This year marks the quadricentenary of the Battle of Macau, fought between Portugal and the Dutch VOC over the Portuguese settlement of Macau. Traces of this significant piece of history can still be seen in the names of different places in the city. However, what indeed happened on that destitute day of June 24, 1622 has remained folkloric and anecdotal, nor is there a comparative study using sources from different perspectives. Besides, the Dutch failure to capture Macau did not allow the Portuguese to realise their precarious holding of Macau in the Far East, altering their subsequent governance of the city, but also directly influenced the diplomacy as much as the power struggle among the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the Chinese, and others in the following years. In order to understand more about this critical battle over the small port-city of Macau, we need to start from the beginning.

Revisiting the Battle of Macau 1622

A Polyphonic Narrative

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Prelude

The Portuguese first settled in Macau in 1557. It became the first diocese ever founded in the Far East, a base for Portuguese missionary work. The city also acted as an important trading post where the Portuguese conducted business with the Chinese, Japanese, the Malaya, and other Southeast Asian communities. In another account, let us not forget the happening of the 60 years of the Iberian Union (1580-1640), when the Portuguese throne was assumed by the Spanish crown, Macau was the hub that linked the lucrative Lisbon-Goa-Macao and Mexico-Manilla-Macao routes together. Concurrently, the port city was the redistribution centre where gold, silver, silk, cotton, timbers, porcelain, spices, and precious stones were redistributed. Thus, situated as a node between the sea and the land, the South and the East, different colonial powers saw Macau as occupying a strategic spot for expanding their influence and market in Asia. Therefore, in the context of the 16th and 17th centuries, capturing Macau means possessing a significant position to scramble for world power in the world. Allegedly for this reason, the Dutch tried to seize Macau from the Portuguese from as early as the 16th century. Indeed, before the Battle of Macau, the Dutch had raided the city in 1601, 1603, and 1607. But the assault in 1622 is seen as their final and final – attempt to capture Macau (Fig. 1).

In 1621, the governor-general of the Dutch East India and officer of VOC, Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1635), started actively planning a trading monopoly with China. His proposal was to send a fleet and occupy Macau first, hoping to replace the Portuguese in their trading position in the Chinese. In the ensuing plan, the fleet was to set sail from Batavia and occupy Macau first, hoping to replace the Portuguese in their trading position in the Chinese. In this case, planning was to place the fleet to the "Pascaerado Archipelego," now known as Penghu (蓬鼓 "Penghu"), situated on the Straight of Taiwan. The port could be built there and subsequent strategies could be developed. Coen ordered his commander Cornelis Reijersen (1590-1633) to execute the campaign. He left Batavia with his soldiers and ships on April 10, 1622, and on June 22, his fleet captured al-Maktam. Over the following two days, a battle that would influence the fate of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the city of Macau took place. Of the same battle, different individual have given their own narratives. Depending on their own affiliations and personal backgrounds, these narrators offer us a polyphonic portrayal of the battle, while facts are blurred with folklore and variations. Thereupon, it is the task to present such a polyphony so that we can revisit this drama once again from different perspectives 400 years after the battle.

In the following paragraphs, I present four archival materials about the Battle of Macau. Some details from one may be contradicted by another. By comparing them, we can come closer to what indeed occurred during the battle. The first account is from the Jesuit Jerónimo Rodrigues (1567-1628), who wrote in Spanish Relacion de la Victoria que alcanzó la ciudad de Macao, en la China centro-occidental ("Report about the Victory Achieved in the City of Macao in China against the Dutch"). This report was only retrieved and published in 1938 by the British historian Charles R. Boxer. The second perspective comes from the diocese’s governor (governador do bispoado), António da Rosário (in office: 1613-1623; 1624-1630), who wrote Relação do vindo das Olandezas a Macau ("Report of the Coming of the Dutch to Macau"). In this account, he also gave his evaluation of the defense led by the captain-major (capitão-major), Lopo Sarmento de Carvalho (in office: 1617-1618; 1618-1623). The third comes from a Swiss mercenary, Elle Ripon (in service for VOC: 1618-1626), who fought on behalf of the Dutch VOC. His diary was first published in 1997 in French by Yves Giraud. The following analysis references the Dutch edition, published in 2010 by Leonard Blusse and Joap de Moor. Last but not least, I consider a brief study conducted by the Swedish historian Anders J lungsstjord, who claimed to have studied the manuscript from Cornelis Reijersen and the reports at the Macau Senate’s archives. Together with other observations he had made during his stay in Macau, he issued his monograph, A Historical Sketch of the Portuguese Settlement in China, in 1834.

The Arrival of the Dutch from the Sea

Right from the beginning of the battle, there are already different descriptions of the strength of the assaulting party. Ripon, in his diary, wrote that there were 12 ships when they left Batavia, but he did not specify if the “boats” and “sloops” that were used to attack Macau were among those 12 ships. On the other hand, Rodrigues reported that there were 13 ships, including those with three masts, seen from the harbour of Macau. Two other three-masted ships that were originally sailing to Japan also joined the Dutch. Rosário’s description accords with Rodrigues: he gives the details that nine of the 13 ships were battle ships with three masts. Meanwhile, Ljungstedt wrote that there were 16 ships that set sail from Batavia, while two other trading ships to Japan joined them on the way to the seas of Macau. In any case, all the accounts describe that the Dutch fleet anchored on June 22. The Dutch immediately surveyed the geography of the part, deciding where they would land their attack. Rodrigues reports that Reijersen himself carried out the survey, and the Portuguese from the city attacked the survey team on June 23. Rosário describes a yet more dramatic scene: already on the 22nd, the Dutch attempted to land but retreated under the defending fire from the city. On the 23rd, two big battle ships with 25-30 cannons approached Macau, raiding the city for four hours. He writes that “our men have a huge casualty on them. This episode, however, does not appear in other materials, including Ripon’s diary. This passionate description, as well as his vivid illustration of the battle, which we will soon reproduce, due to his affinity with the Portuguese. To the contrary, Ripon reflects that they merely preserved everything to disembark without much damage. He also wrote that they could not find any enemy soldiers on the place where the Portuguese and the Spanish had built a trench and a battery. In the other three sources, the spot is marked as Casilhas/Casilhas (葡萄牙 "Tanggouhuan"), on the Eastern edge of Macau.

The Battle on Land

Despite all these differences, the sources are consistent in stating that 800 soldiers from the invading army landed at Caicedas on the morning of June 24. On the defending side, Barata and Ljungstedt identified that there were 60 Portuguese and 90 Macanese. The Dutch side captured the trench and battery successfully, but according to Ripon, they succeeded at the cost of great losses. For one, their commander Cornelis Reijersen was wounded as soon as he arrived at the front and was transported back onboard immediately afterward. Rosário, in his account, speculated that the Dutch landing was more successful, believing that invaders from occupying the trench and battery, the defenders retreated to the city. What happened next seems to be one of the determining moments of the battle. Nevertheless, such an incident was only reported by the Portuguese commander. To the contrary, Ripon reflects that they merely preserved everything to disembark without much damage. He also wrote that they could not find any enemy soldiers on the place where the Portuguese and the Spanish had built a trench and a battery. In the other three sources, the spot is marked as Casilhas/Casilhas (葡萄牙 "Tanggouhuan"), on the Eastern edge of Macau.
was a strategic vantage point for the Dutch, as it is the highest point on the Macau Peninsula. For this reason, he [Carvalho] commanded his men to occupy [the hill] through the eastern part. [...] Seeing the command, his men to occupy [the hill] was a strategic vantage point for the Dutch, and the Dutch soldiers wanted to harness determination, slaughtering those in Rufijn's scene, many of these slaves were killed. According to Carvalho's account, which tends to glorify the contrast between Rosário's standards and drums.

The Retreat of the Dutch to the Sea

Rodrigues and Ljungstedt reported that the Dutch attempted to re-organise themselves when those who had retreated regrouped after being killed, following his overall narrative, there must be far more people who were killed by the Dutch than the mathematics indicated. According to Chronicle of Macau (澳門編年史 [Japón Binranjis]), there were 163 Dutch killed and 162 wounded in this battle. It is known, however, that only a few survived the retreat back onboard, together with "a great number of enslaved servants and slaves. It was this battle. [...] In the end, it seems that no consensus could ever be reached regarding the casualties on both sides.

Epilogue

Rodrigues recorded that on the next day (June 25), a ship bearing a white flag was sent, trying to rescue the rest of the Dutch. The city, however, responded by saying that it was not time until the King judged. Rodrigues, without recording this event, wrote that after they had treated the wounded in good order, they decided to continue their expedition and reach the Pescadores Archipelago on June 27. In addition, both Rodrigues and Ljungstedt reported that the admiral of the sea from the Canton province, seeing the courage of the slaves and servants who fought for the Portuguese, awarded them with a considerable amount of rice. Some of the slaves had even freed by their masters and even if the battle. It is also after this instance that the post of a governor – instead of a captain – was restored in Macao, and a systematic construction of forts and walls was planned [Fig.3].

From there, Rodrigues conferred the victory to the Portuguese and attributed the victory to God. In particular, throughout Rosario’s whole reportage, the legitimacy of the Portuguese rule of Macao and defence against the Dutch. Simultaneously, Ripon’s diary has not only debunked such a myth, but is arguably the only source that recorded the undecipherable writing due to his wounds, made his report incomplete and hard to follow. In the end, by reading these different people's narratives, we can see the same scene through different lenses, happy 400 years ago between two colonial powers over Macao, that determined not only the fate of this tiny piece of land, but also its relationship with the surrounding areas, and even the balance of colonial powers during the early modern time.

Notes

4. Blussé and de Moor, 99-100.
10. Zhong, Kaijian Tang 金國平, and Guoping Jin 景。{fig}
12. Zhong, Kaijian Tang 金國平, and Guoping Jin 景。{fig}
14. Zhong, Kaijian Tang 金國平, and Guoping Jin 景。{fig}