedly also collected taxes. Chinese historians, however, emphasise the resistance by the Chinese on these islands against Portuguese occupation during the Qing dynasty and especially under Xu Keming.8

Sino-Portuguese negotiations to delineate the border were held in 1862, 1887, 1909 and 1928, but all of them failed. The 1927 agreement included the permutation of “perpetual occupation and government of Macau by Portugal”, but this treaty has never been ratified by China. In 1979, after the Carnation Revolution, Portugal established diplomatic relations with People’s Republic of China and Portugal did not exercise it – but even then definition of territory and demarcation of boundaries were avoided. In the words of Cremer “neither the borders nor the questions of nationality, sovereignty and government have ever been as clearly defined as for other countries. Even the formula of Chinese territory under Portuguese administration – ‘Portuguese territory’ clearly was the status of Macau. Rather this formula confirms that Macau is unique and that it is difficult and perhaps not appropriate to define Macau in familiar legal terms”.14

While international relations were often difficult, local interactions with the surrounding areas were generally less complicated. Macau depended on the China trade and on food and water from the mainland. In 1887, Zhang Zhezhong wrote: “merchants from the districts of Nanhai, Panyu, Xiangshan and Shunde, exceeding ten of thousands, come and go between Macau and the province. They frequently set up dwellings and establish businesses in both places, unrestrained by the borders, which causes excessive lawlessness among the people. Their endless traffic is like the weaving of cloth”.15 In more detail (see notes below).

From conflict to tacit agreement: post 1999 cross-border cooperation

When China retreated from ideology and opened up, cross-border contacts started to flourish. With the establishment of the Zhuhai Special Economic Zone in the 1980s and Macau’s handover to China in 1999, the cross-border contacts and integration have grown further.

Politically, Macau became a Special Administrative Region of China, following the example of Hong Kong. While the sovereignty lies with the People’s Republic of China, a high degree of autonomy is guaranteed. Macau can join international organizations and agree to some international agreements; it has its own currency. All these are actually important aspects of sovereignty, which lie with the Macau government, not with the Sino-Portuguese alliance. The Chinese army has a garrison in Macau but does not recruit soldiers there; the Special Administrative Region does not engage in foreign affairs, but even in external affairs – an arguably rather vague argument – and the Central Government is not directly involved in the selection of leading officials, but in reality it determines the outcome. Therefore, something has been invested, but it is still de facto shared and not very clear-cut.

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Notes

10 ibid., Breitung 2009