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FREEMASONS IN CHINA: THE PORTUGUESE LINK

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The emerging of freemasonry in China in the 18th century has been reported a British invention, coming from the historical conflict, the Opium War, that involve Great Britain and China in a dispute about the trading routes in the Eastern Chinese coast and commerce of the narcotic product among the Chinese population. In the outcome of this bloody war the British were entitled to several extraterritorial concessions, namely the island of Hong Kong, concession areas in Canton and other (Chinese) ports that were fundamental to secure the routes of its trade and presence as new Imperial power in the East. In the ships that made the trade of opium from Britain to China, and silk, porcelain or tea towards London, traveled beyond sailors, merchants, military personnel, bureaucrats, business men, intellectuals or lawyers that look to start a new life in Chinese land, transporting the habits, traditions and way of life of the Old Albion. Freemasonry clubs were part of this British tradition and meeting places for the gentry and the administrative bureaucracy that followed the trace of East India Company ships securing the domain of the British Empire.

Easily, Masonic lodges emerged in the cities where the British built their settlements, separated from the Chinese towns and where original ways of life were recreated for the benefit of the merchant and expatriate community. Taking Hong Kong as spoils of the bloody confront that pushed it against the Celestial Empire, Great Britain recreated in the arid scraps a burgeoning city building it according with British rules and peculiarities, governed by the common law and imperial regulations. As lodges emerged in the island as gentlemen clubs, the Chinese bourgeoisie was left, carefully, outside them. Only after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, in 1949, this situation would change with British families fleeing from the political turmoil (in China) that led the foreign presence almost impossible. The British lodges first created in China divided themselves by Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the first territory creating districts subordinated to the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland, and in the second entering on a process of gradual autonomy that led them to create a Grand Lodge of China (Taiwan), a corps that for long time was not recognized by British freemasonry for reasons that are implicit.

Differently than this record, I would be tempted to argue that there are factual events that led us to believe that freemasonry came to the East years before than had been argued, being originated in Macau, a colony of Portugal in the first half of the 18th century. In

1759, a ship “Prince Carl” of the Swedish Company of the Eastern Indian Islands arrived to Macau. The freemasons that came in this ship brought a letter of patent to meet in Lodge in any port they coast, and eventually they did it in Macau initiating profanes and associating Portuguese and other foreign freemasons that already lived in the colony. As the ship transported employees of the Company and other merchants to Canton helped to create an informal Masonic grouping in Chinese land.

Insofar an independent segment of European freemasonry took root in Macau, formed by members of the local communities, and facilitated by the use of the franca language in the East, the Portuguese. Macau came under Portuguese rule in the middle of the 16th century (1557), as premium of the assistance given (by Portuguese ships) to Chinese Imperial authorities in the persecution of pirates that scourge the (Chinese) ports [1]. Portuguese presence was never disputed by the Chinese authorities or foreign powers and this situation extended till the 19th century when China was defeated in the Opium War [2]. In 1862, a treaty was signed between the Portuguese monarch and the Imperial Chinese government. Macau became a colony of Portugal and later a dependent territory, becoming clear that Lisbon had no sovereign power over the piece of land but just an administrative political power [3]; a situation that has been identifies as “divided jurisdiction”, with the Portuguese local authorities governing the expatriate community and the Imperial authority of Canton directing the bulk of the Chinese district. This situation will last till the end of the 20th century when an Administrative Special Region was installed, dependent on Beijing and Portugal, the first European power to come to the East, being the last to leave in December 1999.

Living with considerable autonomy from the far-way Portugal, the Portuguese community make possible the interexchange of cultures, philosophies, moods of leaving, and even religious practices between the Caucasian minority and the Chinese majority; Macau emerged as a very cosmopolitan and open city where distinct social practices were broadly tolerated. Different from what happened in Hong Kong, interracial marriages with Chinese, Indian or Malay women were mostly common, forming gradually a half-brad group named “Macanese” that interlinked the Portuguese with the major ethnic group of Han Chinese. Freemasonry accompany this line of societal compromise and in Macao some lodges and Masonic groups emerged combining Portuguese, expatriates and relevant members of the Macanese community, that spread through the administrative bureaucracy, local companies, liberal professions and the circle of intellectuals that were part of a ferment local society. Two of them, Camilo Pessanha and Wenceslau de Moraes, were members of the intellectual movement of “symbolism” in the earlier 20th Century, applauded poets, and usual presence in the clubs and social events of the local bourgeoisie. Both were freemasons and members of a Portuguese lodge named Luis de Camões, dependent on the Grand Orient of Portugal. Camilo Pessanha would progress till the 18° Degree Rose-Croix of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite according with documents accessible in its personal papers [4].

The different logic of the colonization of both empires, the raising influence of the Chinese in the life in Macau, the hegemonic vision of Britain as grand power in the

Indic and Pacific Oceans made any coordination between the two crafts impossible [5]. In the second half of the 18th century, the Chinese authorities in Canton impose to the European employees of the large Companies of the East India to live outside the city helping to consolidate the Portuguese rule in Macao [6]. The two Masonic communities live apart, divided by the mother languages used by the executive powers, Great Britain and Portugal, although there are reasons to believe that contact between freemasons of Hong Kong and Macao was possible. This division would aggravate during the 19th and 20th centuries, part of it by historical developments happening in Portugal where liberal and absolute kings rotate; the first allowing freemasons to proceed with their activities, recruit new members and increase the number of lodges; the second persecuting freemasons and crashing over the lodges.

Portuguese freemasons were deeply involved in the liberal movements of the 19th century, and as it was summarized elsewhere, participated in the political movements that push the overthrow of monarchies of divine power, that led to the creation of constitutional monarchies everywhere in Europe [7]. Portuguese Craft, although a British invention, adhere enthusiastically to the French stylish club de reflexion and to a more cosmopolitan and politicized participation in the affairs of the profane world. As reflex, Macau's lodges and ritualistic practices were more liberalized than its counterparts in Hong Kong. A basic point of this diversion is the opposite attitude regarding regularity.

Freemasonry in China and Macau

Freemasonry first lodge in China has been disputed has a creation of the Grand Lodge of England or the Swedish Grand Lodge putting it around 1788. Arthur Waite invokes the authority of the German Handbook of Freemasonry to argue that a Lodge of St Elizabeth existed in Canton City prior to 1865 and was the oldest Lodge in China but with time vanished letting the space for two district Grand Lodges under the Grand Lodge of England [8]. No reference is made to Macau by the American historian that probably ignored the existence of the territory administered by Portugal or followed acritically the British sources without taking in consideration others.

What can be said is that during the 19th century two district Grand Lodges existed, one the Northern China district gathering five lodges located in Shanghai, that increase to eleven; the Southern China district had seven lodges under its Obedience, later increasing to nine. But the Western Masonic presence was not restricted to English lodges; in 1908 there were Scottish, American and German lodges at work [9]. Adding to these one should take in consideration the existence of a Triad Society, named Thian-Li-Hui, or Heaven Earth League, that had significant activities during the abovementioned and contacts with European Obediences [10]. This society whose rituals resemble mostly Masonic traditions was lately involved in the Patriotic movements that led to the overthrow of the Celestial Empire and the foundation by Sun Yat-sen of the Republic of China.

Following Portuguese dominance in Macau, Freemasons participate randomly in activities organized by foreign crews of European ships that rest in Macau ports. In its report of Portuguese Freemasonry, Oliveira Marques, the Masonic historian, quotes from the annuary of GOL (1922), the existence of a lodge named “Luis de Camões”, with the number 383, located in Macau and practicing the Scottish Rite. Oliveira Marques names local official of the Portuguese garrison – Domingos Gregório Rosa Duque – as the official point of contact [11]. This fact is confirmed by Albert Mackey that asserts that in 1909 the Grand Orient of Portugal create a lodge with the so-said name in Macao and the Grand Orient of Italy has made the same in Shanghai [12]. We may argue with some certainty that since one century before, Portuguese and foreign lodges met in Macau, namely an English lodge named “Amity” that appears with the number 407 in the 1768 list of Lodges dependent on the first Grand Lodge of England, and a Lodge that has been reputedly associated with the Grand Lodge of the State of Alamaba (United States). The Lodge “Luis de Camões” was probably a remake of a former Lodge, with the same name, that existed in Macau at earlier 19th century formed by Portuguese expatriates [13].

There is some fundamental reasons for the lack of historical registers considering Masonic activity in Macau; first endogenous and the second exogenous. The geographical distance from the motherland, the random participation of local Masters in the activities of the Grand Orient in Lisbon, make the requirement of proceedings dispensable. Complimentary the always-tense relations between the Episcopal Church and the local intellectual liberal circles made that identification rather risky for those who publically assumed themselves as freemasons. In the periods of political unresting in Portugal, conservative clerics demand repression over Masonic lodges and freemasons, in general; this has an immediate reflection in Macao has the Church had an expressive presence around religious organizations, the bishop’s entourage and the Order of Jesuits that had in exclusivity the public and private education. Periodically, as it has been stated elsewhere, the Church took advantage of the time when a Divine Right King was enthroned in Portugal to demand the police and the administrative authorities to lay a heavy hand on Masonic activities and close lodges [14].

There are no documents, insofar, that attest the regular visits of Grand Inspectors of the Order to the local organization, as it is so common nowadays, in Freemasonry. It is doubtful that the Lodge organized any sort of register about members, minutes of meetings, dates of initiation, increase of salary and exaltation of members as they may fall in the wrong hands. A last explanation is that the Craft has suffered during the 19th century lasting decades of division and secession, divided by different Grand Orients or Grand Lodges (Grand Orient of Portugal, Masonic Confederation, Grand Orient Lusitano), and only unified in 1869 by the gavel of Count Parati into a Grande Oriente Lusitano Unido [15].

It is basically unknown the profile of recruitment of members to the Portuguese lodge operating in Macao but if we look descriptions of the life in the colony during the first half of the 20th century, we may imagine that the ranks were composed of employees of the government, members of the military, liberal professionals, and probably some members of the local clergy, sympatric with liberal and republican ideals in fashion in Europe.

Governores of Macau that were freemasons;

Adriao Acacio da Silva Pinto e depois;

António Alexandrino de Melo, barão do Cercal, autor do Palácio da Praia Grande, Cemitério de S. Miguel, Quartel dos Mouros e Clube Militar;

Constâncio José da Silva;

D. José da Costa Nunes;

[1] Conceição, Lourenço Maria, Macau entre dois tratados com a China (“Macao between two treaties with China”), Instituto Cultural de Macau, Macau, 1988, p. 8.

[2] In 1602 the Dutch form a company for the purpose of trading to India and in 1609 the cruised the coasts of China leading them to form a settlement in the Island of Formosa (actual Taiwan). In 1622 they made an attack on Macau but were repelled.

[3] In 1688, the Imperial government creates a customs house in Macao (Ho Pu)

[4] Pessanha’s collection of personal papers is part of a collection existing in the Portugal National Library and originated from private donations. In <http://purl.pt/14369/1/apresentacao.html>

[5] The British fight with the Portuguese and the Dutch for territories and trade in India and in June 1637 four East India Company’s ships anchored close to Macao looking to trade directly with Chinese merchants. This was considered an intrusion by the mandarin authorities and the Captain-General of Macau was invited to push the British out of neighboring waters. He demanded the English fleet to leave the city what would happen. Puga, Rogerio Miguel, “Images and Representations of Japan and Macao in Peter Mundy’s Travels (1637)”, Bulletin of Portuguese/Japan Studies, 2001, vol. 1, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal, pp. 97-109,

in <http://redalyc.uaemex.mx/redalyc/pdf/361/36100106.pdf>.

[6] Boxer, Charles Ralph, Estudos para a História de Macau. Séculos XVI and XVII (“Studies for the History of Macao: 16th and 17th centuries”), 1st Tome, Fundação Oriente, Lisboa, 1991, p. 178.

[7] Gonçalves, A.M.A, “A Shortened History of Freemasonry in Portugal,” Pietre-Stones Review of Freemasonry,

http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/arnaldoGeng.html#_edn1

[8] Waite, Arthur Edward, A New Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Wings Books, Nova Iorque, 1970, new edition 1996, p. 105.

[9] Ibidem.

[10] Callery, Joseph Marie and Yvan, Melchior, L’Insurrection en Chine, Depuis de son origine jusqu’ a la prise de Nankin, Librairie Nouvelle, Paris, 1853.

[11] Marques, A.H. de Oliveira, A Maçonaria Portuguesa e o Estado Novo, 2 edition, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1983, Lisbon, p. 109.

[12] Mackey, Albert, Haywood, H.L. Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Part I, Kessinger Publisher 2002, p. 199.

[13] The Portuguese researcher João ... argues that a Masonic lodge named Luis de Camões was formed in Macao with the patronage of Lodge Lusitania, a lodge created in London by Portuguese exiled, and subsequently put under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England.

[14] Gonçalves, A.M.A, “A Shortened History...”, ibidem.

[15] Grainha, M. Borges, História da Maçonaria em Portugal, Editora Limitada, Lisboa, 1912.