

Macanese woman with the traditional *dó*.  
From Filipe Emílio de Paiva,  
*Um Marinheiro em Macau - 1903*.  
*Álbum de Viagem*  
(Macao: Museu Marítimo de Macau, 1997).



## Macao's Women

### Portuguese Women/Macanese Women

LEONOR DIAZ DE SEABRA\*



Can we ask ourselves about what women would these be, who accompanied the first Portuguese going to Macao, what fate would their daughters have and what their role was in Macanese society?

We must remember that, in the beginning, the adventurous life of the Portuguese in the South China Seas did not permit them to bring along their wives from the Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

According to the historical sources,<sup>2</sup> when the Portuguese first settled in Macao, men had, for the most part, temporary residence. Initially, they traded in Macao, and also in the islands of Shangchuan (Sanchoão) and Langbai'ao (Lampacau), building uniquely temporary houses made of hay for the trading of goods, following, at the same time, the diverse points of commerce in other islands. This was particularly due to the implicit recognition and to the approval and economic and personal gains of the local mandarins, both district as well as provincial. The great geographical advantages of Macao and its location as a harbour officially open for trade attracted the foreign traders more and more.<sup>3</sup> Thus, from a fishing harbour and haven for trading junks, and small collection of

wooden houses and tents, Macao, from 1557, acquired marketable value, augmented by the hill called Patane.<sup>4</sup> Macao thus became a base of commercial operations.

Some sources after 1564<sup>5</sup> estimate that the city was inhabited by 600 Portuguese, plus their slaves and servants.<sup>6</sup> This number could have been higher and there might have been 1,500 inhabitants of which 800 were European and Luso-Asian.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty of access to Chinese women and the scarcity of European women brought many soldiers, merchants and political agents, among others, in the final decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to link with Asian servile female groups through abduction, buying, negotiation and slave rescue.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1590s,<sup>9</sup> many women acquired and rescued in specific places in the South China and Southeast Asia seas, Chinese mainland children and young women, were bought or abducted in commercial and maritime actions, many of them marrying Portuguese or staying in their service or brought to the sexual market. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of abduction and the selling of Chinese children and young women, with the approval of local authorities, became more common, with recruitment from both the poorer layers of the population as well as the orphans of the land. This situation created much fear, scandals and criticism, between the Church and the missionary religious orders, especially due to the enormous extension of the female slave trade launching from Macao's harbour.<sup>10</sup>

\*Associate Professor at the University of Macau. Ph.D. in History from Oporto University, M.A. in Asian-Portuguese Studies from the University of Macau. She published several books and articles in academic journals.

*Professora Associada da Universidade de Macau. Doutorada em História pela Universidade do Porto, Mestre em Estudos Luso-Asiáticos pela Universidade de Macau. É autora de vários livros e artigos académicos.*

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In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Kingdom interfered in the repression of the slave trade in the Orient. This was because, from the markets of the Arabian countries to the famous Goa market, the Portuguese could buy female slaves originating from the most diverse parts of Africa and Asia. This bloated the trade in such a way that, from 1520, it was prohibited by King Manuel to have any slaves brought to Europe, prohibition which was reiterated in 1571 by King Sebastião. In 1595, as a consequence of complaints from the Chinese authorities against the Portuguese, who bought girls of that ethnicity to be their servants and exported them as slaves, sanctions were imposed by the viceroy of India, Matias de Albuquerque.<sup>11</sup>

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During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, as well, several prohibitions of Chinese slavery were imposed.<sup>12</sup> To the residents of Macao, at that time, almost all still rich and powerful,<sup>13</sup> the laws of the Kingdom affected them little, used as they were to being self-governed far from the jurisdiction of Goa, and having at the head of the Senate a group of merchants who were the richest in the city.<sup>14</sup> Along with the ecclesiastical condemnations and pressure from Chinese authorities, the Kingdom continued to impose prohibitions, but without great practical effect.<sup>15</sup>

To make a socio-demographic study of the Macanese population, it must be taken into account that the first inhabitants of Macao did not mix with the Chinese population and the women who they lived with were Japanese, Malayan, Indonesian and Indian, many of them being slaves. Some African black women and numerous Timorese female slaves were later imported, and their blood also contributed to the racial mix.<sup>16</sup> The mix of Chinese blood that the Macanese absorbed,

throughout the centuries, is due, for the most part, to the cohabitation of Portuguese and Euro-Asians with their *muitsai* (children abducted or sold by the Chinese to the Westerners).<sup>17</sup>

The Chinese female slaves were generally kidnapped when children by local traffickers, or sold by their own parents, then also possibly freed by someone wishing to bring them to their homes as concubines.<sup>18</sup> This practice was normal in China, where the Chinese relied on the skills of courtesans—the *pei-pá-tchâi*<sup>19</sup>—who had to train in music, painting and literature, thus becoming pleasant company for men during their evenings.<sup>20</sup>

During the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, with the end of trade with Japan (1639) and the consequent decline of Macao, many Portuguese men left the city and, of these, many abandoned their families, leaving them without economic resources.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, ruffians and adventurers—people without any scruples—started flowing into Macao, fleeing from Goa. It was the material misery, allied with the ‘harem mentality’ that the Portuguese maintained in the cities of the Orient where they lived, the main motive that led many women, mainly *criações*<sup>22</sup> and *escravas forras*,<sup>23</sup> to the dissolute life that all the travellers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century attributed to them.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, there are records that refer to the utilisation of women, by those that they depended on, for the gain of profit through prostitution, especially during times of crisis, given that probably many of them subjected themselves voluntarily to a dissolute life because of the moral and material misery into which they fell.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, Friar José de Jesus Maria, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, designated Macao as a ‘city of women’, precisely due to there being a great number of women within its population.<sup>26</sup> This high number of women in Macanese society was due, in part, to the existence of Chinese and Timorese female slaves who, despite being free since 1758, remained in the city. There were also frequent shipwrecks that left many women widowed and children or young women fatherless, as confirmed by the request made by the City Hall Senate to the Queen of Portugal, in 1783, asking for

*Muitsai* (c. 1868). In Kenneth Gaw, *Superior Servants: The Legendary Cantonese Amahs of the Far East* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991).



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authorisation for the creation of a Gathering<sup>27</sup> for orphan girls and homeless women, many of whom became poor due to the frequent shipwrecks. Aside from that, due to the monsoon season that voyages had to heed, a large number of men were absent from



Macao for long periods, aggravating even more this feminine predominance at certain times of the year.<sup>28</sup>

This feminine predominance is also associated with the frequent references to the practice of prostitution in the city. At that time, prostitution was attributed by the Chinese authorities only to European women, but there were also witnesses who remarked on the existence of Chinese and Timorese women dedicated to this activity.<sup>29</sup>

Another characteristic of this feminine population in Macao during this time was, apart from the practice of begging, its inactivity. This was referred to by Friar José de Jesus Maria, surprised by the women not dedicating themselves to spinning and embroidery of cotton and silk or other such activities, saying also that they did nothing.<sup>30</sup>

This excess of women was also explained by the fact that Chinese mothers of children of the female gender (normally undesired) abandoned them at birth on the streets or gave them directly to the House of the Displaced, or *Roda*.<sup>31</sup> Since there was no space to harbour them all, the foundlings were given to poor adoptive mothers, who received a small monthly subsidy to take care of the children until they were seven years old.<sup>32</sup> After this period, the Holy House of Mercy no longer provided for the foundlings, nor was it any longer interested in their welfare. As a result, the nannies (or adoptive mothers) sent the children to beg for alms, in order to earn their living, ending, almost always, in prostitution.<sup>33</sup>

In 1758, a decree by King José I was made, as advised by the Marquis of Pombal, forbidding slavery of Chinese women (*muitsai*), but it was not followed, just like previous prohibitions.<sup>34</sup> This situation was only definitively resolved later, through the law of 23 February 1869, that led to the extinction of slavery in all Portuguese domains.<sup>35</sup>

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was frequent for the bastard sons of Portuguese nobility to go to Goa, where they married local women, according to the policy of miscegenation implemented by Afonso de Albuquerque, receiving privileges and perks, such as giving land deeds to those who married Asians or Euro-Asians.<sup>36</sup>

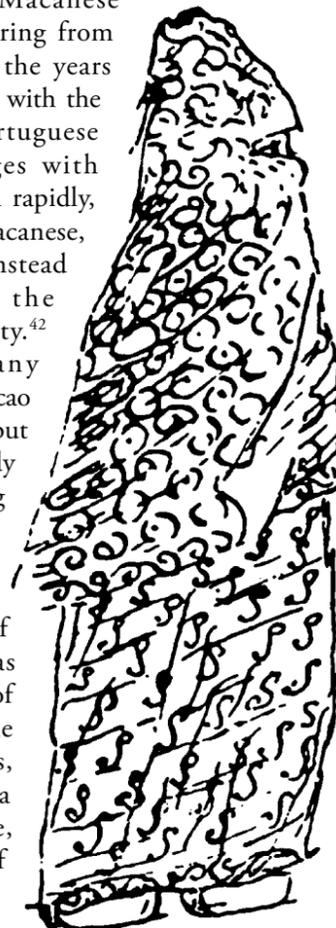
Many would have probably come to Macao and set up roots. The unmarried *reinóis*

Chinese depiction of a 'woman from atlantic countries'.  
From the scroll 'Portraits of foreigners' (late 18<sup>th</sup> century).

(men of the Kingdom of Portugal) who arrived here did not have difficulties in finding a Euro-Asian bride with a good dowry, since the Portuguese fathers aspired to have their eligible daughters marry a fiancé from the Kingdom, in order to preserve the Portuguese blood, which was socially prestigious at the time.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the girls, daughters of families of Portuguese origin, married Europeans, despite many professing to not getting a good option;<sup>38</sup> the sons, on the other hand, married within their own ethnic group or even with people of another ethnicity. This social stratification maintained itself from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup> This originated a certain ethnic isolation of the Macanese, for they married amongst themselves or with Europeans, being the preferred options, in the higher social classes, the army or navy officers, doctors or senior employees.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, until the end of the 1960s, the Macanese normally married amongst themselves or with Portuguese,<sup>41</sup> with an increase in marriages between Macanese and Portuguese occurring from 1965 until 1974. In the years that followed 25 April, with the departure of the Portuguese troops, the marriages with Portuguese diminished rapidly, and even amongst Macanese, with the Macanese instead marrying outside the Lusophone community.<sup>42</sup> In the 1980s, many Portuguese came to Macao for government jobs, but the majority were already married, thus causing the Macanese society to open up to marriages with Chinese.<sup>43</sup>

The life of Macanese women was an idle one in the case of those belonging to the more favoured classes, and Easternised, to a large or small degree, in the inverse ratio of their respective social



classes. The Macanese girls raised in a kind of harem environment in the midst of numerous slave women, could not have, as is evident, similar moral concepts to those of Christian girls from Europe, nor the same view on chastity. In defence of the bad opinion that the Portuguese of the Kingdom and foreigners had of the morals of Macanese women, the socio-economic conditions must be taken into account and also the familial environment in which, since the founding of the City, many of the women had been raised. Not to mention the behaviour expected from the numerous slave women, both before and after being freed. If it is true that the Easternised mentality of Euro-Asian women made them disdain some values of the Judeo-Christian moral of the European bourgeois classes of their time, despite the Portuguese husbands being considered jealous and brutal, the dissolute behaviour of some of them was the fault of the men with whom they lived.<sup>44</sup> In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the liberal ideas

that, from Portugal, expanded through the ultramarine cities and, after the founding of Hong Kong, the influence of the Victorian ethic, imprinted a new facet on Macanese society. The familial moral became rigorous in high society, that the definitive abolition of slavery, in 1876, reinforced. The extended families, which corresponded



Macao women. Illustration included in Peter Mundy's Journal. Reproduced from *Seventeenth Century Macau in Contemporary Documents and Illustrations*, edited by C. R. Boxer (Hong Kong/Kuala Lumpur/Singapore: Heinemann-Asia, 1984).



Macanese woman with *saraca*.  
From Yin Guangren and Zhang Rulin, *Aomen Jilüe* (18<sup>th</sup> century).

always to periods of bourgeois expansion, began to disappear and the Macanese girls started to enjoy a bit of independence, especially in regards to marriage, due to the abolition of the dowry.<sup>45</sup>

As for the clothing of the Macanese women, it was, during the first centuries, inspired by Indo-Malayan wear, as these would have been the women that accompanied the first Portuguese who settled in Macao. The Macanese women used the *baju* (light colored cloth blouse, looking like a short kimono) and two *saraças* (printed cotton cloth, like a 'batik'), with one of them being wrapped around the waist and the other used on the head like a veil, covering part of the face. When they went to mass, they substituted the *saraca* that covered their head for a black cloth or headdress (the *dó*).<sup>47</sup>

This more vulgar clothing, composed of two *saraças* and one *baju*, was criticised by the clergy, who wanted to see Macanese women with a skirt and mantle caught at the waist, as was the European style of the time. But, despite the prohibitions of the Church, the Macanese women continued to use the *saraças*, perhaps due to economic reasons, since the fabric used for the mantles was much more expensive than the cotton cloth of the *saraças*, plus they could wear the *baju* and sandals with these, while with the mantle they would have to wear a skirt, blouse (of a more expensive fabric), shoes and matching socks.<sup>48</sup>

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *bajus* started to disappear in exchange for long-sleeved white blouses, made of light fabrics; the long skirt made of printed cotton (or other fabric), black, which substituted the *saraca* worn around the waist; and the use of the *dó* (on the head) becoming more common. This change appears to have occurred due to the fact that there was a greater knowledge of European fashion, as well as the arrival in Macao of other Portuguese and European women. And, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the '*dó*' was gradually abandoned, just like black skirts and white blouses, although elderly ladies were still seen clothed like that until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup>

But what would have been the origin of this group, the Macanese? This question has generated much controversy among investigators.

Regarding the origin of the Macanese, there are two versions: in the first, the less valued sectors of Chinese society, that is, the prostitutes, were at the heart

of the miscegenation that gave rise to the Macanese; in the second, it is said that the Macanese originated in the miscegenation that occurred in the first centuries since the arrival of the Portuguese to the Orient, among Portuguese men and Malayan, Japanese, Indian, etc. women.<sup>50</sup>

As was seen, in Macao there were always a great number of women.<sup>51</sup> There was a general practice of concubinage, generally with Chinese women, for the Chinese culture easily accepts that a man has legitimised children with several women. To a Chinese woman, being a concubine of a married man was less humiliating than to a woman of Portuguese (Macanese) culture.<sup>52</sup>

There were also the so-called 'new-Christians', that is, baptised Chinese that thus adopted a Portuguese name, becoming accepted by the Macanese/Portuguese community.<sup>53</sup>

*This excess of women was also explained by the fact that Chinese mothers of children of the female gender (normally undesired) abandoned them at birth on the streets or gave them directly to the House of the Displaced, or Roda.*

Traditionally, the Chinese women have a faded role in society, being dominated by a patriarchal power that spans all corners of the globe.<sup>54</sup> But, starting from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese intellectuals started to rethink the status of the woman in Chinese society, influenced by several Christian churches, namely the Protestant church. Later, with the birth of the Republic (1911), the fight for emancipation of women was assumed by the political power.<sup>55</sup>

In the Chinese society of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women had a highly devalued status.<sup>56</sup> In the mid-1970s, there came the end of the Cultural

Macanese woman with *saraca* and *bioco* (a kind of veil or lacy mantle, used on the head to cover the face). Sketch of George Chinnery (1774-1852).

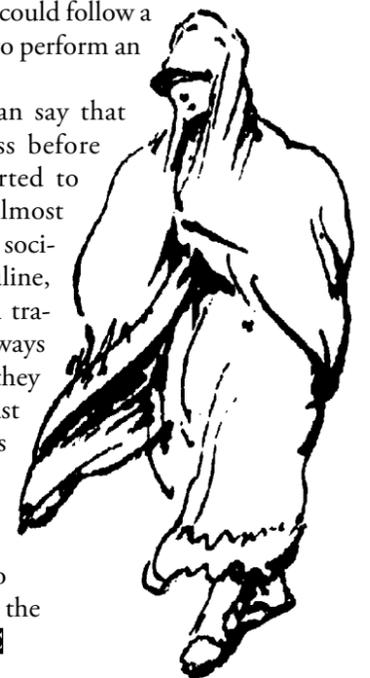
Revolution in China, and the Revolution in Portugal (1974), which resulted in the departure of Portuguese troops from Macao, the entry en mass of new Chinese immigrants and a period of great economic growth.<sup>57</sup>

After the Revolution, the legalisation of divorce allowed women greater freedom.<sup>58</sup> Also, among the Chinese middle class, women began to have a greater freedom to marry according to their personal choices.<sup>59</sup>

There therefore appear to have been more and more women that dedicated themselves to exterior activities, that is, professionals, decreasing the number of housewives and, simultaneously, increasing the number of those who opt for celibacy. There were also fewer women abandoned to the streets, and concubines had almost disappeared. These women were, however, replaced by other modern forms, for many men in the Chinese upper middle class have many women, but they do not cohabitaten or have the status of concubines, being installed in independent domestic residences.<sup>60</sup>

Women came to attain their place in the work market, acquiring more academic qualifications and performing an ever more relevant role in business, administrative or political careers. However, when it came to work access, Macao followed the tendency of the whole region: women from poorer families dedicated themselves to domestic work (for their own families or others) and those of a more privileged economic situation—whose families started to educate their daughters so that they could follow a professional life—were led to perform an active professional role.<sup>61</sup>

In conclusion, we can say that four centuries had to pass before the women of Macao started to free themselves from an almost cultural atavism. But, in a society characteristically masculine, extremely conservative and traditional, women are not always seen well, especially when they reach lofty positions. And just as Cecília Jorge tells us, it is very difficult to eradicate from the Chinese traditionalist mentality the notion that woman is inferior to man and he is 'as distant as the Earth is from Heaven'.<sup>62</sup> **RC**



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## NOTES

- 1 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, p. 7.
- 2 Jordão de Freitas, *Macau, Materiais para a sua História no Século XVI* (Macao: Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1988), pp. 15-18. See also Jin Guo Ping, 'Combates a Piratas e a Fixação Portuguesa em Macau', *Revista Militar*, n.º 2364, Lisbon, 1999, pp. 199-228.
- 3 Wu Zhiliang, *Segredos da Sobrevivência: História Política de Macau*, p. 45.
- 4 Jorge Manuel dos Santos Alves, *Um Porto Entre Dois Impérios: Estudos Sobre Macau e as Relações Luso-Chinesas*, p. 67.
- 5 Manuel Teixeira, SJ a Leonel de Lima, SJ, *BAC, Cartas do Japão*, vol. 3, fls. 103-103v. (Cantão, 1-XI-1564).
- 6 Francisco Peres, SJ a Luís Gonçalves, SJ, *Cartas do Japão*, vol. 3 (Carta de 3-XI-1564), in *Boletim Eclesiástico da Diocese de Macau* (BEDM), n.º 62, p. 770.
- 7 Jorge Manuel dos Santos Alves, *Um Porto Entre Dois Impérios*, pp. 66-67. See also Manuel Teixeira, *Macau no Século XVI*. V. 'Papéis de D. Francisco de Mascarenhas', Mss. Da Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital de Évora, Cod. CXVI/2-5, fls. 226-232.
- 8 See Leonor Diaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau (Séculos XVI a XIX): Irmandade, Poder e Caridade na Idade do Comércio*.
- 9 Cf. Bento da França, *Macau e os seus Habitantes: Relações com Timor*.
- 10 Leonor Diaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau ...*, p. 134.
- 11 Charles R. Boxer, *Fidalgos no Extremo Oriente (1550-1770)*, p. 229. See also Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, pp. 9-10.
- 12 Charles R. Boxer, *Fidalgos no Extremo Oriente (1550-1770)*, pp. 228-229.
- 13 See *ibidem*.
- 14 *Ibidem*, p. 231. Medieval documentation characterises as the richest, the most notable, the most respected heads of family, the most honorable excellent persons within each county. This was the image of Macao: rich bourgeois and the most highly regarded, who monopolised the municipal duties, deciding administrative and economic subjects.
- 15 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, p. 11.
- 16 Charles R. Boxer, *O Senado da Câmara de Macau*, p. 48. Cf. 'Papéis de D. Francisco de Mascarenhas', Mss. Da Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital de Évora, Cod. CXVI/2-5, fls. 226-232:
- 17 Tcheong-U-Lam e Ian-Kuong-Iâm, pp. 120-124. See also Manuel Teixeira, *Os Macaenses*.
- 18 Luís Gonzaga Gomes, *Curiosidades de Macau Antiga*, p. 161.
- 19 Isabel Nunes, 'Bailarinas e Cantadeiras: Aspectos da Prostituição em Macau'. *Revista de Cultura*, n.º 15, Jul./Set. (1991), pp. 95-117.
- 20 Luís Gonzaga Gomes, *Curiosidades de Macau Antiga*, p. 160.
- 21 V. Charles R. Boxer, *O Grande Navio de Amacau*.
- 22 *Criações ou crioulas* – slave women of different ethnicities except Chinese.
- 23 *Escravas forras* – free female slaves.
- 24 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, pp. 24-25.
- 25 Ana Maria Amaro, 'A Mulher Macaense, essa Desconhecida'. *Revista de Cultura*, n.º 24 (II Série), Jul./Set. 1995, p. 10.
- 26 Frei José de Jesus Maria, *Ásia Sínica e Japónica*, vol. 2, p. 221.
- 27 See Leonor Diaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau....*
- 28 Maria de Jesus dos Mártires Lopes, 'Mendicidade e "maus costumes" em Macau' e Goa, na segunda metade do século XVIII', in Artur Teodoro de Matos e Luís Filipe Thomaz (eds.), *As Relações entre a Índia Portuguesa, A Ásia do Sueste e o Extremo Oriente: Actas do VI Seminário Internacional de História Indo-Portuguesa*, p. 74.
- 29 *Ibidem*, p. 73.
- 30 José de Jesus Maria, *Ásia Sínica e Japónica*, vol. 2, p. 231.
- 31 See Leonor Diaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau....*
- 32 Charles R. Boxer, *O Senado da Câmara de Macau*, p. 44.
- 33 *Ibidem*, p. 45.
- 34 Charles R. Boxer, *Fidalgos no Extremo Oriente (1550-1770)*, p. 231.
- 35 Cf. Leonor Diaz de Seabra, *A Misericórdia de Macau....*
- 36 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, pp. 17-19.
- 37 Ana Maria Amaro, pp. 177-178.
- 38 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, pp. 20-21.
- 39 Ana Maria Amaro, *Das Cabanas de Palha às Torres de Betão*, p. 179.
- 40 Ana Maria Amaro, *Filhos da Terra*, p. 24.
- 41 *Ibidem*, p. 61.
- 42 *Ibidem*, pp. 128-129.
- 43 *Em Terra de Tufões: Dinâmicas da Etnicidade Macaense*, p. 130.
- 44 Ana Maria Amaro, 'A Mulher macaense, essa desconhecida'. *Revista de Cultura*, n.º 24 (II Série), Jul./Set. 1995, p. 10.
- 45 Ana Maria Amaro, 'A mulher de Macau segundo os relatos dos viajantes'. *Revista de Cultura*, n.º 15, Jul./Set. 1991, p. 122. Cf. José Ignácio de Andrade, *Cartas Escripitas da Índia e da China nos Anos de 1815 a 1835*, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional, 1843), pp. 123-125.
- 46 From the Malay *sarásab* or from the Sanskrit *sârasa*, initially it was an imprinted cotton fabric (batik) or silk – brought from India and, later, from Manila – wrapped around the waist, to serve as a skirt, and another, on the head, like a kind of veil or mantle.
- 47 Ana Maria Amaro, *O Traje da Mulher Macaense*, pp. 115-124.
- 48 *Ibidem*, p. 125.
- 49 *Ibidem*, pp. 128-136.
- 50 João de Pina Cabral e Nelson Lourenço, *Em Terra de Tufões: Dinâmicas da Etnicidade Macaense*, p. 60.
- 51 *Ibidem*, p. 62.
- 52 *Ibidem*, p. 64. See also Manuel Teixeira, *Os Macaenses*.
- 53 João de Pina Cabral e Nelson Lourenço, *Em Terra de Tufões...*, p. 65.
- 54 Ana Cristina Alves, 'A mulher chinesa na sociedade contemporânea', *Administração*, n.º 57, Set. 2002, p. 1015.
- 55 *Ibidem*, p. 1022.
- 56 *Ibidem*.
- 57 João de Pina Cabral e Nelson Lourenço, *Em Terra de Tufões...*, p. 126.
- 58 *Ibidem*, p. 141.
- 59 *Ibidem*, p. 150.
- 60 *Ibidem*, pp. 150-153.
- 61 *Ibidem*, pp. 145-146.
- 62 Cecília Jorge e Beltrão Coelho, *A Fénix e o Dragão: Realismo e Mito do Casamento*, p. 50.

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