



Title	The Propensity of Things: The Portuguese Calcada and Its Historicity
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Endorsing a narrative of cultural encounters and unmatched architectural and historical value, the official portrait of Macau by the MGTO adopts the *calçada* as a central element in “connecting” disparate historical moments and material realities into an urban unity. Acting both as an artifice and as an artifact capable of conflating past and present in a rather recent urban fabrication, the *calçada* is deployed to promote and advertise the city while conveying processes of political compromise that assess history by rewriting it with reference to the contemporary. Through discourses of tourism and heritage, the fraught nature of interethnic relations that marked the transition from a colonial to a postcolonial era is softened, and different historical and architectural categories are mingled with the aim of “embellishing” Macau’s identity. In this process, the *calçada* contributes to the production of a “place-myth” (Paradis 2004:204), intertwined with and further enhanced by Macau’s global outreach to UNESCO, creating a stronger image, yet arguably a paler reality of place.

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Comments

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The Propensity of Things: The Portuguese *Calçada* and Its Historicity

Sheyla Zandonai and Vanessa Amaro’s study of the transformation of the *calçada* from a ubiquitous paving material originating in Portugal to a “heritage asset” in postcolonial Macau provokes us to consider the forms and processes of heritage-making in a novel way. In contrast to existing heritage scholarship that tends to focus on distinctive buildings and landscapes located in specific sites, the authors direct our attention here to a mobile physical

substance that, despite being newly produced, retains a resilient association with its original context when applied to urban fabrics in distant territories. The acknowledgement of this association by Macau’s local Chinese residents, who in time also inscribed new cultural meanings to the *calçada* on their own terms, further highlights the important role played by material artifacts in constructing new relations to place and history. As Zandonai and Amaro point out, the transplantation of the *calçada* to Macau has helped to “reanimate colonial agency and feelings” that were concealed behind political transition. The study thus raises further questions concerning the nature and propensities of heritage: How does the *calçada* function differently from other heritage assets that are fixed in place? What made it appealing to people with different experiences under colonial rule and helped to create an affective sense of belonging in the present? How may the study of *calçada* and other ubiquitous and often-overlooked materials in the built environment enrich our understanding of postcolonial urbanism and open up new venues in the study of heritage and conservation practice?

In my own research, I point out that the nomination of Macau as a UNESCO World Heritage City after the transfer of sovereignty has led to a surge of interest in heritage and fostered new aspirations among Macau’s citizens (Chu 2015). But behind the collective enthusiasm in conserving the city’s historical assets, people of different social backgrounds do not support the cause for the same reason. Macau’s World Heritage City status is significant in that it has provided a new platform for its different constituencies to reaffirm their identities and possessive relationships to the city under the theme of “cultural exchange” (Chen 2001; Porter 2009). This can be seen, for example, in the new recognition of the significance of “Chinese vernacular buildings.” The move has been strongly supported by the Chinese, who feel that these structures that represent their tradition had long been neglected by the colonial administration in the past, as well as by the Portuguese, who see it as an affirmation of Portugal’s historical role in making Macau a place where Chinese and European cultures harmoniously coexisted. It is important to note here that, although the UNESCO dossier includes a wide range of heritage assets, it is those that are not directly associated with any specific historical periods that became the most effective mediums for expressing the “East meets West” narrative. One can more easily relate, for example, a particular Chinese vernacular building to other ones elsewhere and by extension to a larger “national culture” in general terms than to other more prominent monuments and statues carrying specific political messages. The same can also be said of the streets and squares of Macau, whose distinctive forms and features constitute a “landscape type” that is generally understood to be of Portuguese urban tradition. As the key material substance that constitutes these landscapes, the *calçada* thus embodies a sense of historicity that is not determined by its actual age or time of production. Like Chinese vernacular dwellings and other common cultural artifacts, its symbolic power lies essentially in its generality as a type that serves as a lasting reference to the geographical region from which it originated.

This is by no means to suggest that the *calçada* has not been used for political purposes. As Zandonai and Amaro account, the decision to expand the paving of *calçada* around Macau in the years building up to the handover was a deliberate attempt by the colonial administration to create “a stronger Portuguese image and legacy.” The fact that these proposals triggered initial resistance from local Chinese shopkeepers indicates the existence of a deeper animosity toward Portuguese colonialism. But as the authors point out, the eventual dissolution of Chinese antagonism and their identification of the *calçada* as part of their heritage demands a more careful analysis of the complex dynamics that shaped colonial and postcolonial agency. Not least among these was how the widening use of *calçada* throughout Macau has helped to enhance the World Heritage City status that is a fierce source of pride to its citizens. It is also worth noting that the growing sense of ownership of the *calçada* has much to do with the propensity of the material itself. Unlike other heritage assets, its ubiquity and molecularity allow it to be easily adapted to any environment with new cultural references without losing its own historicity and intrinsic “Portugueseness.” This can be seen in the various paving projects where the *calçada* was utilized to create new patterns that are characteristically more “Chinese.” Although these projects were conceived as part of Macau’s tourism strategies, they have gradually given rise to a new “tradition” that is increasingly identified by both Chinese and Portuguese citizens.

By tracing the changing career of the *calçada*, Zandonai and Amaro have introduced a new lens to study heritage that bridges two types of existing scholarship, that of critical urban scholars who theorize heritage as part and parcel of nation-building processes or capitalist globalization, and that of conservationists who focus on deriving more practical strategies to protect historical sites and improve the urban environment. The close examination of the ways in which the *calçada* was used in Macau’s paving projects forces us to attend to both the politics of conservation and the multiple agents involved as well as to the nature and propensity of the material substance that constitute heritage places and maintain their historicity. Crucially, it shows that this historicity is not simply an effect of age or particular conservation policies but also of communal understandings derived from people’s historical experiences along with a growing collective desire to protect Macau’s urban identity amid accelerating urban change. In this process, the *calçada*’s versatility, generality, and historicity have become key to allow people to make claims to the city, whose streets and squares remain the traces of their own histories.

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This is a worthy paper that should invoke current interest in anthropology, most prominently in relation to cultural heritage. Its setting in Macau problematizes the legacy of Portuguese colonialism, especially after its repatriation to China, but

also reveals the interplay between different actors in society. To say the least, the changing face of post-1999 Macau has given new meaning to what Christina Cheng (1999) once termed “a cultural Janus.” The cultural ambivalences that Cheng views as an abstraction of ideological conflicts rooted in coloniality, politics, religion, and literary imagination have always contributed to the unique character of Macau, regardless of external influences. Instead of a simplistic clash of East and West, one discovers a changing, nuanced interaction between various cultural-qua-politicizing forces.

The debate over cultural heritage, epitomized now by UNESCO’s recognition of World Heritage Sites, has made it an obvious object of gazing for anthropological analyses of cultural objectification in theory and cultural industries in practice, while carving out new terrains for tourist imaginaries and heightened commercialism. But the underlying politics of culture still remains an underdeveloped field. The authors have addressed the relevant tensions that pitted the competing interests of historical memory, national reunification, and urban renewal. Contrary to expectation, the process of cultural accommodation has proven to be more hybrid and collusive than one presumed by a clash of East versus West, tradition versus modernity, and so on. If this was the main conclusion of the paper, then it would be an important contribution to the literature. In the process, their reliance on the behind-the-scenes testimony and opinions of Portuguese masters involved with the *calçada* project has gone beyond the usual analysis of the polemics of policy, thus providing an important source of discursive material, even though one should hope for equal coverage of the Chinese side. In any case, the politics of culture in the literal sense of governmental policy still represents, in the longer view, part of a larger understanding of the complex cultural and political ground that ultimately defines the uniqueness of Macau.

The authors reference, to a large degree, the Chineseness and coloniality of Macau, but I would add that these are hardly the pure pristine entities that we assume them to be. Cathryn Clayton’s *Sovereignty at the Edge: Macau and the Question of Chineseness* (2010) describes cultural ambiguity and marginality in Macau and their complicated meanings for a changing community in ways prompted by a problematic notion of identity, defined paradigmatically by its modernity, assumptions of inherent borders, and content, but muddled ultimately by the contradictions and overlaps created by negotiations between its colonial and ethnic nature in the post-1999 era. Macau has always invited easy, misleading comparison with Hong Kong, especially as a colony. Despite the long history of Macau as a Portuguese trading port, the people have viewed themselves and their culture largely as an extension of Guangdong province in China and not as a separate entity. The complex relationship between the Portuguese and locals in everyday life is mostly a result of how Portugueseness has inserted itself into this normative Cantonese landscape rather than vice versa. Colonial Macau has, in fact, always been hybrid.

In the historical long run, I think Macau was less a city than an anachronistic ghost of a mercantile colonialism. Asia has