

# *Macau, December 20, 1999*

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*By Gianni Criveller*

*Translated from the Italian by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.*

**D**ecember 20, 1999 will mark the end of Portuguese administration over Macau and the return of Macau to the sovereignty of the People's Republic of China. This event is likely to pass largely unnoticed in the forum of international public opinion. The "return" of Macau to the motherland does not seem to evoke the same strong feelings of the analogous happening two years ago: the passage of Hong Kong from British to Chinese rule. The latter event attracted a great deal of interest and caused anxiety throughout the whole world. Both Macau and Hong Kong have rather similar stories. They are like two cousins once in close competition, but today Macau seems to have been relegated to the role of the poor cousin.



## *Hong Kong and Macau Today*

Hong Kong, a great metropolitan city, with more than six million inhabitants, wields a very important influence in the world's political and financial scene. It also seems destined to maintain its special role as the economic bridge between China and the world. Little Macau, on the other hand, with a population of only half a million, cannot make the same boast: its present and future influence seems quite weak. Today, Macau is noted for its casinos, and as a catalyst for criminal activities and for triads. Thanks to prostitution, contraband, and the pirating of various products, crime steadily increases and triads multiply. As a result, Macau continually appears in the crime sections of the newspapers, notorious for its assassinations and its uncurbed mafia-like gang wars.

As a result of China's opposition to the democratic reforms introduced by Governor Christopher Patten, Hong Kong's last years under British administration were marked by a bitter but lively

political debate. Hong Kong, however, remains today an oasis of liberty and pluralism in Communist China. By contrast, the political life of Macau has been anesthetized for years. In Macau, the process of retrogression has passed peacefully without any democratic uproar, without too many expectations, polemics and fear. In fact, since the end of the 60s, when the Cultural Revolution extended into Macau, the enclave, for all practical purposes, has been under China's control. At that time Portugal offered to return Macau to Chinese sovereignty but China declined the offer.

### ***The Origin of the Bay of the Fishermen's Goddess***

The present and future state of the tiny Portuguese territory on Chinese soil seem very uncertain and in a downfall. Macau's real riches lie in its most unique 459-year history. Macau was the first European outpost in the Far East and it is the European world's oldest colony. As such it has played a very special role in the encounter and clashes between East and West.

Portuguese navigators arrived on the coast of Guangdong Province in the wake of voyages started by Vasco de Gama in 1517. The powerful Portuguese galleons overcame the pirates that harassed the southern coast of China. As a reward, in 1557 the functionaries of the powerful Ming dynasty allowed the Portuguese to settle on a small peninsula, called A ma gau, the bay of the fishermen's divinity, in Latin, Macau. From this location, the Portuguese were able to organize their trade with the city of Canton (Guangzhou) and Japan. The Portuguese paid a tax every year to China, up to 1887. In that year, following the Opium War, the Portuguese proclaimed their occupation of Macao in perpetuity, but left vague the matter of sovereignty, that substantially remained Chinese.

### ***The City with the Name of God***

The glorious stories of Catholic missions in Japan and China had Macau as the important haven of rest. The route followed by hundreds of European missionaries was Lisbon, Goa (India), Malacca (Malaysia), Macao, China, and Japan. The voyages were memorable adventures, often ending in tragedy, undertaken only by motivated and courageous persons.

Macau became a diocese in 1576, but previous to that date, missionaries traveled the coast of the Far East to carry the Gospel:

Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians and above all, the Jesuits, who transformed the small fishermen's village into a place that for 450 years was unique in the world, and destined to mark profoundly the story of the Church in the Far East. To this outpost was given the extraordinary name of the *City of the Name of God*.

### ***The Great Visitor of the Indies: Alexandro Valignano***

Alexandro Valignano (1539-1606) played an important role in Macau's early years. He was the visitor of the Society of Jesus in the Far East. Originally from Chieti, after a singular human experience, and an unfortunate romantic adventure and two years in prison in Venice, the brilliant young lawyer Valignano entered the society of Jesus and became one of the most renowned missionaries in history. His greatest achievement was realizing the dream of Francis Xavier: to open up a mission in China and effect the inculturation of the Gospel in Asian culture. Thanks to his directives favoring a revolutionary transformation of missionary methods contained in the book *The Missionary Ceremonials in Japan* (1601). Valignano also left a profound mark on Japan, where he arrived in 1574. This book, according to the renowned contemporary sinologist, Nicolas Standaert, still commands respect today.

It was actually Valignano who reversed the failure to open a mission in China, by sending there, in 1582, two great men: Michele Ruggieri and, especially, Matteo Ricci. To enable a deep dialogue with the influential literati, he ordered the men not only to learn to read and write the Chinese language, but also to master the classic Confucian texts. Following his Japan experience, Valignano suggested the way of accommodation, which included wearing Chinese dress, and even putting on the habit of a Buddhist monk.

Considering the success of the method adopted by the first missionaries in China, in 1594 Valignano founded St. Paul's College in Macau, where missionaries destined for China learned the language of the Celestial Emperor and assimilated the Chinese culture. From that time on, hundreds of missionaries passed through Macau on their way to China. The College of St. Paul was not only a school for missionaries, but for about two centuries, it was also a center, unique in the world, of cultural and scientific exchange on Chinese and Japanese culture on the one hand and Europe on the other. John Paul II himself in 1982, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in China, paid homage to the

particular bridge role between civilizations played by Macau and St. Paul's College.

At the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the magnificent Church of St. Paul Church was constructed next to the college. It was considered the greatest Christian monument in the Far East. In 1853, fire destroyed the famous church and it was never restored. By this time, Macau had already begun to decline and Hong Kong was quickly replacing it.

### ***The Church of Macau Today***

Only a ruin remains of St. Paul's Church, the imposing, isolated façade, that rises over the city. This shattered monument has become the symbol of the enclave: an eloquent testimony of an extraordinary past and an uncertain future.

The number of Catholics is surprisingly small (20,000) considering the long presence of Europeans and missionaries. It is possible that missionaries used Macau only as base to get to other shores, and overlooked the local population. Other factors could be the failure on the part of the Portuguese clergy to learn the local language (Cantonese). This may have prevented the church from achieving an adequate and expected growth. Nevertheless, today's Church, led by the first local bishop, Domingos Lam, is attempting to see the return to China as a positive challenge, to be more dynamic, as an occasion for renewal, and for a witness to the great Chinese continent.