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Affective atmospheres in Macau: from the sublime to the uncanny

DENNIS ZUEV AND TIM SIMPSON

This article examines the atmospheric identity of the Chinese city-state of Macau, which has a distinctive urban charisma owing to its 500-year history as a Portuguese colony and its contemporary development into a global tourist site. By analysing visual ethnographic data, the research understands Macau's urban space with attention to its affective atmospheres. The research explores how visual analysis of urban atmospheres may enhance understanding of a city's atmospheric identity. The article analyses the sublime and uncanny as two complementary affective fields exemplified by two unconventional locales: the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge and the adjacent Chinese Special Economic Zone of Hengqin Island. The article demonstrates that visual analysis of affective atmospheres can be instrumental in describing how people, emotions, objects and environments are reconstituted in a continuous process of urban change and development.

INTRODUCTION

A visitor walking through Fai Chi Kei, one of the least touristy areas of Macau, is surrounded by housing tower arcades that provide sun and rain cover. Passing through grotty passages within the buildings with faded characters of the previous shops or associations visible signage suggests the industrial use of these premises. Occasionally, transversing the narrow passages under protruding balconies requires dodging water dropping from the air conditioner units above or massive subtropical insects rapidly crisscrossing underfoot. The nightscape of Fai Chi Kei is dominated by the lights of multiple housing towers glimmering in the dark waters of Lam Mau marina – indeed the first housing units were built on sort of rectangular stilts – hence the name Fai Chi ('chopsticks' in Cantonese).

Fai Chi Kei is becoming a new food hub, with Hong Kong style bars where cosmopolitan Macau locals enjoy a Belgian blonde. There are very few expats in the neighbourhood except for some students from the nearby

university located on what used to be a small island, Ilha Verde. The smells of barbecued meat fill the air, mixing with the humidity of the summer, and the rising smell of the low tide in Lam Mau. The small eateries offer only several plastic stools on the narrow sidewalks where customers can sit and eat curry fishballs or xiumai meatballs. The shift in the atmosphere is however most striking when passing from vertical residential towers into the realm of narrow streets and dead-end alleys with roaring scooters near the Luis Camoes Garden (Baigechao).

The tiny city-state of Macau is a remarkable locale with a distinct milieu. Founded by Portuguese explorers in the sixteenth century, Macau was China's longest-enduring foreign territory, with a unique combination of European and Chinese cultural influences that are still palpable in the city today.

As the only place in China with legal casino gambling, Macau's gaming industry since its liberalisation in 2002 has become its economic bedrock and major source of welfare. Macau is thus most often associated with its casinos that have made Macau a popular tourist site among mainland Chinese and Hong Kong visitors.

Macau's uncommon blend of neo-classical Portuguese heritage buildings and simulated casino resort architecture, as well as its charming Southern European ambiance, draws tens of millions of annual tourists to the tiny city. However, the wealth accumulated through years of lucrative gaming revenues is not evident everywhere. Although Macau's UNESCO World Heritage districts and spectacular megaresorts generate attractive atmospheres that delight visiting tourists, much of the city is comprised of non-descript locales such as Fai Chi Kei, with a local ambiance of a residential district that is disconnected and far-removed from the typical tourist environments.

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Contemporary Macau has been explored variously as a socio-economic ‘machine’ which plays a functional role in the formation of a new Chinese consumer-citizen subjectivity (Simpson 2012a, 2021b), a car-centric ‘casino complex’ of competing mega-resorts (Al and Kah-wee 2018) or an experimental ‘petri dish urbanism’ where chaotic and claustrophobic and self-contained enclaves and colonies co-exist (Clayton 2018). However, while Macau has a well-researched and heavily-promoted ‘tourist city image’ that emanates from its role as a leisure destination and gaming hub (Mei and Ying 2017), the city’s unique and characteristic *atmospheric identity* has not been sufficiently explored.

We argue that this atmospheric identity is a key component of contemporary Macau and reflective of the city’s intimate relationship to the larger processes of Chinese urbanisation that are the focus of this special issue. However, Macau is a city where such atmospheres are multiple and distinct, from the cosmopolitan and street grid prompted Hongkongesque feeling of the island of Taipa, to the Byzantine narrow alleyway mazes of the Macau Peninsula, to the modern high-speed thoroughfares of the Cotai casino resort district or the tranquil jungle trails of the relatively undeveloped island of Coloane. There are also areas beyond the typical tourist map, such as Fai Chi Kei, where nothing feels special or unique: regular, flat, rectangular, colourless (grey), concrete, windless (airless), dominated by the sheer density of oppressive unpainted high-rise buildings (Zuev 2020).

Fai Chi Kei may seem almost devoid of affect, empty of emotions, representing the ‘bare life’ of the city’s unremarkable residential spaces (see Figure 1). At the same time, however, this area has abundant public space for plaza dances, meetings of proud pet owners who discuss their well-groomed dogs, and lengthy *mahjong* games with impromptu beer drinking and the familiar clacking sound of plastic tiles striking the game board. With the common facilities and safe pedestrian passages that stretch between the densely-crowded buildings, the air sometimes flows faster in the evening in the man-made canyons of the high rises. Although for some Fai Chi Kei is essentially a void, empty of architectural substance, the neighbourhood has a unique atmosphere for residents even if it is difficult for an outsider to discern.

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

In what follows, we scrutinise the urban space of Macau to discover how these distinct atmospheres in the city are generated, as well as how these affective or kinaesthetic

environments may be studied visually. We contend that Macau is comprised of multiple affective fields, as ‘temporary configurations of energy and feeling’ (Conradson and Latham 2007, 238), that *collectively constitute* the city’s overarching affective atmosphere or ‘charisma.’ We also argue that the ‘spectacle’ of Macau is not merely confined to the city’s simulated casino resorts, but may be understood as the ensemble of these affective fields. This spectacle can and should be approached visually, as Macau is one component of the larger urbanisation spectacle that serves as part of the overall socio-political performance of contemporary China. To develop this argument, we will explore two affective fields that are not generally analysed in the academic literature concerning Macau: the *field of the sublime*, which emerges from the sort of infrastructure-led urbanisation that is characteristic of the contemporary PRC, and the *field of the uncanny*, exemplified by the emerging frontier space between Macau and the adjacent island and Special Economic Zone of Hengqin, which the central government is developing into a financial, industrial and leisure hub.

To evoke these two affective fields, we analyse two phenomena: the recently opened Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge, a 55-km mega-structure which is the longest sea crossing in the world and which terminates on a recently-reclaimed Macau bridge port island; and the high-rise skyline of Hengqin, an ‘instant city’ of iconic glass towers that has suddenly appeared on Macau’s western border. Both of these projects contribute unique atmospheric elements of monumentality (Smith 2013) and anticipatory urbanism (Woodworth 2018) to Macau’s cityscape while also serving to integrate the tiny city-state with the ongoing urbanisation of the PRC.

METHOD: CONDUCTING ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE COVID-ERA CHINESE CITY

Our method is based on accounts of long-term qualitative experiences and exposures in Macau, documentation by photographs and narratives of various moods as windows to the world (Heidegger 1962), that can be conducive to understanding or eliciting multisensory experiences. While drawing on long-term fieldwork conducted in the city over the past two decades, the study uses specific visual data collected during the years of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2023). During this period, Macau has been literally closed off to most non-Chinese visitors and even locked down when there were local outbreaks of the virus. These measures were an attempt to both maintain the health of the population and promote a positive image conforming to



FIGURE 1. Fai Chi Kei. Residential Area and a Nucleic Acid Test center in 2022. Photo: Authors.

the ideals of the modern ‘hygienic city’ (Rogaski 2004), but with devastating consequences for the city’s tourist-oriented economy.

It is challenging to work out some satisfactory framework for affective atmosphere analysis – and we cannot attend to all the possible elements or settings that

make up Macau and its affective experience. This is so because we do not wish to analyse the typical affective atmosphere perceived by the tens of millions of annual tourists who visit Macau, but rather to understand the common-place experience of Macau for inhabitants. The two co-authors of this study have collectively lived in Macau for nearly 25 years, providing long-term experience of the city over different eras of contemporary development, both before and during the pandemic. At the same time, however, neither author is a native of Macau, and therefore occupy the dual role of participant-observer that is fundamental to ethnographic research.

Ultimately, this study offers a valuable snapshot of an insular Macau, a Chinese pandemic city-state where a massive amount of tourist mobility has come to a halt, and an indigenous ‘anxious immobility’ characterises the life of locals and long-term expatriate residents (Zuev and Hannam 2021). Macau has experienced one of the biggest economic crises and psycho-social traumas in its post-colonial history.

OVERVIEW OF MACAU AS A SETTING

Macau’s contemporary atmospheres emanate, in part, from the unique geography and economic history of the city. Macau was the first European settlement in East Asia (1557), subsequently a Portuguese colony (1846), and finally a Special Administrative Region of the PRC (since 1999). Macau borders the city of Zhuhai in Guangdong Province in south China, and has since 2018 been linked to Hong Kong via the 55 km Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau sea bridge. The population of Macau is approximately 620,000 people and the territory occupies about 44 square km, by some measures constituting the most densely populated city on earth. The Macau city-state is comprised of the Macau peninsula, and the islands of Taipa and Coloane (the latter designated as a green zone with limitations on further development), which have been connected by the Cotai land reclamation. Indeed, nearly two thirds of Macau has been reclaimed from the sea, with more zones and islands being added to the city according to the new Urban Master Plan (Macao News 2022).

In many ways Macau may serve as a sort of ‘model city’ for China’s development (see criticism by Cartier 2019 regarding ‘exemplary’ Chinese cities), a semi-autonomous enclave of greater China that exemplifies a mode of socio-economic development desired by the central government: low unemployment rate and generous degree of welfare support for locals based on the gaming revenues. In addition, the ‘interiorised

urbanism’ characteristic of the city’s massive megaresorts promotes a safe and highly ordered form of social life that is conducive to surveillance and control by authorities. These features are complemented by the fact that Macau has long had a more positive relationship with the central government than its sometime renegade neighbour Hong Kong, whose own dense streets were dominated by the disorder of student-led intra-state protests in 2019 (Simpson 2022).

Given the fact that Macau has always had scarce land resources and ever-growing density of population (Census 2021), it has grown over years both horizontally – via land reclamation, and vertically, as the high land prices dictated the verticalisation of infrastructure, housing and office space. Macau has a natural hilly landscape, and to some extent these small hills served as both blessing and curse. Hills were not easy to urbanise, and thus remained green spaces. This is similar to the way that Hong Kong managed to preserve large forest areas but thus suffering from the highest real-estate prices in the world and the fact that many residents have to make do with ‘nano-flats,’ or very small living quarters.

Since 2017, Macau has been a part of the Greater Bay Area (GBA) project, a macro-regional cluster in the Pearl River Delta created by Chinese authorities to compete, in both economic function and popular culture resonance, with the Silicon Valley Bay area of California, the Hudson Bay area of New York and the Tokyo Bay area of Japan (Meulbroek, Peck, and Zhang 2022). The official GBA narrative includes discussion of the economic diversification of Macau as a global tourist hub. However, the actual diversification has not progressed very far beyond the city’s reliance on gaming-oriented tourism, although there has been an almost magical growth of Macau via its affiliation with the city across the border – Zhuhai, and specifically the island of Hengqin (Figure 2).

Ultimately, Macau is a Chinese city with a diversity of affective fields that constitute its unique atmospheres. Macau has distinct heritage areas, residential areas and integrated casino resorts, contributing to a rich urban ambiance in contrast to the homogenised atmosphere typical of many cities in mainland China. On the mainland, even those cities with rich histories are losing their charismatic spaces to mixed-use developments modelled on types of consumer locales that ultimately result in a bland and impersonal built environment (Cartier 2016).

In the next section, we provide a theoretical overview of the studies of affective atmosphere of the city, and reflect



FIGURE 2. Contextual Photo. View of Macau from Macau Tower – reclamation in progress, maritime connections and Hengqin skyline. Authors.

on the challenge of ‘seeing the city’ by visually narrating the atmospheres of its multiple spaces.

THE ATMOSPHERIC TURN

Atmosphere is an important but persistently overlooked aspect of both human relations in urban environments and the relationship between the human and the built environment (Albertsen 1999). While there has been a surge of studies related to affective epistemologies (Germann Molz and Buda 2022), the visual analysis of the ‘charisma’ of cities has been largely absent in sociology (Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009). At the same time, atmosphere is part of the aesthetics of the city, and it is instrumental in feeling or sensing the city. Atmosphere is thus a palpable yet invisible characteristic of the city, and grasping and capturing the invisibilities of the lived environment and their social implications is a relevant subject for visually based social inquiry (Edensor and Sumartojo 2015, Pink 2015).

As Bohme suggests, atmospheres are not visible but spatial: ‘atmospheres fill spaces; they emanate from things; constellations of things and persons’ (Böhme 1998). While they can be imagined, and thought of in terms of ecstasies, ‘radiations,’ extensions and volumes of things, atmospheres are at the same time ‘social,’ and

result from the interaction of persons and non-material factors (e.g. light, sound or smell) within the material urban environment.

To articulate these atmospheric characteristics, Brighenti and Pavoni (2023) suggest the apt term *atmoculture* of urban space, ‘whereby the technological and cultural meet on a deeply-affective atmospheric terrain’ (91); such atmocultural practices are located across different domains, between domestic (private) and urban (public). One of the key points is that an atmosphere is composed of multisensory elements – oral, olfactory, haptic and gustatory experiences – therefore, in order to understand and appreciate the Atmospheres of a city it has to be sensed (Bohme, 1993), and ideally experienced over a varied *duree*, with different seasonal, rhythmic and diurnal/nocturnal cycles.

Scholars exploring mobilities and atmospheres have also contributed to understanding the atmosphere as an emerging relationship between bodies, objects and technologies (Bissell 2010) with a range of intensities (Buser 2017). Bissell (2010) suggests considering how spatialised affective fields emerge through the transmission of affect and as Bohme notes – how atmospheres fill in the space with a certain tone (1993). The ‘affective field’ is another apt term for approaching the socio-spatial outlays of the city, where people,

buildings and energy come together as temporary configurations, arising and dissipating (Conradson and Latham 2007).

In an effort to analyse affective fields as constitutive parts of the atmosphere of the city, the following elements may be considered: events (as ritualised constellations of transactions), borders (boundaries, interstitial spaces, the streetgrid/housing design), energetic elements (emotional or affective energy), material components (architecture, infrastructure, objects), multisensory elements (sounds, olfactory, haptic, gustatory) and light. Sociocultural contextualisation is also crucial as atmospheres cannot be reduced to disparate elements without understanding the social and cultural context (Edensor 2017).

Seeing/Exploring Macau's Urban Atmosphere

Cities are important part of the cultural landscape of a nation, and some cities (eg. Dubai, Macau or Venice) become exceptional 'destination' attractions or national showcases. Visual sociology can provide a valuable analytical perspective for exploring and untangling the complexity of the built environment of cities (Krase 2012; Zuev and Bratchford 2021; Zuev and Krase 2017) helping to read the city as a text, not only in terms of its visible, spectacular forms, but also vernacular and invisible forms. Bratchford (2019) investigates how the invisible is co-constitutive of the visible; it adds 'to' the visible as a quality that is essential to its understanding and awareness of its presence. While there has been a surge of studies related to 'seeing the cities' with data (Verloo and Bertolini 2020) these attempts often tend to ignore visual methods. We therefore draw on the work of visual scholars (Bratchford 2019, Pink 2007; 2015) and suggest how we may use our senses to investigate the city and unravel the (often) invisible – atmospheres.

In addition, as we argue in this article, a visual approach also helps us to develop a more refined understanding of the city as a complex ensemble of affective fields produced by the interaction of diverse forms of affective matter. One could say that capturing the atmosphere of a place has always been a key objective of photographers, as much as capturing a decisive moment. However, few visual studies have tackled this issue and we therefore draw on literature that deals with atmospheres as an object of inquiry which can be a launching point for further elaboration on the study of urban atmosphere and its relationship to urbanisation processes in China.

Seeing the atmosphere as a constitutive element of the city and a result of urban planning (or as is often the case

in Macau, as the result of a lack of urban planning), can provide valuable insights into Chinese aesthetics or organisation of urban space and the built environment, specifically in achieving a comfortable environment for multiple groups of population. This is especially relevant in analysis of Chinese cities, as one can argue that they are increasingly losing their unique character or atmosphere in the face of development. Chinese authorities often demolish the areas that are associated with poverty and disorder (such as *hutong* alleys in Beijing) (see Chau 2008), or simply to make space for new residential or shopping developments, in favour of a more immunised and optimized (surveilled and regulated) city. This challenges the organisation of space as a place of both work and dwelling.

Macau has a distinctive charisma owing to the combination of a specific history and contemporary development, therefore theorisation of Macau's urban life needs to consider the colonial and postcolonial contexts. We suggested that multiple ingredients have to be taken into account when sensing the city, and when identifying its affective fields and these in turn can be approached visually. In the following sections we will explore visible generators related to two affective fields: the sublime and the uncanny.

THE SUBLIME AND THE CONTINUOUS DRIVE FOR INFRASTRUCTURAL MONUMENTALITY. THE HKZM BRIDGE

Perhaps what Macau most clearly shares with other Chinese cities is a relentless drive for impressive and monumental infrastructure; this continuous engineering upgrade is typical of the contemporary PRC (Woodworth 2018).

Macau's prosperity, driven by the city's significant casino revenues over the past two decades, has led to multiple mega infrastructure projects. However, many of these projects have either failed spectacularly, or have been idle or underused. These include the city's light rail transit system, the enormous Taipa Pac-On ferry terminal and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge. The often-cited example of such failure is the light rail transit system. In contrast to original projections, the rail currently consists of a single line; the project has experienced massive budget overruns, and has been plagued by technical issues as well as a lack of coordination with other city transit. Ultimately, the local government failed to communicate adequately with residents about the project's progress (Macao News 2015) and to create transit infrastructure that will serve those residents, rather than simply tourists.

One of the key regional infrastructural elements and a dominating visual icon defining the GBA project – the world's longest sea crossing bridge connecting Hong Kong, Macau and Zhuhai, which for many Chinese residents is an element of nationalistic pride, a new 'Great Wall' that resembles a winding dragon.

The bridge has been officially hailed as an architectural wonder that would facilitate the flows of tourists and logistics to tourist-dependent Macau. While the most prominent dissenting voice about the bridge construction came from the government of Hong Kong (which also made the largest financial contribution, see Yeung 2018), residents in Macau were not of unanimous opinion about either the aesthetic or practical value of the bridge. One of the key arguments voiced by citizens was that the bridge is made to promote the blending of Hong Kong and Macau to aid the gradual absorption of both cities by the mainland. As one of the authors wrote in fieldnotes in 2020:

The striking difference is felt between the bustling bus stop in 2020 and eerie emptiness of the megasize grey structure of the terminal of the bridgehead. Indeed, there are two adjacent terminals – on Macau and Zhuhai sides. The five-storeyed parking lot on Macau side remains virtually empty and overlooks the new fourth bridge link being constructed over the river from Taipa to Macau. The CGI narration in the terminal reminds about the mammoth size of the whole border station, with six additional bridges and 200.000 sq. metres of roads.

Photo 3 tells about the magic of concrete, and indeed, in the empty passages one feels the roaming air, coming from the sea, the building of such scale no doubt shapes its own wind currents. Exactly, when stripped of the dynamic flows of people and vehicles one can absorb the full affective and overpowering scale of the concrete/metal sublime – the absence of a single plant at the entrance to the terminal again suggests at mechanistic/practical architecture of the border gate/control space. It is thus not the utter emptiness (because temporary), but the fact that a thing that grand, planned (as a border port) and laid out, has been 'of glory obscured', and not given its proper due to a grand uncertainty, an act of God/nature – pandemic (Fieldnotes 2022).

Designed by Arup (Hussain et al. 2019), the bridge was unfortunately inaugurated just before the start of the pandemic, thus not seeing the actual expected traffic, except for the occasional 'golden bus' ferrying small groups of travellers to or from the Hong Kong airport. At the same time, while decreasing the travel cost between Hong Kong and Macau, the bridge also stimulated the extinction of the similarly iconic, and

arguably more atmospheric, maritime ferries and jetfoils connecting Macau and Hong Kong. While the ferry might not be the most practical form of transportation (due to the frequent seasickness of the passengers and typhoons), it was nevertheless a sea-based adventure which was part of the Hong Kong-Macau tourist package. Indeed, defining cinematic representations of the city, such as the 1952 film noir crime thriller *Macao*, included depictions of the ferry journey from Hong Kong to Macau.

While the bridge itself is a monumental structure, no less sublime are the bridge heads – the gateways for the traffic into or out of Macau (Figure 3). The immense rectangular terminal box of the bridge in Macau is actually located on an artificial island created specifically for the bridge, which is currently being connected to the adjacent island of Taipa by a new bridge and tunnel and one can see the foundations for new residential buildings being erected in the new reclamation zone.

While opened to traffic since October 2018, the bridge has been underutilised since early 2020 due to COVID-related quarantine restrictions on all sides of the bridge, and the bus connections have been infrequent due to the limited daily quota of passengers. For the few people who would take the bus out of Macau the bridge starkly devoid of traffic was a magic cord connecting them to normal life outside of the isolated Macau (Figure 4). The night linear lightscape of the bridge crossing the dark space of the sea is a reminder of constant connection with civilisation. However, with the renewal of tourist traffic between Hong Kong and Macau since January 2023, the bridge again became a key communication link for residents and tourists.

The plaza outside the terminus structure is not a place to linger or to sit in the (non-existing) shade, the bridge is first of all the border crossing experience and thus it is the atmosphere of control, subordination, discipline and order. Imposing, stark objects like the rows of pillars communicate the barriers – restricting the free flow or aggregation of people.

The eerie emptiness of the terminus structure is reminiscent of the empty carriages of another icon of Macau's infrastructure – the Light Rail Transit, which runs only one solitary line in Taipa, connecting spots on the Cotai Strip of casino resorts that are important primarily for tourists rather than serving the transportation needs of local residents. Indeed, the emptiness of the new train carriages running on a route that effectively serves tourists, rather than residents, was not only due to mismanagement or technical failures,



FIGURE 3: The HKZHM bridge terminal entrance. The aluminium pillars, casting some shade in the summer heat, with rare passengers rushing into the air-conditioned space of the hangar like terminal and border control area. Photo: Authors.

but also to the scale of the undertaking, with the LRT's massive supporting concrete pillars cutting a visible boundary between the Cotai (casino complex) and Taipa (village and residential areas). Another component of the infrastructure complex in Macau is the massive new ferry terminal, which, due to Macau's continuously suspended (or in some cases abandoned) ferry routes is now planned to be used as an extension of the modest airport (whose small size can be explained by the already existing international air hub in Hong Kong). In the several years of the pandemic the ferry terminal was not used for ferries, and instead functioned as an oversized nucleic acid test station.

While discussing the architecture or the function of the buildings is not the objective of this article, one could find a common thread in the logic of monumentality in modern Chinese planning, from lofty train stations to border gates and shopping malls, and the lack of attendance to human scale. However, the monumental infrastructure of the bridge, light rail and ferry terminal projects appears to be in stark contrast to the otherwise human scale and intimacy of the small squares and street

mazes in peninsular Macau, or playful ambience of the frequent consumer-oriented pedagogical events organised in integrated resorts in Cotai (Simpson 2021b).

THE UNCANNY ZHUHAI/HENGQIN ISLAND

The becoming of Shenzhen as a global city would be highly unlikely without the proximity of Hong Kong. Macau is experiencing a slightly different story of co-existence between the complementary border cities of Zhuhai (one of the original Special Economic Zones) and Macau. One component of Zhuhai, the island of Hengqin, is becoming a significant feature of Macau. Hengqin, one of the 146 islands that belong to Zhuhai, is located directly adjacent to Macau and is three times the size of the city; this makes Hengqin a potential respite for Macau's future development.

The uncanniness of Hengqin is not in the fact that it is weird or mysterious (despite its empty 'spectral' ghost-town and growing amount of office towers that never



FIGURE 4. The Empty Bridge (Summer, 2022). Author: Nelson Moura (copyright granted).

show life of people working inside) but that it is something ‘strangely familiar’ (Royle 2003) and extraordinary despite its seemingly mundane development and construction. The massive skyscrapers on Hengqin/Zhuhai side are used as vertical columns for projecting diverse messages, written in Simplified Chinese characters reminding Macau (whose citizens tend to use Traditional characters) of the neighbour, and of a different reality which they may co-opt or to which they must adapt. There is also constant media buzz about the registration of new businesses that feeds the expectations of the Greater Bay Area development plan, which encourages cities ‘to further expand their cooperation and accelerate infrastructural connectivity’ (China Daily 2019).

Part of Hengqin is already occupied by the sprawling University of Macau campus, which relocated from Taipa in 2014. An increasing number of Macau residents live in Zhuhai/Hengqin and work in Macau. While the vertical urbanism in Macau is an important feature for capturing its atmosphere (Zuev 2020), we will refer to the ever growing skyline of Hengqin as a much more potent signifier of the urban imaginary and the anticipated future of Macau.

Hengqin is of crucial importance for understanding the cross-border atmosphere reigning in Macau, specifically defining its rhythm at the northern border crossing of Gongbei – which prior to COVID was consistently China’s busiest border – where students, non-resident workers and parallel traders shuffle back and forth each day. Parallel traders (水货者) are relatively invisible agents of what Hung and Ngo (2020) terms as ‘shadow exchange.’ Despite being a busy interchange, the border between Zhuhai and Macau has been securitised over the last several years, with the erection of new higher fences with razor barbed wire near *Ilha Verde*. This invites a comparison with the many other sensitive borders and ever higher fences that exist as part of the frontier infrastructure in other regions of the world, from the US-Mexico border, to the contested divide between Ceuta and Morocco, to the EU/non-EU distinction that separates Belarus and Poland. What is different about Hengqing, as well as the border separating Macau and Zhuhai, is that this securitised border (Figure 5) is *internal* to the PRC, and a product of China’s ‘one-country, two-systems’ regime or zoning logic.



FIGURE 5. Border between Macau and Zhuhai. Security measures on the border between Zhuhai and Macau. The high fences with razor wire appeared in the north-western corner of Macau after 2018. The water canal has been a natural border for Macau for centuries. Photo:Authors.

Hengqin is part of a long-going political discourse of economic diversification of Macau and is portrayed as the *future* of Macau, and a Macau Neighbourhood residential complex has even been planned and built in Hengqin – as one of the solutions to the continuing problem of affordable public housing in Macau. But until now it has been rather empty of any activity – a phenomenon aptly described by a Chinese phrase -有城无市 (*you cheng wushi*, City without a City or ‘walls without a market’). And the lingering question about Hengqin and the new lands across the border is whether this is another Chinese ‘ghost city’ (Sheppard 2015) and part of the country’s ‘phantom urbanisation’ process (Sorace and Hurst 2016), or an actual annex of Macau? And while cooperation is something that is promoted from the centre, the Zhuhai-Macau authorities have not yet found a common ground yet for administrative co-governance framework. Thus a pertinent question related to the uncanniness of Hengqin is the uncertainty for Macau – *Will Macau be swallowed or annexed by Hengqin, or will Hengqin be a part of Macau?*

At the same time, although Hengqin is conceived as an extension for the economic activity of Macau, it is also seen by many Macau residents as a more spacious residential district that while technically located on the

mainland, also inadvertently benefits from Macau’s particular liberties, such as access to Western social media. This is evident in the following comment from one Macau resident:

I can ride my bike here and feel the space, at the same time I live near the border so my mobile can even catch a signal and so I can use my Facebook even though I am already in mainland (Macau permanent resident working in Macau, but living in an apartment in Hengqin).

The fact that Hengqin is part of Zhuhai, yet the island’s proximity to Macau allows this resident to bypass the mainland internet security regime and access media content that is only permitted in the SAR, demonstrates the uncanny reality of this border zone. Before the pandemic, cross-border movements were part of mundane life as multiple flows of people streamed to Macau and back to Zhuhai, such as students, non-resident workers (外劳), parallel traders (水货者), however the recent outbreak in Macau demonstrated how fragile are mobilities in the supposedly seamless border area of Zhuhai-Macau.

One peculiar part of Hengqin is a nearly finished one square mile district of business and office spaces just across from Taipa that resembles a launchpad for some large-scale business experiment or, indeed, a laboratory, waiting for the occupants or participants who are persistently not arriving (see Figure 6). Hengqin free trade zone is potentially an experimental model of urban space that could be transplanted elsewhere in the world as China continues to expand its influence within the Belt and Road Initiative programme. The tourists coming to Macau have a prime view of the Hengqin business district’s growing skyline from the Macau Tower, the highest point in the city. One can also observe Disneyland-style daily fireworks and laser light show in Coloane performed at the Chimelong Ocean Park, which is represented by a palace-like structure and the increasingly diminished and flattened green hill nearby that has been used for a new cableway.

But the growing skyline of Hengqin is uncanny in the sense that nobody really knows what to expect from this currently empty town, a shell that is waiting for its contents to emerge and thus serving as a ‘museum of the future’ (Denton 2013) with its clean and quiet urban environment. However, Hengqin’s uncanniness is not only in its spectrality of the future of the city as a business hub visible from another bank of the river, it is also the utopian vision of the seamless symbiosis of Macau-Hengqin for emergence of another giant theme-park (Ong 2017) or a supportive engine for Macau’s monocrop economy based only on gaming.



FIGURE 6. Hengqin Central Business District under construction. Photo: Authors.

The utopian vision is to make Macau-Hengqin a combined ‘Las Vegas and Orlando’ leisure hub, where integrated gaming resorts of Macau are combined with the themed amusement parks like Chimelong Ocean Kingdom. Theme parks, as Ong suggested, are more than just tourism and leisure centres, they are part of the ideological narrative where a landscape of privilege is aestheticised and thus civilised citizens are cultivated (Ong 2017). Chimelong Marine Science Park is the new key project of the Zhuhai Chimelong International Ocean Tourist Resort located in Hengqin, which has recently finished construction of its main starship-shaped structure. This will become the world’s largest indoor theme park, including the largest living coral tank and aquarium (Hu 2022) and, indeed, the largest amount of animals in captivity (and one-way glass enclosures) that are not natural to the local ecosystem. The superlatives of the Chimelong park are a model way of urbanising China in creating the biggest, iconic, record-breaking forms – in this case related to nature-human interaction and ‘the wild’ being ‘staged, displayed and projected’ (Knight in Ong 2017), paradoxically located near the city with the highest density of population on Earth. Here one can see scenes of terrified visitors riding

on a Mt. Walrus rollercoaster while real live walruses are eating food provided by other visitors (Ong 2017).

Another part of this vision is that the solution for Macau in its economic diversification myth (a key myth for salvation and the future of Macau – originating at least to 2013), where the key role is played by the infrastructure – and specifically the physical space of Hengqin. Thus, it is not only physical but a missionary spectrality of Hengqin that haunts Macau, that is seemingly unable to reinvent itself without the nearby bordertown and its geophysical resources. Hengqin is almost seen as a magic wand or a secret ingredient in the formula for diversification of Macau. While we have no public opinion data about Hengqin, anecdotal opinions over the years have been very critical of the ‘mainlandisation’ of Special Administrative Regions like Hong Kong (Lo 2008), seen as the erosion of the Cantonese-based culture/identity via its greater connectivity and integration via bridges, and financial and human capital of mainland China. In this context, a proposal to connect Macau and Hengqin via a 10 km. long cable car emphasises the idea that connectivity and integration is often envisioned largely via construction of



FIGURE 7. Lisboeta blends in the same space two signifiers of Old Macau. Photo: Authors

physical and spectacular, even if bizarre, infrastructure projects.

There remains a high degree of scepticism about the co-administration by Zhuhai City and Macau of the Hengqin free trade area. Until now, many entrepreneurs have seen Hengqin as a largely failed project of attracting talent and start-ups, thus boosting the image of Macau as a business hub. Creation of new administrative units and co-governance between cities can also be seen as a part of political performance or demonstration of political achievements (政绩 zhengji).

The idea of the ‘spatial laboratory’ could be an apt term to view the Macau/Hengqin displays as significant markers of the experimental spatial economy of China itself, where new models of reterritorialisation, urban administration, spectacular built forms and transboundary regional morphology are created for potential replication elsewhere in developing or transitional economies. This is specifically true where China is exerting more influence via its connectivity and infrastructure projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

We close this discussion of Macau’s atmospheres with an account of Lisboeta, one of the city’s newest gaming resorts, which opened during the pandemic in 2021.

CONCLUSIONS

*Lisboeta is a hotel and shopping complex which provides an art gallery/consumer space crossover experience with a name that purposefully evokes Macau’s Portuguese colonial era, and a thematic infrastructure that features two iconic signifiers of pre-handover ‘old Macau’: a simulation of the floating casino that operated in the city for decades, and was even featured in the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun*; and a reproduction of the decorative mosaic from the Estoril Hotel, Macau’s first luxury casino resort, which opened in 1962. Both of these structures still exist, but in varying states of decay and disrepair. The former is in a poor state, docked in Lam Mau marina (visible on the Figure 5), while the latter is part of a renovation project in the Tap Seac square that aims to preserve only the mosaic within a new central library currently under construction on the former hotel*

site. The plan to dismantle a landmark historic casino resort structure and replace it with a public library, in a neighbourhood replete with numerous preserved heritage buildings, is perhaps indicative of the local government's efforts to erase certain reminders of the city's seedy glory days as a 'Sin City,' but due to the pandemic slowdown and a general reduction of funding, these preservation projects are progressing slowly. However, their simulated reproductions at Lisboeta have been re-contextualised for a new audience (see Figure 7).

The Lisboeta promotes itself as the city's 'first Macau-themed destination,' with a nostalgic design that clearly evokes that free-wheeling 1960s era of the city which is being eradicated elsewhere. But at the same time, these Macau-themed features of Lisboeta blend with new elements of family fun – including an indoor wind tunnel sky-diving facility and ZipCity, a 388 metre zip line attraction that provides intrepid patrons a panoramic view of the Lisboeta's outdoor reproduction of Macau's Senado Square. In fact, ZipCity is much like a similar zip line attraction at the Fremont Street Experience in old downtown Las Vegas, which offers a sentimental scenic view of another faded casino era.

Time will tell whether or not this themed Macau attraction is popular with tourists. However, during a recent visit to Lisboeta, a group of middle-aged Macau locals clearly enjoyed the environment, animatedly singing Cantonese karaoke songs from a stage in the resort's simulated square, and inadvertently contributing an air of authenticity to the faux environment. Indeed, the Lisboeta is successful in evoking the earlier colonial-era Macau, when the sounds of Cantonese, rather than Mandarin or Hokkien, filled city spaces, and quotidian clandestine activities contributed to the city's seedy ambiance. However, this success at conjuring the past is not only attributable to the resort's simulated thematic motif. Rather, it is also the relatively cheap materials and shoddy quality of the construction of the Lisboeta that ironically makes the entire environment seem authentic. Although the resort is new, it genuinely looks and feels antiquated, much like 'old Macau' itself appeared everywhere sort of rundown and decrepit. From this perspective, the Lisboeta may be understood as a thematic counterpart to the neighbourhood of Fai Chi Kei with which we began this discussion, with its desolate concrete environs and rows of residential buildings.

This archetypal ambiance of old Macau is especially evident when the Lisboeta is contrasted with the neighbouring Lisboa Palace, a massive new luxury megaresort, with entire Versace and Lagerfeld branded hotel towers, and with sparkling surfaces and stylish

accoutrements that are clearly visible from the elevated vantage point of the Lisboeta's ZipCity attraction. Taken together, the Lisboeta and Lisboa Palace properties provide both uncanny and sublime experiences, contributing an immersive atmospheric model of past and future Macau.

While atmosphere is admittedly a difficult concept to work with theoretically and methodologically, the sort of visual study of atmosphere that we have pursued here can be an instrumental way of locating and describing the multiple configurations of urbanity that will enable us to understand how people, emotions, objects and environments are re-constituted in the continuous process of change.

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