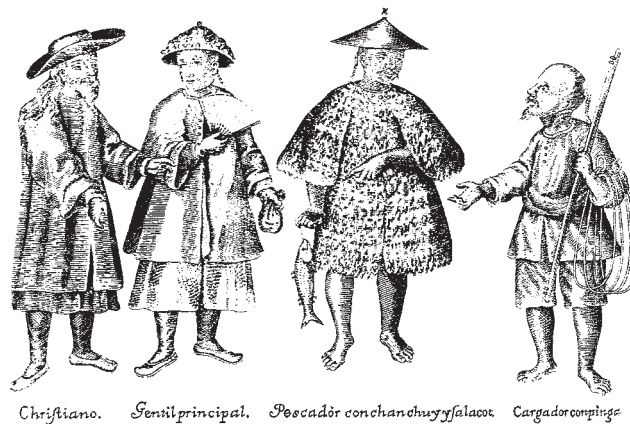


Chinchéus and Sangleys Ten Remarks on the Chinese Presence in Melaka and Manila (16th-17th Centuries)

PAULO JORGE DE SOUSA PINTO*



1. The Portuguese arrived in Southeast Asia in 1509 as the result of a direct order by the Portuguese King D. Manuel to look for Melaka and to obtain a deal with local authorities. The commander of the expedition, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, was also in charge of a wider reconnaissance mission, in order to gather the largest possible volume of information about the commercial life of the city. Among the orders issued by the king, there was one in particular that projected the horizon of the Portuguese beyond local dimensions. He was urged to get detailed information about the Chinese, their physical aspect and religion, their ships and wealth, how often they went to Melaka and whether they

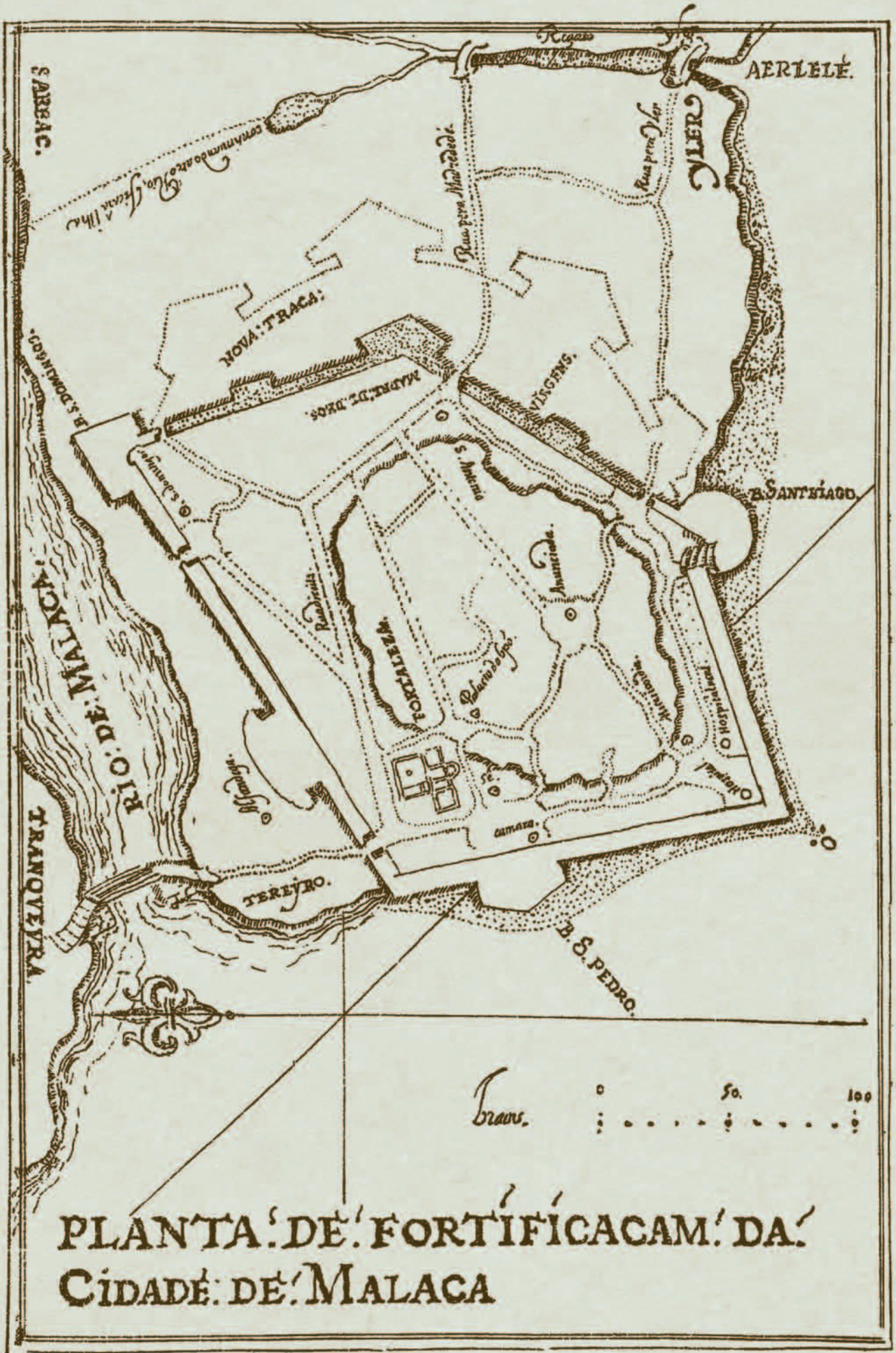
were established there or not. Another object of research was their homeland, its dimension and how powerful their king was.¹

The first contact the Portuguese had with Melaka and Southeast Asia was also, therefore, the first contact with the Chinese trade network that operated there. Two years later, the city was seized under the command of Afonso de Albuquerque. It opened the access to the Far East, the continental kingdoms of Southeast Asia and the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, and also China, to the Portuguese. The Chinese merchants in Melaka influenced the Portuguese governor in his decision to use the force of arms instead of diplomacy to resolve the conflict that opposed him to the Malay sultan.² They also played a leading role in the success of Albuquerque's strategy that followed the conquest of the city, not only supporting the assault, but also acting on behalf of the Portuguese in the diplomatic field and providing substantial information about commercial life in the Far East.

The messengers sent by Albuquerque to the Thai kingdom travelled in Chinese junks and were introduced to the king by Chinese traders from Melaka, on the way to their homeland;³ they also carried the first information about the newcomers to China. The

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PLANTA DE FORTIFICACAM DA CIDADÉ DE MALACA

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Chinese were precious to the Portuguese, not only to their success in the Straits of Melaka, but also—they believed—as valuable intermediate agents for the contacts with China that would follow.

2. Some sixty years later, and after a succession of unfortunate attempts, the Spaniards finally established their Asian empire, not through the Cape of Good Hope but by means of a link to Mexico. Since 1521 and the success of Magalhães' expedition they had looked for a way to reach Asia and the Spice Islands. The problem of the anti-meridian of Tordesillas, the tension with Portugal, the Treaty of Zaragoza and the technical problems that prevented the return voyage to Mexico, delayed the project of an Asian empire for several decades. An expedition led by Miguel López de Legazpi finally settled in the Philippine archipelago in 1565 and was able to elude Portuguese surveillance in the Moluccas and their efforts to dislodge them from the region.⁴

Initially, the Spaniards pursued the access to the Spice Islands, but this target was soon replaced by a more realistic objective, which was to find a way to establish a direct contact with China. To the Spaniards, the Middle Kingdom was some sort of a new *El Dorado*. There was a considerable amount of confusion and outdated information about China that circulated in the Spanish chronicles and reports, mixed with old and fabulous ideas about the existence of islands of gold and silver somewhere in the surroundings.⁵ This clearly matched Spanish expectations of expansion and conquest. The initial settlement in the island of Cebu had been frustrating: the coveted spices did not exist and the local population was poor and unable to correspond to the model of wealthy kingdoms like those found and conquered by Cortés and Pizarro in America. The decision to move to Manila arose from the expectations to find a more auspicious environment.

Its excellent port and geographical position was a perfect spot for future access to China. However, the decisive impulse to make Manila the headquarters of the Spanish empire in Asia came from the rumours about the existence of a Chinese mercantile community in the city. Those who were disappointed with the Visayas

and hoped to find a quick alternative target to the *conquista* were eager to confirm these reports and to widen the horizons of the Spanish presence into the Middle Kingdom.⁶

The expedition under the command of Martín de Goyti, who arrived at Manila in 1570, confirmed the previous information; there was, in fact, a small but prosperous Hokkien community in the city. They were called *Sangleys*, a designation that has raised a long debate about its origin and meaning.⁷ As had occurred in 1511 with Afonso de Albuquerque in Melaka, the Spaniards were supported by the Chinese against the Muslim local king.⁸ Therefore, it was in their best interest to establish good relations with them. After the conquest, a struggle with the Chinese pirate Lin Feng 林凤 gave the Spaniards an opportunity to establish direct contacts with an imperial fleet and Chinese military authorities.⁹

China was a very important goal to the Portuguese and the Spaniards, who were convinced that establishing contacts and good relations with the overseas Chinese communities, in Melaka or Manila respectively, would allow a quick and easy access to Mainland China. This assumption, however, proved to be misleading. Firstly, it concerned two different worlds: the business environment of Southeast Asian Chinese was informal and pragmatic, made of compromise and practical interests, far away from the formal procedures and the ceremonial and rigid bureaucracy that ruled the imperial court of Ming China. Furthermore, the relationship between the territorial space of China and the exterior was at the time under specific and restrictive guidelines of which the Europeans were not aware.

3. What then was the framework that regulated the relations of Ming China with the outside world? There had been an initial period of interest and openness to the southern region by the turning of the 15th century. The famous maritime expeditions led by Zheng He 郑和 and the military campaigns in Vietnam were the most visible signs of this short-lived trend. However, the imperial court came to gradually regard with distrust and disinterest the external affairs in Southeast Asia and the permanent turbulence that occurred in the region.



Plan of the Malacca fortress. In Manuel Godinho de Erédia's *Declaração de Malaca*, 1613.

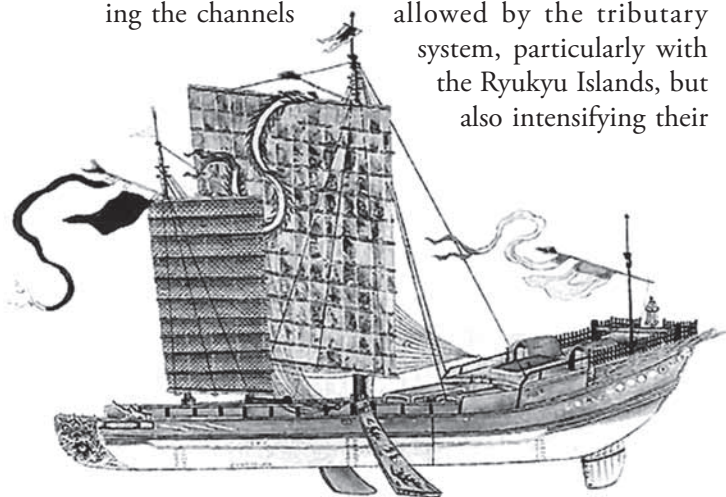
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The problems in Central Asia and the pressure on the northern border of the empire were considered the most serious threats to China's territorial integrity. The political power was based in Beijing and became less interested in what was happening among the various quarrelling tributary states to the south.¹⁰

This shift caused a semi-closure of China to Southeast Asia. Diplomatic relations acquired a mere ceremonial and ritual tone based on formal recognition and acceptance of Chinese overlordship with the consequent tributary statements by the southern kingdoms. Therefore, China developed an isolationist policy that was to persist throughout the whole Ming period. In practical terms, securitarian concerns with the maritime borders were raised and the coast was closed. All trade was allowed only in the framework of the tributary system and, with regard to Southeast Asia, was centralised in Guangzhou. This practice was known as *haijin* 海禁, or 'maritime interdiction' and it was formally valid, despite some variations and partial intermissions, for more than two centuries, to be finally abolished by Emperor Kangxi in the last quarter of the 17th century.

However, this official policy was not consistent with the secular maritime tradition of some provinces, notably Fujian in the south.¹¹ The real impact of *haijin* policies on Chinese trade networks in Southeast Asia still remains an open question and a subject to an ongoing debate. It is known that some trade centres of Fujian that had prospered in previous times, such as Quanzhou, were replaced by new ports, namely Yuegang.¹² It is also known that Hokkien merchant communities were able to fully reorganise their structures and to adapt to the new rules, not only maximising the channels

allowed by the tributary system, particularly with the Ryukyu Islands, but also intensifying their



connections and creating new partnerships with other trading groups and extending their activities throughout Southeast Asia.

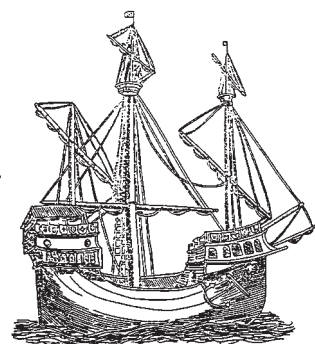
From the official point of view, their activities were considered semi-clandestine, since all Emperors' subjects were forbidden to leave Chinese soil. But the imperial court was in Beijing, far in the north, and the state bureaucracy was, to some extent, permeable in compromising with the maritime and coastal realities. This allowed some flexibility and tolerance, which could vary according to different political circumstances, economic pressures and the balance of power between several factions within the mandarinat.

4. China, although being officially self-sufficient, was an economic giant avid for exchanges. In some coastal regions, including Fujian, the production of manufactured goods—porcelains and textiles of excellent quality—had increased and specialised. The maritime trade networks intensified its efforts to supply the domestic market and were obviously ready to take advantage of any relaxation of the rules imposed by the *haijin* ban to promptly reinforce the links between the ports of South China with those of Siam, the Malay Peninsula, Sunda, Borneo or Luzón.¹³ On the other hand, the Chinese markets demanded a wide range of foreign goods: silver, spices—especially pepper—and exotic woods like sandalwood and other luxury goods requested by the various elites across China.

There was thus a contradiction and a permanent tension between economic life and market demands, on one side, and the decisions at the political level, on the other. There were inevitable antagonisms between the official dimension that gave priority to defensive issues, territorial integrity and surveillance of the coast, and informal interests related to trade and business that were eventually present inside the official bureaucracy and the Imperial court itself.

5. The arrival of the Portuguese, the *folangji* 佛郎晒 as they were called, came to exacerbate these tensions and to change the global frame of the relationship between China and the Southern Seas. In 1511, the tributary system that had previously formed a linking bond between China and most Southeast Asian kingdoms was inactive; only Siam and Champa continued to send tribute delegations by sea.¹⁴ The conquest of Melaka, formally under Ming protection,

HISTORIOGRAPHY



was a challenge to the traditional Chinese hegemony in this region, and the absence of a rapid and decisive response by the Ming was a clear sign of apathy towards Southeast Asian affairs.¹⁵

Melaka was an important part of the Chinese merchant network, performing a significant role in the function played by the city in the 15th century, redistributing goods and products throughout Maritime Asia and linking the Indian Ocean, the Malay-Indonesian archipelago and the Far East. The arrival of the Portuguese in the region and the conquest of Melaka changed this state of affairs. The Portuguese used the Chinese community—mostly Hokkien, whom they called *Chinchéus*, a designation probably taken from the local pronunciation of the city of Quanzhou¹⁶—as a proxy to upcoming contacts with China.

A particular individual, whom the Portuguese called ‘Fulata’ or ‘Cheilata’, played a significant role in this process. He was in Melaka in 1509 and was present when Afonso de Albuquerque seized the city. In 1513, as described by the Portuguese captain in a letter to the Governor, he returned to Melaka with four junks. They were almost empty because it was a reconnaissance mission to check the political situation and discern whether the Portuguese rule was solid or not. A first Sino-Portuguese partnership was then established for the return voyage to China, involving also the *bendahara* of Melaka, Nina Chatu.¹⁷ Four years later, the first official embassy arrived in Guangzhou with direct orders from the King of Portugal to establish a contact with the Ming court in Beijing.

The Portuguese soon realised that the reality of China was quite different from what they expected. Since the initial years of their overseas expansion, they were used to imposing their will without too much opposition. In India, they applied the mixed use of diplomacy with naval power, requesting permission to erect a fortress and demanding exclusive rights on certain trade issues to local authorities. When diplomacy failed or was not persuasive enough, artillery and naval warfare took its place.

In China, this strategy was completely inadequate, not only because there was no political fragmentation as in India, but also due to the existing strict rules that regulated external contacts, which the Portuguese were unaware of. Exclusivity demands and coercive practices in trade were totally unacceptable.

There was also a considerable level of misunderstanding involving these initial contacts. The embassy led by Tomé Pires collapsed due to translation mistakes, lack of diplomatic preparation and ignorance of Chinese standards and etiquette.¹⁸ As a consequence, the Portuguese initial attempts to approach China were a complete failure. Local fears about foreign interference were awakened, those who defended a rigorous use of *haijin* rules gained strength and the Portuguese were banished from the coasts of China for several decades.¹⁹

6. Gradually, the Portuguese tried to re-approach China in an informal way. Melaka continued to be an antechamber of China. Further contacts were no longer made under official cover, as occurred during the reign of King D. Manuel, but through informal initiatives. Portuguese private traders developed partnerships with Chinese merchants and a better knowledge of local realities was achieved. Small groups of Portuguese traders were dispatched from Melaka to the shores of Guangdong or Fujian and established in Lampacau, in the island of Sanchoão or in the island of Pinhal. It was from these discreet, although persistent, efforts and the convergence of both private and official interests that Macao would be born.

In the 1550s, thanks to this long process of gradual détente and informal contacts, the Portuguese were finally in a situation to establish an agreement with the authorities of Guangdong, which was achieved by Leonel de Sousa. After a period of talks and negotiation, the Portuguese presence was accepted under certain conditions and the payment of taxes. As a sign of the end of the ban, they were no longer called *folangji*—a term associated with the former times—but Portuguese from Portugal and Melaka.²⁰ The viability of Macao emerged from the unofficial recognition of a foreign presence in the Chinese territory outside the tributary system. Its success as an exclusive and semi-official hub of trade with Japan was permitted by a decreasing severity of the *haijin* rules and it corresponded to the rise of a lobbying group inside the Chinese imperial bureaucracy, both in Guangzhou and Beijing, that advocated greater openness to foreign trade.

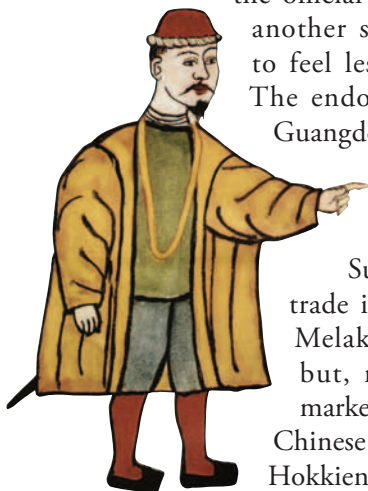
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Somewhat later, in 1567, under pressure to find a solution, the Governor of Fujian Tu Zemin ordered a partial lift of the ban on private trade. It was not intended to ease the entry of foreigners in China, but to regulate, in a partial and limited way, the output of Chinese ships from Fujian to the *Nanyang*, or the South Seas. Nevertheless, it caused an economic boost in the region, providing more stable conditions to coastal populations and an increase of tax revenues to the state.²¹

7. This partial lift of the *haijin* made a considerable impact on the relations between the Chinese overseas communities and Mainland China, leading to a reorganisation and increase of commercial activities by the Chinese network in Southeast Asia. The effects were also felt in Melaka. In fact, the presence of the *Chinchéus* in the city had slowly decreased since the times of the Portuguese conquest. Chinese sources—including the *Ming Annals*—echo this trend, saying it was due to the extortions made by the Portuguese authorities on Chinese traders who saw their ships seized when they attended the port.²² Asian private traders were actually under the pressure of the captains of Melaka, who frequently compelled them to submit to their demands and took advantage of their official position to constrain commercial activities. This was a serious problem for it caused a general distrust among Asian communities and made them avoid Melaka and search for other more favourable city-ports.

Up to the foundation of Macao, there was apparently some caution in Melaka concerning the Chinese, preventing extortions and trying to create a good impression; that is, at least, what is stated in the official correspondence.²³ After 1567,

another strong reason for the Chinese to feel less interested in Melaka arose. The endorsement of the authorities of Guangdong and Fujian to private trade caused the *Chinchéus* to prefer to load pepper directly in the source, that is, Sunda or Sumatra. The Portuguese official trade in Banten—not only supplying Melaka and the Portuguese circuits but, most important, the Chinese market—would soon be lost, due to the Chinese competition.²⁴ Furthermore, the Hokkien were able to get better prices and



The fortress of Malacca in António Bocarro's *Livro das Planimas de todas as Fortalezas, Cidades e Povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental*, 1635.

HISTORIOGRAPHY



HISTORIOGRAFIA



Map of Macao by Pedro Barreto de Resende, in *Livro das Plantas de todas as Fortalezas, Cidades e Povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental* by António Bocarro, 1635.

conditions from the local Sultan than the Portuguese, whom he frequently quarrelled with.²⁵

8. The ban lift on private trade coincided with the arrival of the Spaniards in the region, who settled in Manila in 1571. They too, like the Portuguese a few decades earlier, saw their position as an antechamber to access China and were unaware of the political realities and rules that regulated the presence of foreigners in the Middle Kingdom. Their relations with the Chinese authorities were also not free of misunderstandings and friction points. At an initial stage, say throughout the 1570s and the 1580s, the Spaniards swung between two opposite intentions: to establish peaceful relations with China and to get a position on the coast—as the Portuguese achieved in Macao—or to develop an aggressive, *conquista*-like policy towards the Middle Kingdom. The latter was based on megalomaniac projects that would soon eclipse due to the defeat of the so-called *Invincible Armada* in 1588.²⁶

The alternative project of getting permission to settle in the Chinese coast was not feasible either. Beside the specific conditions that ruled the presence of foreign

people in Chinese territory—Macao being a remarkable exception—such a hypothesis was promptly and firmly rejected by the Portuguese, who claimed that it would be the ruin of Jesuit missionary work in China and the end of Macao and its profitable trade. Despite having a common ruler since 1581, Portuguese and Spaniards were fierce rivals in the Far East.

The latter made two attempts to establish themselves in South China. The first one occurred in 1575, soon after the seizure of Manila, when a delegation tried to convince the authorities of Fujian of this purpose.²⁷ The second was far more dramatic and took place at the end of the century, when an expedition prepared in Manila was authorised by the local authorities to temporarily settle in the island of Pinhal and was expelled by the people of Macao.²⁸

However, the effects of the *haijin* ban lift in Manila were the opposite of what happened in Melaka regarding the overseas Chinese communities. If in Melaka the Hokkien community decreased and became small and discreet, in Manila, on the contrary, its importance grew exponentially. The *sangleys* were important agents on the framework linking China,

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Southeast Asia, the New World and, indirectly, Europe. It was thanks to their intermediary role that a key segment of one of the most important trade lines of the Modern Age was developed, the one that crossed the Pacific through the so-called Manila (or Acapulco) Galleon. This vital channel pipelined the Bolivian silver across the Pacific to Manila, and from there to China and, in the opposite direction, silks and cotton cloths from Fujian to the Philippines and Mexico.²⁹

Chinese sources give testimony of the rapid acceleration of the authorised trade between China and Southeast Asia, as well as the relative weight of the Manila-Fujian link in the context of navigation licenses issued by the provincial authorities. In the early years, their number was limited to two or three ships for each region of Southeast Asia and the total did not exceed fifty. In 1575, this number had doubled and by 1597, it reached 137. In 1589, for each one of the destination ports (both Malay sultanates and cities of Indochina), the figures ranged from one to four vessels per year and Melaka had two; Manila was a remarkable exception, with sixteen, which gives the idea of its relative importance in the general framework.³⁰

9. Melaka and Manila played different roles on Chinese trade networks established abroad. The old Malay emporium that flourished throughout the 15th century had been an important centre of Chinese presence, which benefited from the tributary condition of the Malay sultanate towards the Middle Kingdom. The community probably placed expectations on the Portuguese that came to be defrauded. Melaka lost much of its position as a dominant trade centre in the Straits region, a status now fragmented and shared with other neighbouring centres on the rise.

Melaka, unlike Manila, became a subsidiary position in the Hokkien network in Southeast Asia. The Portuguese had few and ineffective options at their disposal; to force the Chinese to go to the city instead of other ports in the region—a common practice in the late 16th century Melaka—was considered by some of the notables of the city in 1589, after the purchase of the whole cargo of pepper brought by the Chinese in that year.³¹ Imposing a ban of Chinese trade to neighbouring sultanates was also at stake, as occurred in the peace agreement with the sultanate of Johor in the 1580s.³² Yet all that the Portuguese could do was to try to attract the community and avoid any pretext

of grievance. When the Dutch arrived in Southeast Asia and the Portuguese prepared punitive expeditions to expel them from those parts, the general orders issued by the authorities included specific commands forbidding any harm to be done to Chinese people and vessels eventually found.³³

The presence of the *Chinchéus* in the city decreased substantially, but did not vanish. They kept a discreet but continuous presence throughout the whole period of Portuguese rule over the city and are occasionally mentioned in Portuguese sources. An additional reason may be suggested to explain this relatively unnoticed presence: part of the community may have settled definitely in Melaka and converted to Christianity, therefore becoming a mingled group in the undifferentiated category of *casados* and mestizos that formed the social core of the city.³⁴ A century after the conquest of Afonso de Albuquerque, a Chinese Settlement (*Kampung Cina*) continued to exist on the right bank of the Melaka River, and an ‘interpreter of the *chinchéus*’ was still a useful and needed office. Furthermore, there is evidence in the Portuguese sources about projects and suggestions—though never accomplished—to promote the coming of Hokkien people to the city, either easing their tax burden, or planning a permanent Chinese settlement through granting parcels of land for cultivation.³⁵

10. In Manila, the picture was completely different. The city came to be an essential hub of the Hokkien network activities in Southeast Asia, providing an essential segment of the silk versus silver chain that linked America to China. The presence of the *Sangleys* in Manila became fundamental for the viability of the Spanish empire in Asia, at two levels: on the seasonal connections between Manila and Fujian port cities—it is one of the possible origins of the word *sangleys*, ‘those who come to trade’—referring thus to a temporary stay, but also on the local settlement of larger groups of immigrants who performed all sorts of functions and offices, from



HISTORIOGRAFIA

retail business to supplying and provisioning the fleets destined for Mexico.

The *Sangleys* were therefore not a mere trade community, but a vital element of the social structure of Manila, as proved by the figures: from about 150 in 1572 to 10,000 in 1588 and up to 30,000 on the eve of the massacre of 1603.³⁶ The Spaniards followed a policy of segregation, establishing a specific district, the *parián*, where the community lived, and a heavy tax regime was applied to them. Those who converted to the Christian faith formed a different settlement located elsewhere, but the figures were relatively modest, from 400 to 500 families.³⁷ Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, they exceeded several times the number of Spanish colonists in Manila and were considered a major threat to the

security of the city. Several episodes of revolt occurred, resulting in brutal repression.³⁸

However, the number of *Sangleys* in Manila never stopped growing. They are a part of the historical matrix of Manila—and of Luzón in a general way—for the role they played in the formation of the mixed colonial society throughout the following centuries, and the questions involving identity notions like *Sangley*, *Mestizo de Sangley* or *Tsinoy* still persist as a prevailing issue in contemporary Philippines.³⁹ **RC**

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View of Manila Bay, mid-17th century.



NOTES

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