

# The Three Monkeys of Portuguese Macau.

## A Patchwork Quilt of Intrigue

By Geoff Walker



Hear, see, and speak, no evil !



Not only was Macau considered an important Chinese trading post by the Portuguese explorers, but it soon became a center of activity for Catholic missionaries, seeking a gateway into China for the purpose of converting the fertile populations of China and Japan, to Christianity. Jesuits had first arrived in the 1560s and were followed by Dominicans in the 1580s. Both orders soon set about constructing monasteries, churches and schools, the most notable of which were the Jesuit Cathedral of Saint Paul, the façade of which remains, and St. Dominic's Church built by the Dominicans, which also stands as a testament to Macau's early ecclesiastical history.

In 1685, the privileged trading status of the Portuguese with China was revoked, following a decision by the Kangxi Emperor of China to allow trade with all foreign countries. Over the next century, Britain, the Dutch Republic, France, Denmark, Sweden, the United States and Russia all moved in, establishing factories and offices in Guangzhou and Macau. British trading dominance in the 1790s was unsuccessfully challenged by a combined French and Spanish naval squadron, in 1799. Henceforth, Great Britain remained the prominent power within the region.

In the 1840s and 1850's Macau was attempting to nurture a "veil of respectability" as a wrapping for all the illicit and illegal activities that were an everyday occurrence within its confines. Hong Kong by comparison, although not perfect by any means of the imagination, was nevertheless, considered the seat of law and order, decency, and respectability within the region. However, despite the best efforts of the Portuguese they were never able to 100% eliminate the element of transgression, and the mists of intrigue lingered on over ensuing decades; because the checkered history of Macau, it could never rightly, or wrongly, "shake off" its shady background of notoriety.

By the 1930s, Westerners residing in Asia, mostly portrayed the Portuguese enclave of Macau, at the mouth of the Pearl River as a haven for triad societies, pirates, reprobates and gamblers, gambling by day and smoking opium by night. Lacking the nightlife of Shanghai and the dynamic lifestyle of Hong Kong, Macau forged an image as an artefact of history, den of iniquity, and colonial backwater overrun by immoral or illegal shenanigans, amid a declining Portuguese empire, which including the infamous "coolies", slave trade, when thousands of local Chinese were kidnapped and shipped off overseas as slave laborers to Brazil and Caribbean. In short, Macau became synonymous with, and referred to, as the exotic "**Casablanca of the East**", where one could find and get anything, for a price, legal or otherwise.

It was synonymous with other Portuguese colonies of the era, such as Angola, Mozambique, Goa, and Timor. For decades, Macau was considered the “Dustbin” for Hong Kong, to where undesirables were deported, at the drop of a colonial hat.

Macau’s economic stature had been severely curtailed, thanks to the British Royal Navy’s ruthless quashing of piracy and smuggling, in support of Hong Kong’s growing commercial status. Officially, it was cast about as good news, but not for Macau’s illicit pecuniary resources, based on gambling and the movement and use of Opium in its still thriving, Opium Dens. Declining revenue was no longer adding to the coffers of Portuguese colonial governments treasury, as it had done previously.

Earlier concessions for the game of “Fan-Tan” (a popular gambling game long played in China, a game of pure chance), which had generated about US\$5,000 a day for the Portuguese administration, in today’s money approximately US\$100,000 a day, or US\$35 million a year, ceased. Meer peanuts, by the standards of today’s casino economy, but it accounted for a large portion of the Portuguese administration’s budget at the time.

Naturally, concerned that Macau would become a never-ending drain on Portugal’s hitherto, fertile economy, Lisbon ordered officials in its south China enclave to conjure up new revenue streams, which led to some serious befuddlement within the colony’s ministry of finance.

The traditional local industries of fishing, firecrackers, and incense (joss), as well as tea and tobacco processing, were all small-scale, mostly cottage industries. So, the financially pressed Portuguese government urged the colony’s administrators to develop greater economic self-sufficiency. One channel that bore fruit was as a transit point for the new trans-Pacific passenger and postal flights, for competing airlines from the US and Japan – which was at the time engaged in conflict with China. In 1935, Pan-Am secured sea-landing rights in Macau and immediately set about building related communications infrastructure in the enclave, allowing a service from San Francisco to begin in November that year.



The esplanade at Macau, in the early 1950’s showing the Hong Kong – Macau Ferry “Takshing” alongside the “T” jetty. The sea trip between Hong Kong and Macau typically took about 4 hours on a good day. 1930-1950’s, bore little obvious change.

(Unknown copyright)

Amid the easy going, quasi-continental ambience, and slow economic progress, was an alleged and much discussed offer (never officially declared) in 1935 by Japan to buy Macau from Portugal, for US\$100 million. Concerns were raised by the British, and others. In May, the Portuguese government twice declined, and stated that it would never accept any such offer, and the matter was closed, never to be discussed again.

During WW2 Macau was officially neutral but following WW2, when the Chinese communists came to power in 1949, they declared the Macau concession to be invalid as an "**unequal treaty**" imposed by foreigners on China. However, Beijing was not then ready to settle the treaty question, leaving "**the status quo**" until a more appropriate time. Beijing took a similar position on treaties relating to the Hong Kong territories, with the United Kingdom. Hence both colonies experienced a tolerable, but uneasy existence, with China for the next 20 years.

During the 1950s and 1960s Macau's border crossing with China, *Portas do Cerco*, was also referred to as **Far Eastern Checkpoint Charlie** with a major border incident happening in 1952 with Portuguese African Troops exchanging gun fire with Chinese Communist border guards. According to reports, the exchange lasted for almost two hours, leaving one dead and several dozens injured on the Macau side and more than 100 casualties claimed on the Communist Chinese side.

On a lighter note, in 1954, the Macau Grand Prix was established, first as a sort of motorized treasure hunt throughout the city, and in later years as a formal car racing event. As a youngster growing up in Hong Kong, I remember being taken to the initial motor racing spectacle in Macau, by my parents. First run in October 1954 as a week-end club race for local motoring enthusiasts, the **Macau Grand Prix** has since evolved into what many believe is the finest street circuit race meeting in the world and now attracts a world-wide audience.

Then, in 1962, the gambling industry of Macau gained a breakthrough, when the government granted the "*Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau*" (STDM), a syndicate jointly formed by Hong Kong and Macau businessmen, the monopoly rights to all forms of gambling. The STDM introduced western-style games and modernized marine transport between Macau and Hong Kong, bringing millions of gamblers from Hong Kong every year. This paved the way for Macau to become the "**Gambling Hub**" of Asia.



Street scene - Macau in the mid-1960s

Of course, now re-united with Mother China, there is still an air of "mystery" that lingers about the place. Nowadays, Macau has emerged as a thriving economy as part of modern China, although walking through the neon lit streets, one is never quite certain what to expect, as there exists that aura of the unknown, even today, amid the scent of burning Joss sticks, and an economy that comes to life largely after the setting of the sun. (Unknown copyright)

End

**Bibliography:** Public Archives SCMP, History of Portuguese Macau, plus various online sources in the Public Domain

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