

INTER-GROUP CONFLICT AND DISINTEGRATION: THE PORTUGUESE MIGRANT COMMUNITY IN MACAO AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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DOI

https://doi.org/10.14195/0870-4112_3-9_22

Texto recebido em / Text submitted on: 30/05/2023

Texto aprovado em / Text approved on: 30/10/2023

Biblos. Número 9, 2023 • 3.^a Série

pp. 521-545

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the impact of recent events on the Portuguese immigrant community residing in Macao, focusing on inter-group conflict, integration, and disintegration concepts. The research methodology employed includes a thorough literature review, statistical data analysis, in-depth interviews, and subsequent content analysis.

Findings reveal that the strict measures implemented by the local government to achieve zero COVID-19 cases, along with the repercussions of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement, have given rise to an inter-group conflict and to the departure of Portuguese immigrants. However, there is no evidence to indicate a decline or disintegration of this community.

Keywords: Macao; COVID-19 pandemic; Umbrella Movement; conflict; disintegration.

RESUMO

Este estudo examina o impacto de eventos recentes na comunidade imigrante portuguesa de Macau, usando os conceitos de conflito intergrupar, integração e desintegração. A metodologia envolve revisão de literatura, análise de dados estatísticos e entrevistas em profundidade seguidas de análise de conteúdo. Os resultados revelam que as medidas rigorosas implementadas pelo governo local para alcançar zero-casos de COVID-19, aliadas às repercussões do “Umbrella Movement” de Hong Kong, causaram um conflito intergrupar e a saída de imigrantes portugueses. No entanto, não há evidências que sugiram que a comunidade esteja a diminuir ou em desintegração.

Palavras-chave: Macau; pandemia COVID-19; *Umbrella Movement*; conflito; desintegração.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2021 and throughout 2022, there was extensive coverage in Portuguese and Macanese media regarding what was perceived as a significant departure of Portuguese individuals from Macao. Media reports focused on several key aspects, including a growing sense of exhaustion among Portuguese immigrants, concerns about the community's declining population, and a diminishing role of the Portuguese language in Macao. These developments were attributed to the implementation of a zero-tolerance policy aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19¹. The attention given to this issue in the media sparked our interest and served as the impetus for our research. We initiated our study by formulating three primary questions: 1) Is the Portuguese community experiencing a decline in population? 2) Is the community becoming less integrated within the region or showing signs of disintegration? 3) How is the identity of the community undergoing transformation?

In the pursuit of answers to these questions and the discovery of additional factors or events that may have affected the community in recent years, we established a conceptual framework. The first section of this paper delves into an examination of the polysemous concept of conflict followed by an exploration of the roots of inter-group conflicts (identity-based conflicts or ethnic conflicts). Subsequently, we establish connections between the concept of identity and the notion of belonging, thereby arriving at the concept of integration. Finally, we emphasize a distinction between integration and disintegration within the context of migration studies.

In the second section, we delineate the trajectory of Macao's development post-Handover, with a historical and economic overview from 1999, and an analysis of social stability and conflict resolution in Macao.

¹ <https://rr.sapo.pt/especial/mundo/2021/12/20/rodrigo-de-matos-cartoonista-vivemos-uma-debandada-de-portugueses-de-Macao/265005>, accessed October 17, 2023
<https://hojemacau.com.mo/2022/09/30/estudo-comunidade-portuguesa-corre-o-risco-de-se-esvaziar>, accessed October 17, 2023

Following this, we explore the position held by the Portuguese immigrant community within Macao's society, considering historical perspectives, statistical data, and key events, emphasising the significance of the Portuguese language.

In the third segment, we expound on our research design, detailing the chosen methodology and the composition of our sample.

The concluding sections comprise the presentation of our findings and the formulation of our concluding remarks.

1. INTER-GROUP CONFLICTS AND DISINTEGRATION

Sociologists analyse the concept of conflict from various perspectives. In the early 20th century, Georg Simmel developed a theory of conflict in which he regarded conflict as a positive force contributing to the resolution of tensions within society. "Repudiation and dissolution of social relation are negative, but conflict shows itself to be the positive factor in this very contrast with them" (Simmel, 1904: 490).

In the 1950s, Lewis Coser delved into the concepts proposed by Simmel in his seminal work, aiming to develop a theory of social conflict. He believed that contemporary sociologists had emphasized specific facets of social behaviour while overlooking other theoretically significant elements. One of these disregarded aspects of sociological theory revolved around the functions of social conflict. "Conflict as well as co-operation has social functions. Far from being necessarily dysfunctional, a certain degree of conflict is an essential element in group formation and the persistence of group life (Coser, 1956: 31).

Coser examined how conflict played a crucial role in the establishment and preservation of group identities. The demarcation between one's own group and the others was forged through the dynamics of conflict across various domains. Within this context, he delineated several functions that were inherent in the expression of hostility during conflicts. Conflict not only permitted the open expression of hostile dispositions but also could be conceptualized as a "safety-valve", functioning as a means for the release of hostilities, thereby enabling the maintenance of relationships between parties.

The author also explored the differentiation between realistic conflicts and unrealistic conflicts. The first had their origins in the frustration of specific demands and were pursued to achieve certain objectives. In contrast, the second arose when one party sought release from tension. In these instances, the conflict itself became the primary objective rather than a vehicle for attaining specific outcomes. The mediator's principal role was to eliminate the impractical aspects of aggressive behaviour, thus enabling the parties involved to address their differing claims in a more pragmatic manner.

Conflict theory has transcended the realm of sociology, extending into other social sciences. In the field of migrations studies, ethnic conflicts can be elucidated through two approaches (Herbert, 2017). The rational approach is employed when elucidating ethnic conflicts in terms of a security dilemma or as an economic opportunity. The alternative approach is grounded in psychological theories, specifically concerning people's identities and their perceptions of their role in society.

For such conflicts to emerge, "opponents must have a sense of collective identity about themselves and their adversary, with each side believing the fight is between 'us' and 'them'" (Kriesberg & Burgess, 2017). The individuals share a sense of belonging to an "imagined political community" (Anderson, 1991) created through the recognition of shared history, ancestry, and perceived differences from others, some of which may not even be real.

To better comprehend the concept of "inter-group conflicts" it is essential to recognize the relationship between identity and belonging. The notion of belonging is a constituent element of our understanding of our own identity. Maalouf (1998) highlights the dilemma of belonging that immigrants face in their identity formation. Firstly, immigrants must simultaneously belong to both their homeland culture and the host culture, which the author terms "hybridity". Secondly, immigrants must belong to different social groups, including their immigrant community and the wider host society group. Each identity is unique, and different belongings contribute to its distinctiveness.

There is a connection between the two forms of existence: individual and group. An individual reflects the groups they belong to and is associated with certain characteristics attributed by others, which Giddens (2007)

called “social identity”. These markers indicate the person’s identity and their position relative to others who share similar attributes. Social identity establishes commonalities among individuals. The aspect that distinguishes individuals as unique is their “personal identity”. It involves a personal development process whereby individuals create an intrinsic sense of self and establish relationships with the world around them.

Maalouf (1998) argues that personal and group identities present individuals with two challenges: the need to belong and the need to assert themselves as belonging to something. Immigrants must be recognized as belonging to both their home society and their host society. The interaction between an immigrant’s origin group and the cultural group in their current location requires a behavioural shift from both groups’ members, which Berry (2001, 2006, 2008, 2020) refers to as “acculturation”.

Immigrants reconstruct their cultural identity along two dimensions: ethnic identity, which refers to identification with a heritage or cultural group, and civic identity, which refers to identification with the dominant society. Based on these dimensions, Berry (2001) defined four acculturation strategies: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. Specifically, integration occurs when there is as much interest in maintaining the immigrant’s original culture as in daily interactions with other groups. In this case, immigrants maintain a certain degree of cultural integrity while seeking, as members of a cultural group, to participate in the broader social network. The greater the desire for interaction with the host society, the greater the degree of integration.

One of the social consequences of immigrants’ departure from their community is referred to as “community disintegration” (Meissner & Heil, 2021; Lu, 2019; Hinger & Schweitzer, 2020). This term is commonly used in migration studies, although it has been reconceptualized multiple times, leading to different interpretations.

“Disintegration” is often perceived as the antithesis of “integration”. This perspective views disintegration as a failure of integration. According to this viewpoint, there is an assumption of a cohesive past or a social imagination in which stable social configurations were considered the ultimate

ideal for living in society. Despite efforts to promote integration, “this integrationist thinking has not been able to shed itself off the basic premise that migration is why integration efforts are needed” (Meissner & Heil, 2021). However, by recognizing that the differences brought by immigrants alone cannot lead to social fragmentation, we acknowledge that disintegration is not necessarily the opposite of integration.

Another perspective suggests that changes in the social structure of immigrant groups can impact their capacity for collective action. In this view, a process of group disintegration would weaken the community’s ability to mobilize on a large scale to pursue its objectives or advocate for its interests in broader society (Lu, 2019).

A third perspective asserts the existence of disintegration policies and practices. According to this viewpoint, these policies not only neglect settlement but actively aim to cause harm and discourage it. Such measures are often disguised as integration policies and are justified within a broader integration framework. Although some of these policies may lack clear intentionality, they still contribute to processes of disintegration or the undermining of integration (Hinger & Schweitzer, 2020).

2. CONTEXTUALIZING THE PORTUGUESE COMMUNITY IN THE MACAU SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION (MSAR)

2.1. MSAR

In 1979, following the re-establishment of Sino-Portuguese diplomatic relations, discussions regarding the “Macao Issue” determined that the territory under Portuguese administration would be “returned to China (...) at the time deemed opportune by the two countries, and through negotiations” (Mendes, 2013). This agreement followed the Sino-British negotiations over Hong Kong and led to the signing of the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration in 1987. According to the declaration, the transfer of Portuguese administration to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was scheduled to occur in 1999.

Consequently, the MSAR was established, encompassing Macao's peninsula, Taipa, and Coloane. It operates based on the "one country, two systems" principle, which is enshrined in the MSAR's Basic Law, serving as its constitutional framework. Pursuant to Articles 2 and 5, PRC grants the MSAR a significant degree of autonomy, including independent executive, legislative, and judicial powers, including the authority of final judgment. Meanwhile, the capitalist system that was previously in place has been maintained. Additionally, it was stipulated that the way of life existing prior to 1999 would remain unchanged for a period of fifty years, until 2049 (SGSC, 2022).

In the 1990s, Pina Cabral (1994) drew attention to the numerous changes that had taken place in the territory over the preceding two decades, which were visibly transforming Macao into a new city, and predicted that the transformations in the coming decades would be at least as profound as those observed until that time. Regarding Macao society, Cabral identified three ethnic categories – Portuguese, Macanese, and Chinese – which tended to revolve around two primary languages, Portuguese, and Cantonese. Nowadays, apart from Portuguese and Cantonese, another language has gained prominence in Macao over the past two decades – Mandarin, the official language of all of PRC.

As Gary Ngai stated in 1999, Macao's identity has been shaped over more than four centuries and is rooted in two major aspects: the Chinese or indigenous heritage and the influence of Western culture. During Macao's transition to PRC, the founder of MAPEAL² envisioned a future for Macao in which linguistic and cultural pluralism would be central to its identity development.

Ngai's vision closely aligned with the subsequent developments in Macao. In 2003, PRC's Central Government made the decision to promote Macao as a crucial link between China and Portuguese-speaking countries. This decision came after the First Ministerial Conference for Economic Cooperation and Trade between China and Portuguese-speaking countries

² Macao Association for Exchange between Asia-Pacific and Latin America Promotion (MAPEAL)

- Forum Macao. This initiative aimed to strengthen economic cooperation and trade relations, further emphasizing Macao's role as a bridge between these regions.

Only a decade after the Handover, Chung & Tieben (2009) stressed the dialectical tension faced by Macao in shaping its future. The city had to strike a balance between preserving its unique characteristics to establish a specialized cultural and economic niche and accelerating integration and cooperation with PRC. There was a concern that Macao's distinctiveness might be compromised in the process. At that time, Macao faced challenges in diversifying its economy beyond gaming and tourism, and there was a need for urban growth, which led to the decision to develop Hengqin Island, located west of Macao.

Fast forward to the present, the objectives for Macao now focus on promoting adequate economic diversification. This includes the establishment of the Guangdong-Macao Intensive Cooperation Zone in Hengqin, the development of the Guangdong – Hong Kong – Macao Greater Bay Area (GBA) and integration into the national “Belt and Road” strategy (Meng & Liao, 2018). These projects aim to attract talent, companies, and investments from various regions in PRC and abroad (GCS, 2023).

Reviewing the history since the establishment of the MSAR, it becomes evident that the local government placed a strong emphasis on prioritizing economic development. However, while this economic progress represents a remarkable achievement, it has also sown the seeds for several social contradictions. “It can be said that economic prosperity is accompanied by different social conflicts, which constitute the normal state of Macao after the return” (Liao, 2018). Drawing on Liao's research from 2018, even though his study predates the COVID-19 pandemic, it is apparent that social conflicts in Macao predominantly align with the category of realistic conflicts (Coser, 1956). These conflicts are rooted in issues related to people's livelihood. Among them, public housing demand and supply, and land development and planning. Macao has a large population, but the land resources are scarce, affecting public housing and the development of the economic industry based on land resources. The substantial taxation and employment

imbalances resulting from the rapid growth of the gaming industry and its related service sectors have hindered the diversified development of Macao's industry to some extent (Meng & Liao, 2018).

Beneath the economic affluence, there appear to be numerous underlying social conflicts. "Due to the flexibility and diversity of conflict resolution adopted by the MSAR Government, the conflict is controlled, basically, by eliminating the negative impact of social conflicts on local social stability. The MSAR government's resolution of local social conflicts is actually the role of its social 'safety-valve'" (Liao, 2018). One of these conflict resolution mechanisms is the annual "send money" (government finance formed by gambling taxation) but it comes with a "double-edged sword" effect since it cultivates the dependence of Macao residents on "waiting, relying on, and wanting" (Meng & Liao, 2018).

2.2. MSAR'S PORTUGUESE COMMUNITY

In the last two decades of the 20th century, the Portuguese community in Macao was largely composed of individuals working in the administrative sector who tended to reside in the territory for a relatively short period. Most of these individuals spent only a few years in Macao. Conversely, some members of the community established permanent ties in the territory, usually those in liberal professions who married Macanese or Chinese individuals from Macao (Cabral, 1994).

The Portuguese presence in Macao has left lasting identity imprints, not just in terms of language and heritage, but also in the legal system. Macao's law is based on the Portuguese Civil Code and remains influential and fundamental (Teixeira & Silva, 2017).

After the Handover, there was a significant reduction in the Portuguese community as many immigrants returned to Portugal. From 2002 onwards, the opening of the gambling industry led to increased living costs in Macao, which were not immediately accompanied by corresponding increases in the wages of Portuguese immigrants. Additionally, the local Chinese community experienced improvements in living standards, enabling them to occupy

positions that were previously predominantly held by Portuguese individuals (Branco, 2017).

The economic crisis that originated in Portugal in 2008, prompted a significant number of Portuguese individuals to pursue opportunities in Macao once again. The allure of securing significant professional positions and attaining a standard of living that had become increasingly unattainable in Portugal proved highly appealing, leading to a notable rise in the number of Portuguese immigrants. Thus, the community became more diverse, with individuals working in various fields, not limited to lawyers or teachers but also encompassing engineers, architects, designers, with many working in the casino industry. There were, though, some adverse effects, such as divisions within the community itself between long-term immigrants and more recent arrivals. While those who had been in Macao prior to 2008 sought to redefine their role within the community and their connection to Macao, newcomers appeared to be less engaged with the Portuguese community and less interested in its culture and history. Consequently, the dynamics within the community have once again undergone changes (Branco, 2017; Teixeira & Silva, 2017).

2.3. MSAR IN NUMBERS

Macao's gaming and tourism industries have propelled it to rank among the top in per capita GDP globally. In 2020, COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on the economy, with Macao's GDP decreasing, by 43 percent, in the end of that year (DSEC, 2023). However, just in the first half of 2023, Macao's GDP had a record growth of 117.5 percent, which was attributed to "the driven force of the thriving tourism and gaming sectors" (DSED, 2023).

As of 2022, the population of Macao stood at 672,800 inhabitants. Male residents accounted for 46.8 percent of the total population, while female inhabitants represented 53.2 percent. Most of the population consisted of Chinese nationals, comprising 88.4 percent. Filipino nationals constituted 4.6 percent of the population, and Portuguese nationals made up 1.4 percent (DSEC, 2023).

2.4. MSAR'S PORTUGUESE COMMUNITY IN NUMBERS

Table 1 illustrates the number of foreign residents in Macao who were born in Portugal compared to the number of foreign residents with Portuguese nationality in relation to the total resident population, spanning from 2001 to 2021 - last year with available data, from the Portuguese Emigration Observatory (OE, 2023). The number of Portuguese immigrants experienced a decline between 2001 and 2006; however, since 2006, there has been a gradual increase. The decrease in Portuguese residents from 1999 to 2006 can be attributed to the Handover, during which many individuals, particularly those employed in public services, returned to Portugal as their service commissions came to an end. Following 2006, as mentioned previously, the number of Portuguese residents saw a rise due to the economic crisis that began in Portugal in 2008. Portuguese residents with Portuguese nationality constitute a larger group when compared to individuals born in Portugal who migrated to Macao, representing a mere 0.3 percent of the population, totalling 2.213 immigrants in 2021 (OE, 2023). This research specifically focuses on this latter population — that is, on individuals who indeed migrated.

Table 1 – Evolution of the Portuguese Resident Population born in Portugal and with Portuguese nationality vs. Total Population in Macao, 2001-2021

Years	Total resident population	Foreign residents born in Portugal		Foreign residents with Portuguese nationality	
	N	N	% of total	N	% of total
2021	682.070	2.213	0.3	8991	1.3
2016	650.834	2.011	0.3	9024	1.4
2011	552.503	1.835	0.3	5020	0.9
2006	502.113	1.316	0.3	8593	1.7
2001	435.235	1.616	0.4	879	2.0

Source: Portuguese Emigration Observatory³.

³ Portuguese Emigration Observatory, <https://observatorioemigracao.pt/np4/paises.html?id=147>, accessed October 16, 2023.

2.5. PORTUGUESE LANGUAGE IN MACAO

Portuguese, along with Mandarin, will remain an official language of the MSAR until 2049, as stipulated in Article 9 of the Basic Law: “In addition to Chinese, the Portuguese language can also be used in the executive, legislative, and judicial bodies of the MSAR, and it is also an official language”.

Although Mandarin and Portuguese are recognized as official languages, most of the population, approximately 80.1 percent, uses Cantonese as their primary language. The proportions of the population using Mandarin and Tagalog are 5.5 percent and 3 percent, respectively. In terms of overall language proficiency, around 50.4 percent of the population speaks fluent Mandarin, while 27.5 percent speaks fluent English. Only 2.3 percent of the population can speak Portuguese fluently (DSEC, 2023).

Prior to 1999, the Portuguese language was widely used in the administration and judicial sectors, benefiting from its prestigious status (Laborinho, 1999). Even so, Grosso (1999) predicted that, over time, Mandarin would gradually replace Portuguese at the administrative level, “With the spread of the use of Mandarin, there will be a tendency towards a single language (...) and an increasing reinforcement of belonging and unity with China”.

Presently, initiatives are underway to enhance the prominence of the Portuguese language, aiming to facilitate Macao’s position as a Sino-Lusophone platform. There is a concerted focus on strengthening the teaching and research of Portuguese. The 2022 Macao Yearbook, which delineates administrative policies for the year, accentuates the amplification and utilization of Macao’s role as an intermediary between PRC and Portuguese-speaking countries. It highlights the utilization of platforms to establish connections between the mainland China market and support industries and society in fostering cooperation across diverse domains (GCS, 2023).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This research adopts an exploratory approach with the aim of understanding how recent events have impacted the Portuguese immigrant community in Macao, particularly in relation to their identity, integration

in the region, and the significance of the Portuguese language as one of the official languages.

A qualitative methodology is employed, which encompasses a comprehensive literature review, analysis of statistical data, and the conduct of eight in-depth interviews. Due to logistical constraints and the researcher's location outside of Macao, all interviews were conducted remotely via email.

One limitation of this method is the reduced ability to redirect interviews towards specific research objectives, which could have been more feasible in face-to-face interviews. Even though, respondents still had the freedom to express themselves in their own words and answer questions in the order they deemed most appropriate.

Despite this limitation, conducting interviews via email offered advantages. One benefit was the absence of time constraints. Unlike in-person interviews that require scheduling and adherence to a set timeframe, email interviews allowed participants to take their time in formulating their responses. Interview scripts were sent to the participants via email, and they were given several weeks to provide their answers. This allowed for more thoughtful and considered responses. Five interviews were conducted in 2021, followed by three additional interviews in 2022.

Subsequent content analysis involved a systematic examination of the collected interview data. Each interview was individually analysed, followed by a cross-sectional analysis of all interviews to enable comparisons among the respondents.

3.1. SAMPLE DEFINITION

The primary objective was to create a sample consisting of diverse, distinct, and representative profiles. Criteria includes age, gender, and the status of migration (those still in Macao and those who left the territory). The aim was to 1) ensure a balanced representation of both men and women; 2) cover a wide range of age groups; and 3) primarily include individuals who left Macao, while also including some who decided to stay despite the pandemic situation.

The sample consists of five female respondents (62.5 percent) and three male respondents (27.5 percent). In terms of age distribution, one participant is under 30 years old, two are between 31 and 40 years old, three are between 40 and 50 years old, and two are over 50 years old. Two participants were residing in Macao, while six had already left the region. It is worth noting that all interviews conducted in 2022 were with individuals who had made the decision to move abroad, as some participants in 2021 were still in the process of making that decision.

To ensure the anonymity of the immigrants, initials not directly linked to their real names were used throughout the research process.

Table 2 – Sample

Initials	Age rank	In/ out of Macao	Gender: M/F
2021			
D. G.	>50	In	F
L. H.	>50	Out	M
E. T.	31-40	In	F
Q. T.	31-40	Out	M
J. B.	<=30	Out	F
2022			
K.Q.	41-50	Out	M
M.H.	41-50	Out	F
T. F.	41-50	Out	F

4. FINDINGS

4.1. SELF PORTRAIT

Differences in how individuals perceive their sense of belonging to the community are influenced by their date of arrival in Macao. Significant events, such as the Handover, have shaped their experiences. During the interviews, they used the words “small”, “closed”, and “united” to characterize their community. Though, regarding this last adjective there is no consensus among them.

Regarding the role of the community in the region, there has been a significant shift in recent years. D.G., when asked about her sense of belonging to Macao, expresses that in the past she felt like a “Macao person”. At present, she describes herself as a “Portuguese immigrant”. This sentiment is shared by other interviewees: “I feel a sense of slight offense when the government openly categorizes me as a foreign resident of Macao. I consider myself a person from Macao because a significant portion of my adult life has been spent in this city” (Q.T., hospitality professional).

All the interviewees acknowledge the significance of the Portuguese community in Macao as a historical reference. Yet, the importance attributed to this role varies according to each individual’s perspective. Q.T., for instance, believes that this historical reference does not confer any particular significance to the community: “The Portuguese presence in Macao remains as a lingering memory, albeit not completely eradicated. It seems that the Portuguese themselves have not fully grasped the fact that they have already faded into oblivion”.

From an alternate standpoint, it is precisely this historical function that grants Macao its distinctiveness. L.H. contends that the Portuguese community’s significance in Macao primarily resides in its role as a historical reference and a symbol of cultural heritage. It imparts a sense of uniqueness and an almost exotic quality to Macao’s identity. Conversely, Macao’s character is also moulded by the collective contributions of all individuals who have traversed its streets, whether they resided temporarily, established permanent roots, or departed after a certain period: “Macao is a product of the diverse tapestry of people who have left their mark on the region” (Q.T.).

4.2. IMPACT OF RECENT EVENTS

4.2.1. COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Macao was heavily felt in the tourism industry, which consequently led to a decrease in the number of people on the streets. Regarding the interviews collected in 2021, respond-

ents generally thought that the government's response to the effects of the pandemic was swift and well-implemented. Borders were promptly closed, a two-week confinement period was imposed, and mandatory quarantine measures were enforced for anyone entering the territory.

The feeling of isolation and the inability to visit extended family members represented the flip side of the coin. Despite these challenges, some immigrants regarded the measures aimed at promoting local consumption and minimizing the risk of layoffs as positive.

T.F. reports a less visible yet significantly catastrophic aspect of the pandemic's impact. While the resident population received protection measures, the non-resident population, comprising a significant portion of Macao's workforce, did not enjoy the same level of protection and endured immense suffering: "Numerous individuals in the private sector have lost their jobs, and many non-residents have been left unemployed. I have been involved in assisting the Food Bank. It is disheartening to witness the hidden hunger and poverty that exist in Macao" (T.F., lawyer).

4.2.2. UMBRELLA MOVEMENT (UM)

In examining the interviewees' connection to Macao, the word "freedom" emerges in a negative light. The UM that originated in Hong Kong in 2014 symbolized a struggle to uphold the existing democratic system in the region, as outlined in its basic law during the 1997 handover to China. This event had consequences in Macao, yet it was perceived by Macao's society as detrimental to economic growth. According to Wing-yat (2019), there was indeed a surge in youth campaigns in May 2014. What set this apart was that, for young activists in Macao, the UM wasn't necessarily the primary driving force behind their reform campaign. Instead, their motivation revolved around the retirement compensation packages provided to the chief executive and senior officials. "They were able to mobilize 20,000 protesters against it. In Macao's history, the scale of this demonstration was second only to the support for the 1989 Beijing student movement" (Wing-yat, 2019).

In June 2019, as the fifth anniversary of the UM approached, demonstrations re-emerged in Hong Kong, causing disruptions that were also felt in Macao. Consequently, during interviews conducted in 2021, the prevailing sentiment was not just disillusionment, but a genuine apprehension regarding potential constraints on freedom, particularly freedom of expression.

According to the interviewees, the process of aligning local political views in Macao with those of PRC began during the second term of Chief Executive Chui Sai On. This shift in direction coincided with changes in the government team, which introduced new instructions to foster a closer alignment with China's political stance.

Due to their limited fluency in Cantonese and Mandarin, the interviewees predominantly rely on Portuguese and English media. Their language limitations restrict their ability to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Nonetheless, it is noticeable to them that journalism practiced in Macao is currently under scrutiny by Chinese authorities, which became more evident after 2019. The role of journalists in Macao appears increasingly essential. J.B., a journalist who has already left Macao, states that she observed a significant increase in obstacles when it came to accessing information and covering events. "Arrests were made on June 4th, 2020, during vigils commemorating the Tiananmen massacre. There was a significant police presence at Senado Square that night, despite no one planning to hold the customary vigil due to the ongoing pandemic".

In this scenario, for these immigrants, the decision to leave Macao arises as a consequence of the COVID-19 zero-cases policy and the restrictions imposed on freedom of expression: "In this situation, freedom is severely curtailed, and individuals feel compelled to unquestioningly adhere to the guidelines (...) from the health authorities. The sheer volume of rules has become exhausting for the people" (M.H., teacher).

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research is to examine the current situation of the Portuguese community in Macao following the pandemic. To accomplish this objective, three key questions have been formulated:

1. Is the Portuguese community experiencing a decline in population?
2. Is the community becoming less integrated within the region or showing signs of disintegration?
3. How is the identity of the community undergoing transformation?

Regarding the first question, the government's measures aimed at achieving a zero- cases policy, the events in Hong Kong, particularly the protests of the UM, and the perceived restriction of freedom of expression were cited as reasons for some respondents to leave Macao. Nonetheless, there is no statistical evidence indicating a decline in the Portuguese community. Resident numbers continue to indicate an increase in absolute terms, and the proportion of the Portuguese community remains stable at 0.3 percent of Macao's total population. According to Macao's DSEC (2023), the total population in 2022 decreased by 10.400 people compared to 2021, but this decline is primarily attributed to a decrease in the number of non-resident workers residing in Macao. It should be noted that this number does not include non-resident Portuguese immigrants.

The majority of the non-resident population in Macao originates from mainland China (69.9 percent), followed by the Philippines (15.7 percent). The respondents' observations about the non-resident population align with this data, as they mentioned that non-resident workers did not enjoy the same level of protection as resident workers during the pandemic and experienced significant hardships.

Regarding the second and third questions, the research findings have provided valuable insights that will assist us in analysing and understanding the dynamics and challenges faced by the Portuguese community, as well as the potential impacts of external events and restrictions on freedom in shaping these dynamics. Our conclusions will be formulated within the framework of our conceptual model, enabling us to offer a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

5.1. IDENTITY, BELONGING AND INTEGRATION

Belonging is an essential aspect of identity formation, and immigrants often face the challenge of belonging to multiple social groups simultaneously.

The changing perception of the Portuguese community in Macao reflects the complexities of identity and belonging in a multicultural context. The differing perspectives on the community's historical role and its importance highlight the negotiation of identity and the impact of historical legacies. The feeling of being a Portuguese immigrant rather than a part of Macao's fabric speaks to the challenges of belonging and the effect of social and political dynamics on identity formation. Integration is here discussed as a process in which immigrants maintain their cultural integrity while seeking to participate in the broader social network.

In this context, it can be asserted that the Portuguese community remains integrated into the larger society of Macao. However, there is a noticeable difference in the level of integration and the sense of belonging compared to a decade ago (Branco, 2017). According to the accounts of some interviewees, in the past they identified themselves as "Macao people", whereas now they are seen as "Portuguese immigrants". Yet, in accordance with previous studies on the same community, it is evident that the community still plays a role in preserving Macao's identity.

In addition to the feelings of the immigrants, the Chinese central government assigns significance to one of the pillars of the region's identity, which is directly linked to the role of the Portuguese as custodians of that identity. Efforts are underway to enhance the prominence of the Portuguese language in order to support Macao's role as a Sino-Lusophone platform. Therefore, not only can the community be considered integrated within the region, but this integration is also tied to the continuing importance of the Portuguese language in the territory. The language is not in decline, particularly because its significance is not determined by its usage or the number of speakers in Macao, but rather by Macao's position as a centre for the teaching and research of this official language.

5.2. DISINTEGRATION AND INTER-GROUP CONFLICT

One of the social consequences of immigrants' departure from their community is disintegration, which refers to the weakening of collective action and

the community's capacity to pursue its objectives, as well as fragmentation of social cohesion.

References to social fragmentation raise concerns about disintegration. In the past, divisions were observed within the community itself between long-term immigrants and more recent arrivals (Branco, 2017; Teixeira & Silva, 2017), along with differing perspectives on the community's historical role, which persist to this day. This "intra-group conflict" highlights internal divisions. Currently, the issue lies in disintegration policies and practices that undermine integration efforts (Hinger & Schweitzer, 2020). Concerning the Portuguese community in Macao, although the restrictive measures of the COVID-19 zero cases policy may not have explicitly aimed to make these immigrants leave the territory, they are recognized as one of the reasons for their departure. This situation represents an "inter-group conflict".

The other reason for their departure was the repercussions of the UM in Macao, where restrictions on freedom, particularly freedom of expression, were perceived as an erosion of rights in Macao. The government's response to the pandemic, including strict measures and surveillance, can be seen as attempts to maintain control and enforce compliance. The influence of Chinese authorities on the media further illustrates the exercise of power and control to shape narratives and limit dissent. The role of media and communication in shaping perceptions and controlling information emerges as a crucial theme. The interviews shed light on the challenges faced by journalists in accessing information and reporting on sensitive issues, underscoring the importance of media freedom for a transparent and informed society.

Individual decisions to leave Macao can indeed be seen as a form of resistance. However, choosing to stay also constitutes a form of resistance. Those who decide to remain in Macao do so based on personal and professional motivations. In terms of personal motivations, these immigrants attribute a distinct role to the community, emphasizing the importance of preserving the connection between Macao and its Portuguese heritage (collective identity). On an individual level, they still identify themselves as Macao citizens, even if their recognition within the broader Macao society has waned (personal identity).

Within the realm of professional motivations, despite the negative factors highlighted by these immigrants, Macao's economy is currently stronger than ever, primarily driven by the tourism and gambling sectors. Paradoxically, what keeps these immigrants in Macao is rooted in the social conflicts within Macao society - significant taxation and employment disparities resulting from the rapid development of the gaming industry, which hindered the diversified growth of other industries; and residents demands for better livelihood conditions and increased employment opportunities for locals (Meng & Liao, 2018). In response to this last demand Macao's government is already implementing measures to restrict the entry of foreign employees, including Portuguese nationals⁴.

Hence, while diverse events had impacted the Portuguese over the last years, and still are, it is not evident that the Portuguese community is currently undergoing a process of disintegration. Instead, it is worth emphasizing that this community has consistently demonstrated the capacity to transform and adapt in response to adversity over the course of centuries.

While this study is exploratory in nature and relies on a limited sample size, our objective is to make a valuable contribution to the existing body of research on Macao and migration. To further enhance the findings, future investigations could encompass a larger sample size.

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⁴ <https://www.macaubusiness.com/portugal-macao-in-talks-over-restrictions-on-residency-applications-for-portuguese-nationals/> accessed October 25, 2023

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