

Macau – history and changes of the name(s)

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MACAU – a bit of history

In 1537, the Portuguese received from the Ming government, for an annual fee of 500 taels (Chinese: 兩 *liǎng*), the right to stay temporarily on St. John's Island, also Shangchuan Island (Portuguese: *Ilha Sanchoão, Ilha São João*, Chinese: 上川島 *Shàngchuān Dǎo*, also historically known as *Sancian*, 21°39'55" N, 112°47'44" E), a small island at the mouth of the Pearl River, about 14 kilometers south of the Chinese mainland. The island is known for having been the place of death of St. Francis Xavier in December 1552, before he can reach China mainland.

St. John's Island (139.87 square kilometers) is the main island of the Chuanshan Archipelago (Chinese: 川山群島 *Chuānshān Qúndǎo*) in the South China Sea. The island was called Shangchuan Shan (上川山) in the Ming dynasty, as recorded in the *Records of the Unity of the Great Ming* (大明一統志) published in 1461. Now the Chuanshan Archipelago is a part of the Guangdong province of the PRC.

Shangchuan Island was one of the first bases established by the Portuguese off the China coast, during the 16th century. They abandoned this base after the Chinese government gave consent for a permanent and official Portuguese trade base at Macau in 1557. Before that, in 1553, the Portuguese received permission from the Guangzhou (Canton) authorities to settle on the current Macao Peninsula (Chinese: 澳門半島 *Àomén Bàndǎo*, Cantonese *Ou Mùhn Bun Dóu*, Portuguese *Península de Macau*).

The territory of Portuguese Macau was first leased by the Ming dynasty to Portugal as a trading post in 1557. Portugal paid an annual rent and administered the territory under Chinese sovereignty until 1887. In 1887, Portugal gained perpetual colonial rights in the Sino-Portuguese Treaty of Peking (1 December 1887). The colony remained under Portuguese rule until 1999, when it was transferred to China.

Portuguese soon began to build the city of Macau (Portuguese: *Povoação do Nome de Deus de Amacao na China*, “Village of the Name of God [named] Amacao in China”). It was separated from Chinese territory by a wall in 1573. In 1585, the city received the epithet *Cidade do Santo Nome de Deus* (City of the Holy Name of God), which was expanded in 1642 to *Não há outra mais Leal* (None is more faithful).

The name of the city is said to have been derived from the temple of the goddess A-Ma (Chinese: 媽閣廟 *Māgé Miào*, Cantonese *Mā Gok Miuh*, Portuguese *Templo de A-Má*, also *Templo de Barra* after the Portuguese name of Barra Hill, *Colina da Barra*, Chinese: 媽閣山 *Māgé Shān*, at the foot of which the temple is located).

The temple was built in 1488 in the southwest of the peninsula and was dedicated to the local goddess 媽祖 *Māzǔ*, the protector of sailors and fishermen, a very popular deity throughout southern China and Taiwan. She is known by various names, often as 天后 *Tiānhòu* (“Queen of Heaven”). 阿媽 (*āmā*) means “mother” in Cantonese. A number of other legends on the origin of the name exist, including a derivation from 馬交 *Mǎjiāo* or 馬角 *Mǎjiǎo* (Cantonese *Máh Gāau*, *Máh Gok*), which is more likely derived from the Portuguese name.¹

MACAU – early evidence of its name

Textual evidence points to the name “Macau” being derived from a local name 阿媽港 (Cantonese: *Āmāgóng*; literally “Port of A-Ma”), written variantely as ‘*Ya/A Ma Gang*’ (亞 / 阿 – 媽 / 馬 – 港) in both Chinese and Japanese texts since the sixteenth century.²

The Chinese modern name 澳門 *Àomén* (Cantonese *Ou Mùhn*) literally means “bay gate”. This name first appeared in a Ming document in 1564, when the Portuguese had already penetrated Macau. The earliest evidence of the name *Macao* in Portuguese is in a letter by Fernão Mendes Pinto (c.1509–1583) a Portuguese explorer and writer, dated November 20, 1555. It is noted that the word ‘*amaquão*’ appeared at both the beginning and the end of this letter, in which there is the nasal coda of ‘*ão*’. Since ‘*quão*’ is the same as ‘*cão*’, ‘*amaquão*’ is hence pronounced as ‘*amacão*’. ‘*Amacão*’ corresponds to ‘*Ya/A Ma Gang*’ (亞 / 阿 – 媽 / 馬 – 港) in Chinese.³ In reality, all Portuguese variations of the word ‘*Macau*’, such as ‘*Maçhoam*’, ‘*Ama Cuão*’, ‘*amaquan*’, as well as ‘*Amacão*’, ‘*Amacuão*’, ‘*Amaquão*’, ‘*Amangão*’, ‘*Amagão*’, ‘*Amaquam*’, ‘*Machoam*’ and ‘*Maquão*’, reflect the nasal coda.

¹ Batalha, Graciete Nogueira (1987). “This name of Macau...” *Review of Culture*. No. 1. Cultural Institute of Macao. (<https://www.icm.gov.mo/rc/viewer/20001/728>; retrieved 2024, February 23; 譚世寶 Tán Shibǎo: *Macao, Macau* (馬交)與澳門、馬角等詞的考辨 (*Mǎ jiāo*) yǔ ào mén, *Mǎjiǎo děng cí de kǎobiàn* [An examination of the words "Majiao" and "Aomen", "Majiao" etc.] (<https://www.icm.gov.mo/rc/viewer/10035/641#>; retrieved 2024, February 28)

² Wu, Zhiliang; Jin, Guoping: “The evolution of spellings of 'Macau': an examination of early Portuguese and Western archival materials”. In Wong, Katrine K. (ed.). *Macao – Cultural Interaction and Literary Representations*. London: Routledge 2013: 3-12.

³ *Ibid.*: 4.

The earliest formal spelling of ‘Macao’ in Latin appeared as ‘Machao’ in the edict of Pope Gregory XIII on 23 January 1576, in which the establishment of the Diocese of Macao (Latin: *Machaonensis dioecesis*: “... erectionis ecclesiae Machaonensis facta an. M.D.L.XXVI”), the first Catholic diocese in East Asia, whose jurisdiction included China, Japan and other islands and neighbouring regions⁴, was promulgated.

It originally covered China, Japan, Vietnam and the Malay Archipelago, with the exception of the Philippines. From its founding, the diocese was a suffragan diocese of the Archdiocese (soon Patriarchate) of Goa, in Portuguese India.

In Portuguese, ‘Macao’ sometime was in fact ‘Macão’ without tilde. The earliest known document in which ‘Macão’ was so written is a report drafted by João Escobar, Secretary to the Gil de Góis Mission in 1565. Brother André Pinto, who followed the Mission, used ‘Amacao’ and ‘amacao’ when referring to Macao in his letter on 30 November 1564.⁵ ‘Macao’ and ‘Amacão’ were used also in Spanish and other languages in the end of the 16th century.⁶

The word ‘Macão’ appeared in a local map produced before 1641.⁷ After a decade, ‘Macao’ was generally used by the Jesuits, although ‘Macão’ also appeared once in the same publication.⁸ In Spanish, ‘Macan’ and ‘Macán’ appeared alternately.

Father Pedro de Alfaro (1565–1644), the Guardian of the Franciscans, used ‘Macan’ to indicate Macao in his letters of 12 October 1579⁹ and 13 October 1579¹⁰.

Franciscan Father Agustin de Tordesillas († 1578) used either ‘Machan’ or ‘Macan’.¹¹ In his concise records to the second mission, Father Alonso Sánchez (1547–1593), a Spanish Jesuit missionary, used ‘Macán’ on several occasions.¹²

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⁵ Wu, Zhiliang; Jin, Guoping (2013): 5.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ L. Silveira (ed.), *Livro das Plantas das Fortalezas, Cidades e Povoações do Estado da Índia Oriental com s Descrições do Marítimo dos Reinos e Províncias onde Estao Situadas e Outros Portos Principais Daquelas Partes – Contribuição para a História das Fortalezas dos Portugueses no Ultramar*. Lisbon: Ministério do Planeamento e da Administração do Território, Secretaria de Estado da Ciência e Tecnologia e Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, 1991, map 93: 109.

⁸ Biblioteca da Ajuda. *Jesuitas na Ásia*. 49-IV-61, fl. 18v.

⁹ A. Wyngaert et al., *Sinica Franciscana/Collegit, Ad Fidem Codicum Redegit et Adnotavit* (Vol. II), Quaracchi: apud Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1933: 172–173.

¹⁰ Archivo General de Indias. *Filipinas*. 84. 1. 16.

¹¹ A. Wyngaert et al., *Sinica Franciscana*: 118, 125, 128, 129, 131, 141, 143, 145, 150, 151.

¹² Archivo General de Indias. *Filipinas*. 79. N. 10; M. Ollé, *Estrategias Filipinas Respecto a China – Alonso Sánchez y Domingo Salazar en la Empresa de China (1581–1593)* (Vol. II). Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 1999: 100.

The earliest Chinese documentation in which Macao was referred to was in about 1598, when it was called ‘*Ya/A Ma Gang*’ (亞馬港). However, the mentioned letter by Fernão Mendes Pinto dated November 20, 1555, clearly shows that Macao had been known as ‘*Ya/A Ma Gang*’ (亞 / 阿 – 媽 / 馬 – 港) in Chinese well before. The only difference is that in Chinese the name is only used to refer to the waters off the Temple of A-Má , but in Portuguese ‘*Amacão*’ means the entire Macau Peninsula, which was referred to by the Chinese population as ‘*Háojìng’ào*’ (‘濠鏡澳’).¹³ The entry of ‘*Maquao* = 濠鏡澳’ in the *Dicionário Português-Chinês* (ms., written between 1583 and 1588) compiled by Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci serves as clear evidence.¹⁴

MACAU – changes of the name after 1999

The Portuguese gradually abandoned the form *Macao/Macão* and currently the only official form in Portuguese is *Macau*. It is different in English. After December 1999, when Macau was transferred to China, the new Macau government considers both the older form of Macao and the newer Macau to be acceptable in English. For example, on passports the name of the territory is given in English as *Macao Special Administrative Region*. Other examples: *Macau Square*, *Macau Center*, *Macau Government Tourist Office*, *Macau Grand Prix Committee*, *University of Macau*, but e.g. *Macao Polytechnic Institute*. So far it follows that both forms can be considered official in English.

¹³ Tang Kaijian, *Aomen Kaibu Chuqishi Yanjiu* [Studies on the beginnings of Macau]. Beijing 1999: 65.

¹⁴ J.W. Witek (ed.), *Dicionário Português-Chinês* (葡漢辭典) (Ruggieri and Ricci, 1584–1586). Macao: Instituto Português do Oriente, Biblioteca Nacional Portugal, Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, University of San Francisco 2001: 169.