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Developing and Expanding Trade by the Portuguese in China in the 16th – 18th Centuries

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Abstract

This article clarifies the process of establishing and expanding the commercial power of Portugal in China in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. In the second half of the 16th century, through various means, the Portuguese gradually “legalized” their existence and established a highly autonomous government in Macao. The Portuguese Crown expected to build a fortified base as a springboard to realize their plan in developing an exclusive trade network in mainland China and Japan as well as the other countries in Southeast Asia and South Asia in the 17th and 18th centuries. To study this issue, the authors mainly rely on original materials and academic achievements by Chinese and international scholars that are directly or indirectly related to the content of the article. At the same time, the authors use two main research methods of Historical Science (historical method and logical method) with other research methods (analysis, synthesis, statistics, and comparison). This research will make a specific contribution in recreating the overall picture of Portuguese commercial activities in Asia in general and China in particular from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

Keywords

Portugal, China, Macao, commerce, Japan, India

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Развитие и расширение португальской торговли в Китае в XVI–XVIII веках

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Аннотация

Статья объясняет процесс установления и распространения торговой силы Португалии в Китае в XVI–XVIII вв. Во второй половине XVI в. путем принятия различных мер португальцы постепенно «узаконили»

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свое присутствие и установили в высшей степени автономное правительство в Макао. Португальская корона собиралась создать укрепленную базу в качестве трамплина для реализации своего плана по развитию эксклюзивной торговой сети в материковом Китае и Японии, как и в других странах Юго-Восточной и Южной Азии в XVII и XVIII вв. Для изучения этой темы авторы в основном использовали оригинальные материалы и академические достижения китайских ученых и всего международного научного сообщества, прямо или косвенно связанные с содержанием статьи. В то же время авторы использовали два основных исследовательских метода исторической науки (исторический метод и логический метод), а также и другие методы (анализ, синтез, статистику и сравнение). Это исследование внесет особый вклад в воссоздание цельной картины португальской торговой активности в Азии в целом и особенно в Китае с XVI по XVIII в.

Ключевые слова

Португалия, Китай, Макао, торговля, Япония, Индия

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Introduction

From the beginning of the 16th century, with the participation in the trading network in Southeast Asia, the Portuguese gradually established the first relations with Chinese merchants¹. However, this process did not take place as smoothly as the Portuguese had hoped. At that time, the activities of *Wokou* (倭寇: Japanese pirates) led to insecurity in the southeast coast of China and seriously threatened the survival of the Ming dynasty [Lim, 2010; Guillot, Lombard, Ptak, 1998; Antony, 2010]. In such a context, the Ming dynasty implemented the “*Haijin*” (海禁: Maritime prohibition) [Von Glahn, 1996, p. 116; Kangying, 2010, pp. 3–4] policy, which became a major obstacle to establishing trade relations with China. From 1513 to 1520, except for Fernão Peres de Andrade who came to trade in Guangzhou, most other Portuguese merchants were unable to conduct trade with the Chinese. “The final chapter of this story was the arrival at T’un-men, in August 1522, of three ships under Martim Affonso de Mello Coutinho, who has a royal commission to conclude peace with China, and enough men to garrison a fort he hoped to establish, presumably with consent” [Twitchett, Mote, 1998, p. 340]. However, two of these three ships were captured by the Ming government. In fact, during this time period, growing Portuguese activity only increased the Emperor's distrust of Westerners. The historians of the Ming dynasty considered: “The Portuguese as kidnappers and slave traders, men who ate children after cooking them”². As a result, the Portuguese faced a ban on trade in all Chinese ports. The Ming dynasty also aggressively arrested any Portuguese who secretly operated in the country despite the ban from the government. Among them, Tomé Pires was one of the typical cases [Newitt, 2004, p. 96].

Despite facing fierce resistance from the native authorities, in the first half of the 16th century, there were still a few Portuguese merchants who succeeded in infiltrating China [Newitt, 2004, p. 96]. From these initial successes, by the 1530s, several communities of temporary Portuguese merchants had been established in the southern coastal region of China, the largest of which was Lampacao [Newitt, 2004, p. 115]. Along with bribing local officials and taking advantage of the Malay and Siamese trade networks, Portuguese traders went to other ports such as Chinchew (泉州), Changzhou (常州), Ningbo (寧波) in Fujian and Zhejiang [Diffie, Winius, 1977, p. 387]. Especially from the second half of the 16th century, when *Wokou*'s activities became more and more

¹ In 1511, a Portuguese navy force led by Albuquerque and Antonio de Abreu borrowed junk from Chinese merchants to invade Malacca [Diffie, Winius, 1977, p. 381].

² “They (Portuguese) secretly sought to purchase children of above ten years of age to eat. Each child was purchased at 100 cash. This caused the evil youths of Kwangtung to hasten to kidnap children and the number of children eaten was uncountable. The method [of preparing the child] was to first boil up some soup in a huge iron pan and place the child, who was locked up inside an iron cage, into the pan. After being steamed to sweat, the child was then taken out and his skin peeled with an iron scrubbing-brush. The child, still alive, would now be killed, and having been disemboweled, steamed to eat” [Ptak, 1987, p. 145].

drastic, the establishment of Portuguese commercial relations in China had important changes. In the previous period, the Ming dynasty tried to prevent the presence of the Portuguese in China, but at that time, to fight the *Wokou* problem, this dynasty sought help from them. In return, the Ming dynasty allowed the Portuguese to use certain locations on the Guangdong coast, such as Shangchuan Island (上川島), Lampacao, and Macao (1557) for trade [Wills, 2010, pp. 37–38]. Besides, at that time, the Chinese market was in high demand for compressed silver from Japan, so the Ming dynasty had to change its attitude towards the Portuguese. They gradually recognized the legal role of the Portuguese in the supply of this item. This change ushered in a landmark period in establishing the position and expanding the influence of the Portuguese in trade with China and other countries in the 16th – 18th centuries.

Establishing power: Starting in Macao

In the first half of the 16th century, with the conquest of Goa (1510) and Malaca (1511), Portugal also drew up a long-term plan for entering and establishing trade relations with China. However, at that time, the Ming dynasty in China was vigorously implementing the policy of expelling Westerners. Therefore, the presence of the Portuguese in Zhejiang, Fujian led to strong military reactions from the authorities which forced them to leave these places [Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 17]. They looked for other opportunities to infiltrate China through several locations along the coast of Guangdong Province, of which Shangchuan Island [Wills, 2010, pp. 36–37] was one of the first choices of the Portuguese. However, the Portuguese operation on this island could not take place safely because they often faced the risk of attack from Ming army forces. In this context, the Portuguese captain Leonel da Sousa realized that establishing relations with China through a peaceful path instead of using force would bring more certain opportunities for Portugal. One of the starting places for the implementation of this plan was Macao.

In 1554, through a number of different measures, Leonel da Sousa and other Portuguese merchants were granted permission by the Guangdong government to trade in certain locations on the island of Macao, but they had to pay the prescribed customs duties [Braga, 1949, p. 85; Diffie, Winius, 1977, p. 389]. Initially, the majority of Portuguese ships were concentrated in Langbaiao (浪白澳: Lampacao in Portuguese) to conduct trade and in 1560, the number of Portuguese here was estimated at more than 500 or 600 people [Ljungstedt, 1836, p. 9]. However, because Mengjingao (蠔鏡澳), i.e. Macao, clearly showed its superiority over Langbaiao both in terms of residence and commerce, more and more Portuguese went there for trading and living. While in 1555, there was only eight Portuguese people there [Pei Huaxing, 1937, p. 95], nine years later (1563), this number increased to 900 people [Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 23]. As a result, a Portuguese community was formed in Macao, and Western-style buildings were gradually built on this island. Therefore, Macao replaced Lampacao as the centre of trade between China and Portugal, and other countries.

Before the establishment of the Portuguese trading community in Macao, from 1560 to 1564, Ming officials in Guangzhou had to report on the activities of Portuguese merchants to the imperial court in Beijing. In addition, they discussed and proposed some measures to expel the Portuguese from Macao. However, at that time, *Wokou* stepped up their activities in the southeast coast of China and constantly conflicted with the Ming army. Meanwhile, in Guangdong, peasant uprisings broke out in many locations. Therefore, local authorities were not able to take strong measures against the Portuguese community in Macao because they did not want to face additional difficulties and pressure at the same time. Taking advantage of that situation, with the aim of establishing their strong position in Macao, the Portuguese sought opportunities to gain recognition from the local authorities for their existence there.

And that opportunity came in 1564. Through helping the Ming government to suppress mutiny [Braga, 1949, p. 211], the Portuguese residence in Macao was tacitly approved by the Guangdong government. In particular, from 1572 (or 1573), every year the Portuguese in Macao had to pay the

Ming government 500 silver pieces of land rent [Montalto de Jesus, 1902, pp. 33–34]. At that time, Chinese mandarins not only received the land tax paid by the Portuguese but also recorded this tax in the *Guangdong fuyi quanshu* (廣東賦役全書: The complete book of taxation and conscript labour in Guangdong) which was printed and released during the reign of Emperor Wanli (萬曆) [Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 30]. This showed that, at that time, the Chinese mandarins officially allowed the Portuguese to rent land to reside in Macao. This meant that they acknowledged the legal existence of the Portuguese community on this land.

During the years 1580–1582, through offering gifts [Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 32], especially bribing Chinese mandarins [Boxer, 1953, p. 35], the Portuguese continued to be allowed to reside in Macao by the Guangdong government, but they had to submit to the management of the local mandarins [Li Madou, Jin Nige, 1983, p. 149; Boxer, 1953, p. 35]. That was an extremely favourable objective premise for the Portuguese community in Macao to gradually realize their long-term settlement plan and build their autonomous government on this land.

In fact, the direct cause of the birth of the Portuguese self-governance in Macao was the Portuguese dependence on Spain since 1580. In 1582, after being forced to declare allegiance to the Spanish King [Souza, 2004, p. 66; Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 37], the Portuguese in Macao realized that their power would be seriously threatened if the governor from Manila came to direct management in this area. Therefore, on the basis of pre-existing governing institutions such as *Capitdo-mor da Viagem da China e jfapdo*³ and *Santa casa da Misericordia*⁴, Portuguese officials in Macao organized a conference and recommended the establishment of *Senado Camara*. This organization with great autonomy would create a balance and relative independence from the patronage and control of the Spanish emperor [Fei Chengkang, 1988, p. 37]. On 10 April 1586, the Portuguese Governor at *Estado da India* affirmed the interests of the Portuguese in Macao by authorizing the establishment of this organization [Souza, 2004, p. 25].

From the second half of the 16th century, in order to realize the goal of establishing trade relations with China through various means, the Portuguese gradually approached the coastal area of Guangdong. Along with this process, an increasing number of Portuguese communities also gradually formed in several locations, first in Lampacao and later in Macao. In particular, in the 1580s, with the aim of protecting the commercial interests of their community against manipulation and control from the Spanish royal family, the Portuguese in Macao decided to establish a highly autonomous management that was *Senado da Camara*. In particular, in the 1580s, *Senado da Camara* was established, and until the early 17th century, it gradually changed and perfected both their structure, functions, and tasks. This laid a solid foundation for the establishment and expansion of Portuguese influence in commerce in China and in other countries of the Far East.

Expanding influence: From Macao to Mainland China

From the second half of the 16th century, after establishing a certain position in Macao, the Portuguese continued to promote commercial activities and expand their influence to other areas (especially mainland China). In fact, the opportunity to boost Portuguese trade in mainland China during this period came from a factor outside of China. The interruption of trade relations between

³ *Capitdo-mor da Viagem da China e jfapdo* was responsible for the management of ships departing from Macao to designated ports in Japan. Initially, this position was held by Portuguese merchants to self-manage their activities in China. But later, the Portuguese royal family appointed Portuguese nobles to hold this position. When the Hasburg dynasty ruled in Portugal (1580), the King authorized the auction of this position to potential candidates of the aristocracy, and also allowed the participation of powerful Portuguese merchants in the Far East. However, by 1583 this position was replaced by a more complete management institution. It was *Senado da Camara* headed by *Capitao-geral* [Souza, 2004, p. 19–20].

⁴ *Santa casa da Misericordia* was a Christian charity founded in 1569, whose mission was to provide social support to all its Christian members. In fact, the function of *Santa casa da Misericordia* was quite extensive such as managing the estates of the deceased or dealing with inheritance according to the will. Therefore, the financial power of *Santa casa da Misericordia* was quite large and Portuguese traders in Macao had to regularly borrow money from this organization [Souza, 2004, pp. 27–29].

China and Japan for a long time caused by the *Wokou* gave the Portuguese the opportunity to become a “bridge” connecting the trade between these two countries.

When conducting trade with Mainland China, Portuguese traders realized that the North China region had a great demand for spices (pepper, cloves, nutmeg), sandalwood, compressed gold, and especially silver. As a result, they satisfied the hunger of the Chinese for silver by importing large quantities of this precious metal from Japan. Meanwhile, the southern region of China had great potential for exporting goods such as ceramics, porcelain, gold, zinc, alum, textile fibers, and silk which was favoured by the Japanese aristocrats at that time. Therefore, Portuguese merchants conducted to buy mainland Chinese silk in exchange for silver from Japan. During the late 16th century, the amount of raw silk purchased and shipped to Japan by the Portuguese increased from 1,000 to 1,600 picols per year. This production accounted for about 1/3 to 1/2 of the total amount of Chinese silk that was traded by sea at that time [Sebes, 1978, p. 170–183]. Even in the early 17th century, although silk was not the main export item of the Portuguese, they periodically maintained the purchase of about 2,000 picols of silk in Guangzhou [Souza, 2004, p. 48]. Besides silk, the Portuguese also concentrated on purchasing mercury in China and exporting it to serve mining in Japan. The profits that Portuguese traders collected from the mercury trade were quite high. Because at that time, the price of mercury in Guangzhou was only about 40 tael/picol, but when shipped to Japan, it increased to 91 tael/picol. According to the statistics of George Bryan Souza, in the period between 1598–1638, the amount of mercury that the Portuguese exported from China to Japan was estimated at 4,200–8,400 picols (5,600–11,200 quintals). Therefore, the average amount of mercury exported from China to Japan each year was about 150–300 picols (200–400 quintals) [Souza, 2004, p. 92]. In addition, gold was also an important commodity that Portuguese traders bought from many different sources to sell to the Japanese [Souza, 2004, p. 53–54].

It was thought that the intermediary role in the trade relationship between China and Japan in the second half of the 16th century could create favourable conditions for Portuguese merchants to establish and expand commercial activities in mainland China. However, by the first half of the 17th century, political instability in the country became a major challenge to their ambitions. In fact, after the Manchus invaded China and established the Qing Dynasty (1644), their struggle with the remnants of the Ming Dynasty – the political force that ruled China for almost three centuries (1368–1644), had a significant impact on Portuguese trade. In such a situation, it was difficult for Portuguese traders to purchase silk, metals, and spices from China. However, they did not give up on their goal of establishing trade relations in mainland China. In 1651, they concentrated on buying rice and other foods to solve food shortages of the Portuguese (especially orphans and widows) that was happening at that time in Macao in particular and Guangdong in general [Souza, 2004, p. 199]. In addition, the Portuguese sought to approach and sympathize with the Qing dynasty by assisting the government to eradicate piracy. Therefore, in the second half of the 17th century, when the Qing dynasty enforced a policy of prohibiting sea trade in the southwestern coast of China in order to destroy the remaining Ming forces [Souza, 2004, p. 200], the Portuguese in Macao still managed to find a good way to continue trading with mainland China. In 1681 and 1682, overland trade from Guangzhou to Macao was still allowed, and the total tax collected by Senado da Camara was 12,200 and 18,076 taels, respectively [Souza, 2004, p. 201].

In particular, from 1684, along with allowing foreign trade, the Qing dynasty also strengthened the management of foreign trade activities in Southern China through the establishment of a series of tax stations and the appointment of General Manager of Taxation in Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shandong. Two years later (1686), Qing mandarins separated customs duties and taxes on goods transported by road. At the same time, they introduced new taxes on ships from other countries, including Portugal. Before that situation, Portuguese traders in Macao had their own plans. With the goal of establishing and consolidating their monopoly position, Portuguese traders sought to prevent the penetration of the Dutch, British, and Siamese into mainland China. In 1686, Senado da Camara sent a petition to the Qing court in Beijing, which suggested that all

foreign ships should not be anchored for long periods in Macao but instead, they should be anchored at Whampoa near Guangzhou [Souza, 2004, p. 203]. In the same year (1686), Senado da Camara and Hoppo⁵ discussed a new tax⁶ that would be imposed on Portuguese ships from Macao. The representative of Senado da Camara, Jose Vieira da Silva, after many efforts, also reached an agreement of 500 taels per ship, regardless of size and 20% value tax (ad valorem) [Souza, 2004, p. 204]. However, the high value of goods tax had seriously damaged the commercial interests of Portuguese merchants. Therefore, the Portuguese merchants in Macao approved the good relationship between the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in Beijing and the Qing dynasty to negotiate the reduction of the value of goods tax to the basic level (pro rata)⁷. This effort eventually brought the expected results of the Portuguese. In 1698, the Qing dynasty approved the reduction of customs duties in Guangdong for Portuguese ships arriving from Macao at a rate equivalent to that levied on Chinese ships [Souza, 2004, p. 204].

However, receiving some tax incentives from the Qing dynasty in the late 17th century, did not mean that the expansion of the trade network from Macao to mainland China by Portuguese merchants was entirely favourable. In fact, by the early 18th century, Portuguese trade in mainland China faced serious challenges. In 1717, Emperor Yongzheng (雍正) issued a decree prohibiting trade between Chinese and foreign merchants on the South coast [Souza, 2004, p. 206], and in 1725, he implemented a policy to limit no more than 25 Portuguese ships from Macao to Guangzhou annually [Souza, 2004, p. 209]. In 1748, to further intervene in Macao, powerful mandarins in Guangdong pressured the Portuguese government in Macao to negotiate and issue a number of specific provisions that would help clearly define the relationship between the Chinese and the Europeans in general and the Portuguese in particular in Macao⁸. The enactment of these laws showed the Qing dynasty's desire to stabilize the internal situation and gradually limit the influence of the Portuguese in Macao over mainland China. This attitude of the Qing dynasty towards the Portuguese could be explained by two reasons. Firstly, the fact that Portuguese traders in Macao engaged in the Chinese slave or muitsai trade [Spence, 1985, p. 208; Pinto, 1992, p. 18; Boxer, 1968, p. 225; Finkelman, Miller, 1998, p. 737; Leite, 1999, p. 19], despite the ban from the native government. Secondly, the Qing dynasty was implementing a careful and strict diplomatic strategy with Westerners. Therefore, by the middle of the 18th century, the Qing dynasty continued to take specific actions to strengthen control of sea trade and trade relations with Macao.

During the period 1754–1761, the government issued a decision to centralize all foreign trade to Guangzhou [Souza, 2004, p. 210], while strengthening the power of Chinese merchants (hong⁹ and later co-hong) to control trade relations between European companies and native traders. In that situation, the experience of more than 200 years of contact with Chinese civilization helped the Portuguese in Macao to find a suitable way to behave. In order to realize the goal of continuing to maintain commercial activities in mainland China, the Portuguese government in Macao advocated

⁵ Hoppo was a mandarin of the Qing Dynasty in Guangzhou responsible for managing shipping, collecting taxes, and dealing with relations between merchants in the *Zhoujiang* (洲江) Delta from 1685 to 1904 [Cheong, 1997, pp. 199–208, 230–233; Hirth, 1882, pp. 221–235].

⁶ In the past, all Portuguese ships arriving into port (except Royal Portuguese ships) had to pay “a graduated tax, based on the size or measurement of the ship involved, and Chinese customs duties” [Souza, 2004, pp. 203–204].

⁷ Macao ship owners wanted the tax rate to be reduced to 100 tael/1,000 picol (equivalent to 66 2/3 tons). This was a huge benefit to small ship owners as the new tax only applied to ships with a tonnage of about 5,000 picols (approximately 3,333 tonnes) or more. Meanwhile, the size of most ships used by the Portuguese was from 65 to 400 tons [Souza, 2004, p. 204].

⁸ In the 12 articles negotiated and promulgated, there were a number of articles directly related to the relationship between the Chinese and the Europeans in general and the Portuguese in particular in Macao, including homeless Chinese in Macao should be deported (article 1), Europeans guilty of killing or raping Chinese people would be dealt with according to Chinese law (article 5), in the trials of Chinese people who did not pay European debts, Chinese officials must be involved (article 6), the trafficking of Chinese children must be stopped (article 8), Europeans were not allowed to hunt near Macao (article 11), and the Chinese conversion to Christianity was not to be continued (article 12) [Subrahmanyam, 1993, p. 341].

⁹ Guild or Merchant Association [Souza, 2004, p. 210]

gradually replacing the previous official relations with the Qing dynasty with informal ones, which through the connecting role of interpreters (jurubacas), Jesuit priests and even the first slaves from Macao fled to mainland China [Boxer, 1974, p. 65–90]. Not only that, but the Portuguese also speculated that: if in the case of the Qing dynasty taking drastic measures, the entire population of Macao would move out – an exodus that the Portuguese were sure would be undesirable for both Chinese merchants and the Guangdong mandarins. In the 16th–18th centuries, the expansion of commercial activities of the Portuguese from Macao to mainland China encountered many ups and downs because of the policy of the Qing dynasty. However, by ingenious, proactive, and flexible measures, the Portuguese managed to penetrate, establish and maintain trade networks in mainland China until the end of the 18th century when they were pushed back from this vast market by powerful rivals such as the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France.

Conclusion

From the 16th century, Asia entered the era of vibrant sea trade with the participation of merchant forces from many different Western countries. At that time, on the basis of the sphere of influence divided by Pope Alexander VI from the end of the 15th century (1493) [Johansen, Pritzker, 2007, p. 208; Tarver, Slape, 2016, pp. 19–21], the Portuguese gradually realized their intention to build a trans-Asian trade network, through accessing and conquering a number of important trading places in the countries of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia.

Among them, China was definitely one of the key points. In order to establish and promote commercial activities in China, Portuguese traders had drawn up a long-term plan, in which the most important point was to establish a solid “land on foot”. At that time, Macao, with superiority of trade as well as convenience for residence compared to some other locations along the coast of Guangdong became the ideal choice for the Portuguese. In fact, from the second half of the 16th century, through many different measures, the Portuguese in Macao gradually “legalized” their existence there. In particular, in 1583, Senado da Camara – organized to represent a European – style autonomous city model that was established in Macao.

This was a turning point for the establishment of the Portuguese position in commerce in China. After that, Macao became the “springboard” for the Portuguese to establish and promote trading activities in mainland China. Authentic and objective evidence demonstrates a relatively prosperous development period of Portuguese maritime trade in Asia in general and China in particular, which lasted for more than two centuries.

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