

Marginal yet Free

The Macanese in British Hong Kong

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People make their own history but under pre-determined circumstances outside of their own choosing. Karl Marx implied this in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* from 1852. Echoing Marx, historian Richard J. Evans suggested exploring how much free will people had in building their lives to recover alternative versions of the past. It is from such a place that I reconsider the experiences of Luso-Asian migrants¹ who found unprecedented opportunities, spaces, and freedoms in colonial Hong Kong to advance and to thrive.²

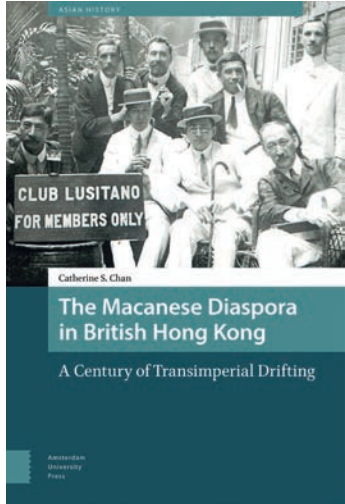


Fig. 1 (above): Book cover of *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong, A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

Fig. 2 (right): Brian Edgar's parents, British baker Thomas Herbert Edgar and Macanese Evelina Marques d'Oliveira, in their wedding ceremony at St. Joseph's church, Hong Kong, c. 1942 (Photo courtesy of Brian Edgar).



1842 marked the year Hong Kong formally became British territory. For some Luso-Asian (hereafter Macanese) residents of a decaying Macau, which was then leased by the Chinese government to the Portuguese as a settlement, this development signified the opening of new doors to better careers, business opportunities, and educational facilities. In less than three decades, more than 1300 Macanese had crossed the waters in search of new beginnings. In the process, they took part in the establishment of Hong Kong, from what British statesman and later Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) dismissed at the London Parliament as a “barren rock” into a vibrant multicultural port city. While the latter has been retold in numerous writings, some of which have flattened the kaleidoscopic experiences of the Macanese under the umbrella term “Portuguese,” my narrative of the Macanese touches upon the normative realities of a marginal community living under a foreign colony. In my monograph, I discuss the impacts of transimperial migration on individual aspirations, social mobility, communal segregation, and identity construction. As opposed to the general picture of solidarity and oneness, the Macanese community had diversified by the late 19th century into a complex community torn by class differences and differing allegiances. Their story speaks not only of the freedom exercised by subjects living on the fringes of colonial cities, but also of the power to constantly decide one's identity by harnessing new and old imperial and cultural networks.

Time, place, and chance

Colonial cities provided spaces to rework rules of inclusion and exclusion, allowing marginal subjects to navigate new worlds of sociability and confrontation. When the Macanese arrived in 1840s Hong Kong, many found employment using their knowledge of English and Cantonese, which earned the community the general reputation of loyal administrative assistants in public and private offices. This secured the Macanese with promising careers but simultaneously barred them from higher-ranking jobs that were reserved for Europeans. Leonardo d'Almada e Castro (1815-1975), one of the first Macanese to enter the Hong Kong waters with Captain Charles Elliot's entourage, wrote unsuccessfully to the Colonial Office with a complaint against his British colleagues. He had hoped to become the next Colonial Secretary; but only less than a decade into the establishment of the colony, the Britons were neither expecting nor ready to let an “alien” take on such a prominent position. Nonetheless, D'Almada spent his life working as the chief clerk of the Colonial Secretary's office and clerk of the Executive and Legislative Councils. Well-paid by the government and respected in his community, he focused on providing for his family and, in 1865, generously sold a plot of land to the Italian Sisters at a low price to build a convent. Despite encountering restrictions in the workplace, an effective and mutually-beneficial collaboration remained: Macanese men like D'Almada found career opportunities unavailable in Macau while helping to run the colony's basic operations at an affordable cost.

For some, the shift from a Portuguese imperial sphere to a British colony entailed opportunities for further migration and/or social mobility. Shortly after Brian Edgar was born in Hong Kong in 1950, his Macanese mother and British father decided to move to England [Fig. 2], where Edgar was raised and eventually graduated from Oxford. In another example, Major-Generals Sir Cecil Pereira (1869-1942) and Sir George Edward Pereira (1865-1923), known in most existing studies as “British” men who fought for their country, came from a family of Macanese opium traders. Their great-grandfather was a prominent businessman and politician in Macau. Their father, Edward (born Eduardo) Pereira (1817-1872), moved within the worlds of middle-class Britons: he was the only Macanese to establish a partnership with a foreign firm and become a resident member of the short-lived China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. Edward Pereira left Hong Kong in the late 1850s. He would reappear in London, having already revived his Portuguese background, and subsequently enter low nobility upon marrying the Honourable Margaret Ann Stonor, daughter of Lady Frances Stonor and Thomas Stonor, 3rd Baron Camoys of Stonor Park, Oxfordshire. Owing to its connectivity to other port cities and British territories, Hong Kong served as a springboard for a wider world of opportunities for adventurous spirits that willed to venture.

Those who settled down in Hong Kong explored the city's urban spaces and soaked up its multicultural atmosphere. From the lesser-known Clube Portuguez to the long-standing Club Lusitano, middle-class Macanese men established organisations based on British club culture. Such spaces emerged as platforms for middle-class Macanese to elevate their social visibility. By networking with British officials and prominent merchants, some would eventually be acknowledged by the colonial government as leaders of the “Portuguese” community and as representatives of Portugal in Hong Kong. Solidarity amongst the middle-class Macanese, however, came with new forms of exclusivity as well. From the 1890s to the 1930s, Club Vasco da Gama, Club de Recreio, and Liga Portuguesa de Hongkong would emerge as alternative social spaces for Macanese individuals and families. Club Vasco da Gama and Liga Portuguesa, in particular, were aimed at countering the Anglicisation of the Macanese, a characteristic that had been tied to Club Lusitano. Liga Portuguesa de Hong Kong, further encouraging a revival of Portuguese patriotism, had a considerable following that stretched from Shanghai to Kobe to Manila.

Across the pages of the British colony's English- and Portuguese-language newspapers alone, contributors debated on what it meant to be a true Macanese. This was demonstrated by a heated discussion that lasted three years regarding Montalto de Jesus (1863-1932). A Hong Kong-born historian, Montalto suggested the passing of Macau from the hands of an impotent Portuguese colonial government to the tutelage of the League of Nations until its people could self-administer. Was Montalto a traitor of the Portuguese nation or a Macanese martyr who fought for a more progressive Macau? As readers grappled with each other over questions of political loyalty, none seemed

to care about Montalto himself, who was left a penniless man and a broken historian.

By the 1930s, the Macanese had diversified into various strands: first-generation Macanese migrants maintained a stronger attachment to Macau, whereas Hong Kong-born Macanese tended to be more Anglicised. A quarter of the latter were naturalised as British subjects, and two Anglophile Macanese men successfully entered the Legislative Council as unofficial members. Those who grew up in Macau and moved to Hong Kong as adults despised the buttoned-up British culture of Club Lusitano. Of those born and raised in Hong Kong, some preferred to remain “Portuguese” and openly expressed their love for the Salazar government and the Portuguese nation. Overnight, all of these would appear insignificant when the Japanese occupied Hong Kong in December 1941. The ensuing war shattered pre-existing lines of social inclusion and segregation, making way for new allegiances and shifting patterns of identity and allegiance to emerge.

Free will, identity, and greater inclusivity

Transcending the narratives of cities, of nations, and of empires, the Macanese experience in British Hong Kong speaks of the fluidity of individual and communal identities. By exploring the freedoms they exercised as a marginal community and the various ways they responded to pre-determined circumstances, we are given the opportunity to recover the voices of ordinary women and men, whose experiences have been generalised as those of “the colonised.” I do not deny that these people were tied to the realities of colonial life, which could be prejudiced and cruel. Even so, the Macanese demonstrated the power to build their own lives and create new forms of sociability that eventually resulted in intra-communal disputes, the diversification of the Macanese community, and the emergence of alternative and sometimes overlapping strands of Portuguese and Britishness.

We make our own history, though not always as we please. We do not choose our parents, our natal country, nor the era in which we are born. Nevertheless, as the Macanese narrative has shown, we are not completely without agency. Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1833-1955) once wrote: “I am I and my circumstances.”³ To different extents, we all have the free will to decide what we are going to be in the next moment by realising that we get to choose how we respond to pre-determined circumstances. If we can acknowledge this very point, then perhaps we can stop condemning one another for taking on alternative identities and navigating new affiliations. Instead, we might start to appreciate each individual as a unique combination of their life experiences and see identity as an ever-expanding entity composed of our daily encounters with unfamiliar cultures and with one another. Through this lens, the more we see and experience, the more our identities expand, and hopefully, the more we gain the potential to value and respect diversity more than we did.

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Notes

- 1 Luso-Asians here refers to persons with Portuguese ancestry in Asia. This article focuses on the Macanese, a community that took root in Macau through generations of inter-racial marriage between the Portuguese or Portuguese Eurasians with Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Malay, and Eurasian people in the Portuguese territories of Goa, Malacca, and Timor.
- 2 This topic is explored in greater depth in my recent monograph [Fig. 1], *The Macanese Diaspora in British Hong Kong, A Century of Transimperial Drifting* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021).
- 3 The original was ‘Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia’ from José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditaciones del Quijote*, ed. Julián Marías (México: Catedra-REI, 1914), p. 77.