Legal and Clandestine Trade in the History of Early Macao:
Captain Landeiro, the Jewish “King of the Portuguese” from Macao

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Introduction

It is not possible to imagine early European trade in China without the city of Macao, and without its adventurers, desperadoes, and pirates. The present chapter results from the accumulation of numerous documents in many languages on the European presence in East Asia during the second half of the 16th century. Based on these sources it was possible to elaborate a short study on one of the most important and mysterious figures who lived in Macao during those years. One such person was Bartolomeu Vaz Landeiro. Although seldom mentioned in scholarly literature, nonetheless he is an unavoidable figure in the history of diplomatic and trade relations amongst the first Europeans in China and Japan. Similar to many of his European, Eurasian, and Asian peers living in Macao, Landeiro was at once a merchant, a pirate, a smuggler, an adventurer, a captain, and also an official representative of the Portuguese authorities.

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part I discuss Macao and the legal and clandestine trade networks established by the first Europeans in Asia. I also analyze the differences between private and official merchants who operated in Macao and the key roles that Eurasians played in these activities. In the second part I present a biographical sketch of Landeiro’s life and examine his key role in Macao and in the commerce of the South China Sea. Here I describe his role as an informal captain in the city of Macao, his legal and illegal commercial activities in Asia, his help given to the Jesuits in Japan and to officials in China, and the military exploits he rendered to the Spanish community in Manila and the Philippines.

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In order to accurately portray Landeiro it is first necessary to draw some attention to the trade taking place in the South China Sea during the second half of the 16th century. The constant depredations by the wako pirates along the Chinese coast and throughout the entire region during the first half of the 16th century caused a severing of political and commercial relations between China and Japan. The Portuguese skillfully took advantage of the situation to become the trade intermediaries between the two Asian countries. Their monopoly brought advantages to all three intervening parties. The Chinese were able to continue to trade with the Japanese, without breaching the imperial prohibition, through Portuguese merchants. The
Japanese were able to acquire large quantities of Chinese silk, which was financed by the silver mines of Iwami. And the Portuguese traders were able to achieve fabulous profits with their monopoly of these transactions between China and Japan.

In 1557, after several failed attempts to establish themselves in China, the Portuguese were finally able to persuade the Chinese authorities and founded the *emporium* at Macao. What distinguished Macao from previous Portuguese emporiums along the Chinese coast was the obvious interest shown by the Canton authorities in benefiting from the commercial profits, while at the same time being able to control the Portuguese comings and goings in the area. The Ming authorities also hoped to use Portugal’s naval strength to protect the port of Canton from external attacks. This partnership ensured profitability for the Portuguese as in this way they had the exclusive privilege of acquiring Chinese silk and other textiles at low prices and of better quality.

It is therefore no surprise that Macao quickly became an important trade center and that its sudden growth resulted chiefly from the European diaspora across the neighboring regions. In a short time Macao had a population of 600 Portuguese who were accompanied by servants and slaves. By 1570 the expanding city already had an estimated 5,000 “Christian souls,” composed not only of Portuguese but also of Eurasian, Chinese, Japanese, and other converts. In a letter dated 1584, the writer stated that there were some 3,000 slaves and Chinese Christians in addition to the European residents.

The sudden rise of Macao, with its newfound wealth, incorporated the city into one of a growing number of “refreshment ports” that served scores of itinerant traders, officials, adventurers, soldiers, missionaries, sailors, smugglers, and pirates who came from all over the globe. The city was hounded by unscrupulous men attracted by opportunity and greed, and who opposed the religious authority that the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) had tried to impose at all cost. Macao quickly developed a lasting reputation as one of the “wickedest cities in the Far East.” It had become a disreputable, scandalous and dangerous city. As Robert Antony has explained, Macao “constituted part of an intricate economic zone that comprised both legitimate and illegitimate trade on land and sea.”

Based on the available documents, these early European settlers and sojourners composed a mixture of pirates, smugglers, merchants, missionaries, soldiers, mercenaries, renegades, assassins, and even some family men. As indicated by Captain Martim Afonso de Melo e Castro in a letter of 1565, at that time no less than 2,000 Portuguese, lived between China and Siam without prospects for stable employment; he explained that they mainly survived as pirates and mercenaries in the services to local rulers. Some of them, much to the distaste of the author, had renounced the Christian faith and had converted to Islam. With news of the founding of Macao, many of these misfits sought new lives and fortunes there.
Another aspect which made Macao so attractive was its great distance from Goa, the center of the Portuguese presence in Asia and the judicial impunity resulting from that fact. Like so many others of this floating world of Asia, these European misfits fed on the misfortunes of others. Competition and strife in these crowded seas often cost not only a loss of money but also many lives.

*Pilgrimage* by Fernão Mendes Pinto is a fundamental source, not for its historical rigor, but rather for its detailed descriptions of the seas of India and China. This book also demonstrates what recently discovered documentation proves — that very little distinguished the Europeans from other avaricious traffickers operating in Asian waters. These sources prove that survival and profit lay above religious interests and that the Europeans in Macao were far more pragmatic than what the self-censured and carefully argued Jesuit discourses tried to convey. The early inhabitants of Macao thus divided their time and energies into four pursuits — official trade, smuggling, piracy, and extortion.

Once the news of large commercial profits between China and Japan became known to the Portuguese central authorities, officials rushed to obtain their share of the profits. Therefore, after 1550 the trading voyages between China and Japan were transformed into a royal monopoly. The right to undertake such voyages was granted by the king of Portugal, or by the viceroy of Goa acting in the king’s name, to important noblemen as rewards for services rendered to the crown. This system of rewards also increased the competition among the Portuguese nobles to receive such a distinction, as it obtained for its holders great wealth. Initially, those distinguished with this reward received the title of “Head Captain of the Voyages to China and Japan,” later shortened in the documents to simply “Head Captain (Capitão-mor).”

In addition to the trading voyages to China and Japan, the Head Captain was also the official representative of the Portuguese authorities before the Chinese and the Japanese and additionally was the highest judicial authority in Macao. During his stay in that city, the Head Captain had the authority to resolve quarrels between the Portuguese residents, as well as mollify the various interests of the traders in the city. However, his residency was too short to implement lasting judicial or administrative measures.

Because the Head Captain had little understanding of the commercial traffic in the region, he became dependent on the support and advice of the private traders of the city. But who were these private traders? Along with the official trade, the European community established in Macao also developed its own trade and diplomatic networks with neighboring ports, organized local political power comprised of a small elite of the richest men in town. These local traders, besides cooperating with and advising the Head Captain, also participated in an informal and clandestine commercial network that operated outside the crown’s
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monopoly. Herein lies the great difference between the official traders and the private traders: the former were those who received official authorization from the Portuguese crown to undertake the trade voyages between China and Japan, while the latter were not officially recognized by the crown and, despite taking part in official voyages (by renting space for the transport of commodities in their ships), they also participated in many other trading voyages which were not regulated by the Portuguese government.\textsuperscript{10}

Although considered illegal by the Portuguese government and even frowned upon by certain wealthy citizens of Macao, nonetheless the clandestine trade with Japan and other Asian ports continued to expand over the late 16th century.\textsuperscript{11} These dissenters from the norm found in sending private vessels to Japan a way to make enormous profits, not having to pay the ten percent freight duties to the Head Captain or the tax required by the city of Macao. Despite decrees from the crown forbidding the private trade, such as the decree of 15 April 1595 that outlawed the private export of silk to Japan, the private trade remained as vibrant as ever and the authorities were never able to completely eradicate it.\textsuperscript{12}

Another aspect which characterized the official traders is that they were exclusively Europeans, whilst we can identify among the private traders from Macao and many other Portuguese settlements countless Eurasians, an ill-defined group resulting from mixed marriages between Europeans, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians. Although not adequately appreciated in the scholarly literature, these traders actually played a significant role in the Portuguese expansion in Asia. I would argue that these mixed heritage traders, besides arranging political and economic negotiations between the Europeans and the different Asian powers, were themselves indispensable mediators in the informal trade. Because of them and their descendants the Portuguese presence in Asia was maintained long after the fall of the so-called State of India.\textsuperscript{13} Their Eurasian background had advantages: they were not faced with the language limitations of the merchants born in Europe and they had a profound knowledge both of Eastern and Western cultures, thereby creating a bridge between the interests of European and Asian merchants. The fact that they were able to establish these important connections was a great advantage in such competitive economic networks as the Asian ones. They were able to travel both in the trade circuits which were not used by (or available to) Europeans as well as in the trade circuits used exclusively by the Europeans.\textsuperscript{14}

Among his many duties, the Head Captain of Macao was the chief of all the ships and Portuguese establishments between Malacca and Japan. However, with a few exceptions, he did not participate in the informal trading networks, which were controlled by the wealthy merchant-elite of Macao. After receiving the title of Head Captain, he was obliged to equip his own ship, having very often to resort to loans from the Portuguese crown or, in some cases, to loans from the rich tradesmen in Macao. In some cases a Head Captain, if personally unable to
undertake the trading voyage to China and Japan, transferred his rights to a representative, often a kinsman, who undertook the trip with no loss of privileges. For example, João da Gama undertook the voyage in the name of his brother Miguel da Gama, or the Italian Orazio Nereti undertook a voyage in the name of Paulo de Portugal.¹⁵

Due to the annual changes of Head Captains and their prolonged sojourns in Japan, the residents of Macao elected three representatives known as the “elected” (eleitos) or the “good men” (homens-bons), following the medieval tradition of Portuguese cities. From 1562, one of these three representatives was given the title of Captain Superintendent (Capitão de Terra), who was subordinated to the Head Captain and also to the wealthy traders of the city. In addition to the three elected persons there was also a judge and four tradesmen elected by the Europeans in Macao to administer the city. What my research demonstrates is that despite the existence of this complex administrative system, in fact, the seamen and traders in Macao were subordinated to the wealthy private merchants for whom they worked. When the interests imposed by the various rich private tradesmen were antagonistic, armed skirmishes took place, as happened in Macao on several occasions. One of the most important incidents was the struggle in 1588 for power following the death of Captain Landeiro.¹⁶

In the year of 1582 news of the merging of the Portuguese and Spanish crowns reached Macao.¹⁷ With this news several attempts from the Philippines to establish beachheads in China occurred, putting at risk the European presence in Macao.¹⁸ At the same time the Spanish authorities based in Manila tried to meddle in the trade monopoly in Macao. This situation brought forth a new political organization in Macao, the Town Hall Senate composed of two judges, three town councilors (one of which acted as solicitor (Procurador) representing the tradesmen of Macao), and a secretary. These positions were elected by Macao citizens, the so called “sons of the land” (Homens da Terra), who could be either European or Eurasians. Nonetheless, the important private merchants continued to govern the city and, although the Town Hall Senate in Macao in 1586 was granted the same rights as those of the Portuguese city of Évora, such rights were usually disregarded by the wealthy tradesmen. For instance, in 1590 one of the important Portuguese merchants in Macao, Domingos Monteiro, had several members of the Town Hall Senate of Macao arrested for disobeying his orders.

During the late 16th century, the important private tradesmen in Macao employed their own personal armies mainly composed of slaves and mercenaries. These tradesmen had their own trading fleets, headed by private captains, who traveled between Macao and the main Asian trading ports. Among the various rich merchants there were also some members of religious orders (but not Jesuits), who owned their own vessels and took part in several trading partnerships. Also the Jesuits actively participated in this trade, the profits of which were used to finance various evangelical missions mostly in China and Japan.¹⁹
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It is in this context that Captain Landeiro, one of the most mysterious and interesting European figures, appeared in the South China Sea during the second half of the 16th century. Like so many of his contemporaries, Landeiro was an adventurer and misfit who operated in the tenuous space between legality and illegality, somewhere between merchant and pirate. But what made him stand out was that he played a significant role in the early development of Macau and in the international commerce of Asia. Landeiro, with his personal army of adventurers and mercenaries and with his large number of private trading ships and captains, came to “rule the seas” of China. Because of his vast power and prestige he acquired the name “King of the Portuguese” from Macao.

Documentary sources indicate that Landeiro descended from a family of Jewish origin that came from the outskirts of Lisbon, from the small settlement of Santa Iria. Because of this Jewish heritage, it is very likely that Landeiro fled to Macao. As it is well known, during the entire 16th century, a fanatical religious movement known as the Inquisition existed in the Iberian Peninsula. Religious persecutions obliged a large number of Portuguese Jews to convert to Christianity or to flee to other countries. Among the many thousands that left Portugal, some sailed to the far-flung Portuguese overseas possessions in Asia in the hope that the Inquisition would not be able to reach them. Landeiro was among them.

Beginning in 1560, however, the Inquisition arrived in Goa. The immediate and long-term affects were disastrous because the Jews and so-called “New Christians” had played leading roles in the Portuguese trading system. In the second half of the 16th century the Portuguese government promulgated several laws that required that Jews and “New Christians” living in Portuguese outposts to be deported back to Portugal and they were forbidden to embark or engage in trading voyages. These persecutions cost the Portuguese trade system a high price and was a leading cause in its fall due to lack of investors as well as capital to encourage continued development. The Jewish knowledge and capital had been fundamental for Portuguese expansion in Africa, Brazil, India, and even in China and Japan.

Captain Landeiro, belonging to one of these persecuted families, sailed from Lisbon for Goa with the Armada of 1559 aboard Pedro Vaz de Sequeira’s ship the Frol de la Mar. He sailed with other notable captains that year, namely Francisco de Sousa on the Algarvia, Rui Mello da Camara on the São Paulo (which did not complete the voyage and returned to Portugal), Pedro de Goes on the Santo António, Luz Alvarez de Sousa on the São Gião, and Lesuarte de Andrade on the Conçeyção (which wintered in Mozambique). Some months later, Landeiro with some of his family members arrived in Goa, where a new round for
religious persecutions was just beginning. Because of this, Landeiro falsified his birth, erasing traces of his Jewish heritage, and asserted in its place a noble ancestry.

Although we know little about his life between 1560 and 1570, he undoubtedly began building up his investment network in the seas around India, which brought him enough profits to initiate his own commercial enterprise. From information from his nephew, Sebastião Jorge, we know that beginning in 1564, Landeiro and other family members begin visiting Macao and also engaging in trading voyages to Cambodia. We also know that around this same time Landeiro married in Macao, probably with a Eurasian, and they had two daughters.22 Once settled in Macao, by 1570, “Captain” Landeiro quickly became one of the most powerful men in the city, in large measure due to the profits resulting from the formal (legal) and informal (illegal) voyages to Japan and elsewhere in Asia. The second half of the 16th century was the apex of Portuguese trade in Asia before its decline in the following century due to the arrival of the Dutch.

It is also important to point out that besides Portuguese and Spanish captains working with Landeiro, there were also Chinese and Japanese captains. As the number of Europeans living in Asia was relatively small, Western vessels were not crewed predominantly by Europeans. Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and Latin documents reveal that the majority of the sailors were Chinese, Japanese, Malays, and other Asians, as well as Eurasians. Thus finding non-European captains aboard Landeiro’s ships should not be surprising. Furthermore, a closer examination of the sources reveals that a large number of these captains were probably mercenaries, adventurers, and pirates, similar in background to Landeiro. From the standpoint of the Portuguese Crown, anyone who operated outside the official trading system or who opposed them was labeled a pirate and outlaw. According to the perspective shown in the European sources “outsiders” were considered pirates and their activities as criminal. However, when these very same groups associated with the state (or received official recognition and sanctions), their identities were astoundingly transformed from pirates and outlaws to respectful captains and honest friends of the Europeans, often even being imbued with virtues of Christian morality.

In addition to participating in the official trade, which took place annually between Macao and Japan, Landeiro also participated in countless clandestine or illegal trading voyages. Due to the lack of sources on this matter, however, it is likely that his trading network were much larger that the sources reveal. His network certainly included Macao, Japan, Manila, Cambodia, Siam, Timor, and India, and possibly also Burma, Borneo, Java, Malacca, and Aceh. In other words, his trading network stretched all across the South China Sea from Japan to China to Southeast Asia and beyond. Because these operations were conducted outside the officially sanctioned trading system, and also involved armed vessels that occasionally

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engaged in belligerent, forced trade, they verged on piracy. Landeiro, like many other traders of his day, became involved in numerous battles at sea, in some cases in defending his ships against pirates and in other cases in outright aggression against his competitors. His ships were always heavily armed and ready to fight.

A number of sources clearly show that Landeiro had close connections with Japan, China, and the Philippines. In Japan, he became the symbol of Macao’s authority. He helped the Jesuits by building churches, supplying money for their mission, and supporting their political allies with arms and money. His reputation was such that Landeiro gained the sobriquet, “King of the Portuguese.” As if to live up to his reputation Landeiro “went everywhere attended by a suite of richly-dressed Portuguese and by a bodyguard of eighty Muslim and negro slaves, armed with halberds and shields.” The pirate dressed and acted as a king.

In Canton, Landeiro helped the Chinese authorities to fight pirates, even sailing to Siam to engage the notorious pirate chieftain Lin Daoqian. Fighting against the pirates had a double advantage for the Portuguese. On the one hand, it safeguarded their own presence in Macao and the good diplomatic relations with Chinese authorities and it eliminated possible competition and trade rivalries. On the other hand, from the Chinese point of view, the Portuguese represented a military force of some importance, not only for patrolling China’s coast against pirates, but they also represented a vigorous trading force, with the capacity to supply China with silver and gold, and bring wealth to Chinese ports and merchant communities.

In the Philippines, in 1583, Landeiro represented the city of Macao and signed a trade agreement there. He sent three vessels, the first ones to sail from Macao to Manila. These vessels were very important for the economy of the city as they contributed towards the recovery of Manila after the great fire of 1583 and also its defense against the strong possibility of a rebellion of the Chinese community, the so-called Sangleyes, against the Spanish colonizers. Soon Landeiro’s ships were competing with Chinese junks in the Manila trade. It was also through captain Landeiro’s nephew, Vicente Landeiro, that the first known contact between the Manila authorities and Japan took place.

The commodities transported by each vessel were predominantly gold, ivory, and slaves. We have references of African and Asian slaves not only in Goa, Macao, and Manila, but also in China and Japan. African slaves originated mainly from the Portuguese colonies, especially Mozambique, which was a regular, annual port of call along the Indian trade route. Many references exist as to the acquiring of slaves in Mozambique by the Portuguese. As for other slaves, mostly Asian in origins, though the documents remain silent on this matter, they would have been procured mainly through raiding, a common
practice throughout Southeast Asian waters. Captain Landeiro himself, according to Spanish sources, was accompanied by a personal army composed of slaves, some of which possibly African, as they were considered to be the most apt for war.\textsuperscript{3,3}

After 1585, however, Landeiro seems to have run into trouble. His vast trading network was overextended and several investments proved unsuccessful. As his debts mounted, he ceased being a key player in Macao’s political and economic life. He died sometime after this, but the exact date and circumstances of his death, like the man himself, remains a mystery. Yet his death left a power void in Macau, as clearly seen in the mounting grievances and disturbances in 1588.

Conclusion

In general, a large part of European-Asian relations during the second half of the 16th century occurred through these private merchants and their respective informal, illegal trade networks. This so-called “under-trade” was very significant not only for the traders in Macao but also for the city’s finances. Unlike what is subscribed to by several scholars, I believe that the informal trade during the 16th century actually represented a significant portion in the annual economy of Macao. However, because this trade was considered illegal by the Portuguese authorities, it is mostly omitted in the majority of official sources. Captain Landeiro acted as one of the major private merchants in Macao at that time. He was not the only one, however, as we find many other Europeans and Eurasians involved in clandestine activities.

What also seems to be a characteristic of the Portuguese presence in Asia is the link which exists between these private European and Eurasian merchants and the Portuguese political power. The Governors, officials, and officers of forts and trading-posts maintained close connections with these free-lance traders, in spite of strict prohibitions. Therefore, products which were under the Crown’s monopoly could easily be smuggled and its quality adulterated by the authorities themselves. Even items financed by the state, such as vessels, commodities, and weapons were easily deviated towards this informal trade.\textsuperscript{3,4}

The vitality as well as the survival capacity of this informal, illegal trade system is extraordinary considering the exorbitant amount of legislation published to control and restrain it.\textsuperscript{3,5} Nevertheless, what is perhaps most surprising and significant is that it remained even after the disintegration of the official trade networks. This fact also demonstrates that the involvement of the Europeans with the informal, under-trade was general and comprised all social classes from the wealthy merchant-elites down to poor soldiers, sailors, smugglers, and pirates. In conclusion, I contend that we should employ a fresh perspective to analyze the Portuguese presence in Asia. The under-trade and piracy should be viewed as a parallel system.
to the legal trading system; it should be integrated and accepted as a key feature of the
Portuguese presence in Asia with the same legitimacy as the formal trade.

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