

## Notes

### THE CHINESE DIASPORA: PRESENT AND FUTURE IN PORTUGAL<sup>1</sup>

**Luís Filipe Amaral da Silva Pestana**

[luisfilipepestana@bnu.edu.cn](mailto:luisfilipepestana@bnu.edu.cn)

He is a Portuguese lecturer at Maxdo College at Beijing Normal University (People's Republic of China) and has also held the same positions at the Faculty of Western Languages at Harbin Normal University. Master's and Bachelor's degree in International Relations at the Institute of Political Studies of the Portuguese Catholic University of Lisbon. Participated in the research project "The possible African seduction by the Chinese model: the analysis of Mozambique", Research Center of the Institute of Political Studies, Portuguese Catholic University

The Chinese people have always been characterized by great mobility. In the nineteenth century many were those who sought their fortune outside Imperial China. In the Portuguese case, the process was slower since Portugal was traditionally seen as a crossing point for other stops rather than a final destination. However, this trend began to change from the 1970s onwards. Nowadays, reality shows that this community is changing again, because of the transformations of its own country. As such, more and more students and investors who are holders of the Visa Gold, see in Portugal the way to improve their academic careers and an entry into the European Union.

#### Introductory note

The 21st century promises to be, for better or worse reasons, China's century. Its assertion from the external point of view will have profound consequences for the way the international order will be organized in the coming decades. With this evolution, the profile of the Chinese immigrant is also changing progressively on a world scale. Citing the example of the United States, one of the earliest records of Chinese in this country, dates from 1784, upon the arrival of a ship with Chinese sailors. From 1850 onwards, many of the Chinese who settled there were attracted by the "gold fever" in California. Until the 1870s, a good part of this community served as cheap labor in the construction of railways on the Pacific coast (LOC, 2017). Currently, the Chinese who go to the United States have higher qualifications. They seek to pursue their academic career, do business or constitute a family outside their country. By 2013, China has overtaken Mexico as the main immigrant source country (Lee, 2015). For many Americans, this and other Asian communities are seen as examples of work and dedication to be followed by others.

<sup>1</sup> The translation of this article was funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia - as part of OBSERVARE project with the reference UID/CPO/04155/2013, with the aim of publishing Janus.net. Text translated by Cristina Félix and reviewed by Carolina Peralta.



Portugal will not escape this trend and may receive an increasing number of Chinese immigrants in the coming years. However, this migration phenomenon is not uniform at all, having undergone several fluctuations over more than 100 years of history. Thus, to understand the real impact of the Chinese diaspora in today's Portuguese society, it is crucial to know how everything began and what is the current situation of a community that still seems mysterious to the eyes of many Portuguese.

### **The 70's of the 20th century**

The example of the United States has some similarities with the one that we have in Portugal today, although the social and economic circumstances dictate the existence of some differences. To begin with, it is not clear when the first Chinese arrived in Portugal, although records from the Civil Government Archives of Oporto show the existence of a Chinese community since the 1920s of the 20th century (Matias, 2010: 79). These individuals came from Zhejiang province and specialized in street vending (Mortágua, 2011: 294). In the next 50 years there is little to register for the Chinese community in Portugal. This would change with the end of the Portuguese colonies in Africa. The decolonization of Mozambique, for example, led to the withdrawal of 26 Chinese families from the territory. Contrary to what is often pointed out by the Chinese community in our country, these individuals did not experience any integration difficulties when they arrived in Portugal. They were Portuguese-speaking people with professional experience in different sectors, being an integral part of the Mozambican colonial society. However, the change of status quo in Mozambique led to the departure of some of these individuals. As Matias (2010: 84 and 85) points out, the Chinese who settled on the East African coast left their country in search of better living conditions. As early as 1960, the Chinese population amounted to over 660 million people (National Bureau of Statistics, 2014). With the aggravating effects of the Great Leap Forward (Dikötter, 2010: 333, Mason, 2012) and later the Cultural Revolution, many Chineses were forced to seek places that would guarantee them the necessary stability, to have a comfortable and quiet life. The independence of Mozambique brought a highly troubled period to the new African state, which led to the withdrawal of 26 families to Portugal. Arriving in European territory, many ended up being integrated without major difficulties. We can not forget, as Matias (2010: 88) points out, that the fact that these individuals had a vast knowledge of our culture and language, allowed their integration process to be almost perfect.

Timor-Leste, another old Portuguese colony, also had a very significant Chinese community. The invasion of the territory by the Indonesian government of Suharto in 1975, dictated the flight of this community to other stops. However, many of those who came to Portugal used our country as a point of passage to other destinations. These individuals, however, had an equal migratory trajectory: leaving Cantão, they settled in an old Portuguese colony and later passed through Portugal (Mortágua, 2011: 296).

### **From the 80's of the 20th century to the 21st century**

With the end of the troubled 1970s in Portugal, Chinese immigration gained new impetus from the 1980s. Once again, the departure of many Chinese from their country was due to the search for better living conditions. While Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the late 1970s led to a substantial improvement in living conditions in the People's Republic of China



(PRC), they also exposed Chinese citizens to new realities and environments they had never known. In a sense, those who left their country were drawn to the development provided by the capitalist states of the Western world. Added to this is the growing circulation of information which, little by little, allowed many people to risk emigrating because they had more knowledge about the diaspora (Gaspar, 2015: 2).

The wave of Chinese immigration that came to Portugal during the 1980s came mainly from Zhejiang province (Qingtian and Wenzhou port cities) and from Fujian. Many of these individuals (mostly men) went through a process of re-immigration, that is, they were in other European countries (eg, France or Holland) before arriving at Portuguese Lands (Mortágua, 2011: 297). It was this great migratory movement that brought with it one of the most enduring stereotypes of our society: the Chinese small merchant. It was in this period that the first Chinese restaurants and shops began to emerge, symbols of a community intrinsically linked to commerce (Mortágua, 2011: 297). Even today we have access to Chinese product stores in any part of our country. In the beginning, many of these businesses competed with others, belonging to Portuguese. The main consequence of this situation is the creation of one of the most enduring stereotypes related to the Chinese community: "Chinese shops" (alongside large stores) have destroyed traditional commerce. The fact that stores are exempt from paying taxes in the first five years of existence (Matias, 2010: 137), a perception that helps to create prejudices among the Portuguese population vis-à-vis the Chinese community.

The construction of this kind of prejudice is often a consequence of a very low level of integration of the Chinese population. Notwithstanding this situation, the Portuguese also have responsibilities in the low acceptance of these individuals. There is, in fact, a great lack of knowledge and even indifference to what the Chinese are. The fascination that some feel for China is due to their culture which, in our eyes, is seen as being exotic or mystical. As for the Chinese community, its closed nature makes much of the existing contact with the Portuguese being summarized by commercial transactions associated with their establishments (Matias, 2010: 156). Thus, "the increase in the number of Chinese who study Portuguese and who cross half a world to continue their studies in Portugal, will cause this image to be gradually diluted. In addition, these individuals will greatly contribute to the eradication of cultural barriers between the two peoples, something that will bear fruit that goes beyond merely commercial aspects."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the Chinese community has undergone major changes over the last decades. However, its progressive increase has been its most striking aspect. According to statistics released by the Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF), there were more than 22,000 Chinese living in Portugal in 2016 (SEF, 2016: 11). This increase is mainly due to the incessant search for better living conditions outside Chinese territory. As such, it is not a new or unexpected motive, as it has been strongly credited in the different waves of Chinese emigration. The example of individuals from Zhejiang Province who settled in Oporto and in Lisbon testifies this fact, as they sought to escape the atrocities committed by Japan in Chinese territory. As we saw earlier, the 1980s were marked by the arrival of Chinese from Wenzhou who found their livelihood in street vending. Being the family character one of the characteristics of this diaspora, the transition to the area of restoration and retail was quickly made.

---

<sup>2</sup> Pestana (2017).



Although the tendency for this community to grow and to not have chinatowns in Portugal as elsewhere in Europe or in the United States, there is a great concentration in Lisbon, especially in the Martim Moniz area (Gaspar, 2015: 4 and 5). As such, it is possible to conclude that on the part of the Chinese community there is a clear tendency for the maintenance of a status quo in which the contact with the Portuguese population sums up to the minimum indispensable, probably, as a way of preserving their traditions and traditions.

The profile of the Chinese immigrant in Portugal has been gradually changing. At this time, college students and those with Gold Visas are at the forefront of this new wave of immigration from the Middle Kingdom. At present, there is an increasing interest in studying Portuguese because of relations between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. As such, the number of universities teaching Portuguese rose from only 6 to 37 in less than two decades. This trend means that in a brief time the number of Chinese higher education institutions with Portuguese courses may reach 50. (Gaudêncio 2017). Through various agreements and protocols, Chinese universities have been giving their students the possibility to study abroad for periods of up to one year. For Portuguese learners, these are unique opportunities to improve their level of language and also to know a different academic reality from the one they have in China. It should also be remembered that Portugal is in a situation (up to now) privileged from the point of view of security, which is joined by being a Member State of the European Union. All these factors make our country a prominent destination for many Chinese students who want to finish their studies abroad (Pestana, 2017).

In October 2012, the Golden Visa program came into effect with the promise of attracting more foreign investment. By the end of 2013, the first year the program was available, Chinese citizens had already invested 229 million euros under this program (Cerqueira, 2017). This is an easy way for Portugal to obtain investment, especially in the real estate sector. For those who enter Portugal through this program, it is an uncomplicated way to travel in the Schengen Area. Up to November 2017, 3,575 Golden Visas were awarded to Chinese citizens, which reached approximately 3,380 million euros (Ribeiro, 2017).

As I mentioned:

*"These two groups are the mirror of a society that has been changing rapidly. Not only has the Chinese upper class has been growing, but it has also sought to invest in places where living and security conditions guarantee an investment without aggravated risks. Portugal, as already mentioned, has all these characteristics"<sup>3</sup>.*

Of particular importance (also because of media), the country has not yet been subjected to any terrorist attacks since the rise of the Islamic State unlike other EU members (Pestana, 2017).

## Conclusion

---

<sup>3</sup> Pestana (2017).



The path taken by the Chinese community in Portugal since the beginning of the 20th century has been marked by constant fluctuations and periods of low migratory intensity. When these movements occurred, it was due to the greater instability of the places where the Chinese lived: the PRC, since its founding, experienced periods of great social and political unrest, and the former Portuguese colonies (such as Mozambique and Timor-Leste) are no exception. Thus, the Chinese diaspora has always been forced to move, seeking the best possible living conditions. In Portugal, the Chinese encountered trade opportunities in the 1970s and 1980s that helped them settle down. Today, this community is in a new process of transformation with students and investors heading this new wave of immigration. It is up to the Portuguese State to create the conditions necessary for these individuals to be above all an added value for the country, promoting a more cohesive and effective integration process.

## References

- Alden, Chris (2009). *China in Africa*. Londres: Zed Books.
- Cerqueira, Marta (2017). Vistos Gold. China lidera investimento em Portal. In Jornal i [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted November 30, 2017] Available in URL. <https://ionline.sapo.pt/564302>
- Dikötter, Frank (2010). *Mao's great famine: the history of China's most devastating catastrophe, 1958-62*. Londres: Bloomsbury.
- Gaspar, Sofia (2015). A comunidade chinesa em Portugal: percursos migratórios, contextos familiares e mercado de trabalho. *CIES e-Working Paper*, 201/2015. Lisboa: CIES – IUL.
- Gaudêncio, R. (2017). Em sete anos haverá 50 "universidades chinesas com português". In Público [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted November 30, 2017] Available in URL. <https://www.publico.pt/2017/07/30/sociedade/noticia/em-sete-anos-havera-50-universidades-chinesas-com-portugues-1780800>
- Hung, Frederick Fu & Victor C. Falkenheim (1999). Zhejiang – Province, China. In Encyclopaedia Britannica [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted November 30, 2017]. Available in URL. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zhejiang>
- Lee, Erika (2015). Chinese immigrants now largest group of new arrivals to the U.S: Column. In USA Today [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted December 4, 2017]. Available in URL. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2015/07/07/chinese-immigrants-largest-column/29784905/>
- Mason, Paul (2012). Yang Jisheng: The man who discovered 36 million dead. In British Broadcasting Corporation [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted on November 30, 2017]. Available in URL. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-20410424>.
- Matias, Ana (2010). *Imagens e estereótipos da sociedade portuguesa sobre a comunidade chinesa: interacção multissecular via Macau*. Lisboa: Alto-Comissariado para a Imigração e Diálogo Intercultural (ACIDI, I.P.).
- Mortágua, Maria João (2011). *Simbiose dos Povos: os Imigrantes Chineses no Sul da Europa na Viragem do Século XX para o Século XXI*. Doutor. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, Facultad de Geografía e Historia.



National Bureau of Statistics of China (2014). Statistical Yearbook: 2014. In National Bureau of Statistics of China [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted on November 30, 2017]. Available in URL. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2014/indexeh.htm>

Pestana, Luís Filipe (2017). A comunidade chinesa em Portugal. In Xinhua Português [Em linha]. 2017 [Consulted November 30, 2017]. Available in URL. [http://portuguese.xinhuanet.com/2017-11/23/c\\_136772729.htm](http://portuguese.xinhuanet.com/2017-11/23/c_136772729.htm)

Ribeiro, Maria José (coor.) (2017). *Relatório de Imigração, Fronteiras e Asilo 2016*. Oeiras: SEF.

The Library of Congress (1976). Rise of Industrial America Chinese Immigration to the United States, 1851-1900. In The Library of Congress [In line]. 2017 [Consulted December 4, 2017]. Available in URL. <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/timeline/riseind/chinimms/>

Xinhua (2017). Commentary: Eliminating poverty, the Chinese way. In Xinhua News Agency [In line]. 2017 [Consulted December 4, 2017]. Available in URL. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/02/c\\_136577587.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/02/c_136577587.htm)

### How to cite this Note

Pestana, Luís Filipe Amaral da Silva (2018). "The chinese diaspora: presente and future in Portugal". Notes, *JANUS.NET e-journal of International Relations*, Vol. 9, N.º 1, May-October 2018. Consulted [online] on the date of last consultation, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.9.1.01>