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Macanese Cuisine: Fusion or Evolution?

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ABSTRACT: Macanese cuisine is based on history, social events, cultural perceptions and ethnic influences of people from different regions in the orient and beyond. It is important to distinguish fusion food from recipes of dishes born of a place and time which provide a window into peoples' history. An evolving cuisine is shaped by agricultural and fishery products particular to cities and regions. Macanese iconic dishes are known by their designation in *Patois* attesting to their genuine nature and evolution in their place of origin. We should take pride in, safeguard and promote this heritage. Macanese culinary traditions that have been kept alive and shared through generations strengthen, and are part of a unique identity.

KEYWORDS: Fusion food; Evolution dishes; History; Identity; *Patois*; Heritage.

In today's world of instant communication and globalization, Macanese food continues to be a means of expressing identity and belonging for the Macanese still living in Macao as well as for those who emigrated to every corner of the world making a success of their endeavours.

These dishes of celebration provide a window to understand Macanese identity and why the Macanese feel connected to one another regardless of where they were born and why they continue to feel a cultural affinity with Macao.

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Is Macanese cuisine simply a set of recipes originating at different times in different parts of the world? Is it a result of fusion cuisine, so fashionable today, borrowing from old recipes brought to Macao by the Portuguese or has it evolved over time shaped by events during centuries of history?

Fusion cuisine is usually referred to as an intentional combination of features from two or more different culinary traditions. This includes a mingling of current recipes from different countries or a mix of older and modern dishes.

Some authors claim that French *nouvelle cuisine* of the 1970s is the basis for fusion food because of its delicate presentation, freshness of ingredients and the use of steam cooking adopted from oriental cuisine.

However, *nouvelle cuisine* is basically a break from *haute cuisine* with its involved methodology and heavy sauces. The history of *nouvelle cuisine* can be traced back to the first half of the eighteenth century¹ and has evolved ever since, by simplifying methods,

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cooking with the freshest ingredients, light sauces and greatly reduced cooking time in an attempt to preserve the natural flavours of produce as much as possible thus creating more delicate dishes which require an increased emphasis on presentation. *Nouvelle cuisine* became famous throughout the world with the late Paul Bocuse from Lyon France.



Pan pan di mamá — author's collection.

Another approach is to classify fusion cuisine as food prepared with ingredients and flavours inherent to another culture. This could imply that all cuisine is basically fusion because throughout history most spices and products used in regional cuisines come from somewhere else. For example, cloves are from the Molucca islands, tomato is native to Mexico, sweet potatoes in Chinese cuisine were introduced to China by the Portuguese before 1515, cinnamon and pepper became popular in Europe through Arab and Venetian traders since the Middle Ages,² hot chillies (*capsium frutescens*) are native to Central America and were introduced in India and China by the Portuguese to name a few.

Applying certain techniques does not necessarily define fusion cuisine. For example, *stir fry* is accepted as a typically Chinese method, the same goes for how to make noodles. However, nobody would consider spaghetti as a fusion food just because it is made like Chinese noodles or Japanese ramen.

The definition of fusion cuisine should be stricter to avoid misunderstandings of terminology and to convey a more precise message.

A preferred definition of fusion food is a recipe that combines different particular elements from current dishes and different countries or regions.

Indian sushi is made with basmati rice and curry. *Peruvian maki* is made with Peruvian-style marinated fish rolled up with rice, avocado and seaweed. *Thai roast duck* is made by mixing Chinese roast duck with red curry. A Filipino dish called *panci palabok* takes inspiration from different sources and is made using local fish, rice noodles and tofu from China and chicharron imported from Spain. The result is a bright orange dish because of the annatto seed seasoning.

On the other hand, evolution cuisine is based on history, social events, cultural perceptions, and ethnic influences found in different countries. This cuisine is shaped by agricultural and fishery products particular to cities or regions.

Macanese cuisine can be traced back to the conquest of Malacca on 24 August 1511 by Afonso de Albuquerque and the implementation of the policy of mixed marriages that resulted in a population of *Filhos da Terra* who the Chinese call “*Tòu sán* 土生”.

Jorge Alvares arrived in T'un-Mên (Tamão) in 1514. Fernão Peres de Andrade sailed into the Pearl river and arrived at the port of Canton in 1517 where he traded with the Chinese and heard about Islands rich in gold laying further East.

Diogo de Couto³, who was the Portuguese chronicler in Goa, wrote:

In 1542 António da Costa, Francisco Zeimoto and António Peixoto were in Siam and decided to go to China because it was a profitable prospect. They loaded up their

Chinese junk with furs and other merchandise and set sail to Chincheo in Fukien Province. On route they ran into a fearful storm (typhoon) which lasted for several days. When it was over, they found themselves close to some islands. Islanders came to their rescue, they saw that these men were whiter than the Chinese, with smaller eyes and small heads. The islanders were kind and very hospitable. From them they learned that the islands were called Niponji. They repaired and refitted the junk, exchanged the merchandise for silver and returned to Malacca.

This account of the Portuguese arrival in Japan is substantiated by the Japanese Teppo-ki or "History of the introduction of fire arms into Japan" written between 1596 and 1614 indicating 23 September 1543 as the arrival date of the Portuguese in Japan.

The Portuguese settlement in Liampó (Ningbo 寧波) in 1542 became the base for trade with Japan where Chinese silk was exchanged for silver and used as currency in China. The Portuguese expression "*negócio da China*" comes from this highly profitable trade.

The destruction of Liampó and Chincheo (Chincheu 漳州) from 1542 to 1544 dispersed the Portuguese and *Filhos da Terra* to the islands on the delta of the Pearl river familiar to the Portuguese mariners since 1517. Chinese sources⁴ indicate that the Portuguese settled in Macao in 1553.

The enormous profit from Japanese trade aroused the interest of the Viceroy in Goa who tried to impose a crown shipping monopoly (*carreiras*) to trade with Japan. Fortunately for the inhabitants of Macao it failed and a concession approach was used and the position of the captain-major of the ship was auctioned. By 1580 the concession voyage⁵ from Goa to Macao and Nagasaki known as the *Great ship from Amacon* or *kurofune* in Japanese fetched 20,000 cruzados at auction that merchants could invest in the cargo. This trade with Japan lasted for a century.

From 1511 onward, the Portuguese had settled in St. Thomas of Mylapore, Colombo, Batticaloa and Trincomalee in Ceylon, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Pegu in Myanmar, Malacca in Malaysia, Makassar (Sulawesi), Ternate (Moluccas) and Larantuka (Flores) in Indonesia, Lifau in East-Timor, Ayutthaya (former capital), Phuket and Pattani in Thailand, Phnom Penh in Cambodia, Da-Nang in Vietnam, Macao in China and Nagasaki in Japan. Most of the Portuguese population⁶ was of Euro-Asian descent, *Filhos da Terra*.⁷

The ships from Macao regularly sailed to these places where a substantial number of *Filhos da Terra* lived.⁸ In 1625 an English trader reported the presence of 10 to 22 Portuguese ships in Makassar from Macao trading Chinese silks, sandal wood from Timor, diamonds from Borneo and cloves from the Moluccas⁹ with a profit of over 60,000 cruzados, an enormous amount of money at that time.¹⁰

Commercial activity provides clues to thinking about Macanese cuisine as a fusion of recipes from different ports of call.

Is this hypothesis based on historical evidence?

Macanese cuisine was developed by Macanese mothers who originated from Malacca and Nagasaki and later from the Chinese province of Canton.¹¹

Recipes like *achar de fula papadeira macho*, *alua*, *apa-bico*, *apa-mochi*, *bagi*, *balichã*, *porco balichã*, *tamarindo*, *bafassá*, *bebinga*, *pan-pan di mamã* or *mammum*, *bolo minino*, *brede raba-raba*, *caldo macaense*, *celicário*, *chácha*, *tacho* or *chau-chau pele*, *chicu di porco*, *chilicote*, *congee*, *diabo*, *dóci di cambalenga*, *dodol*, *hâng-gân-péng*, *lacassá*, *ladu*, *chili-miçó*, *miçó-cristão*, *minchi*, *óndi-óndi*, *peixe molhos*, *peixe têmpra*, *saran-surabe* and *xarope di figos* are Macanese cuisine at its best.

By looking at the etymology of these words and cross referencing them with historical events and geography we can go back in time to the origin of these recipes to ascertain the singularity of Macanese cuisine and to have a better understanding of why Macanese people feel a collective belonging.

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Macanese recipes use expressions from Bazaar Malay, Portuguese and other languages and are intrinsically linked to Macanese Papiá or Patoá. Patoá evolved from Asio-Portuguese, rooted in Bazar Malay or Market Malay and fifteenth-century vernacular Portuguese with words borrowed from Japanese, Arabic, Chinese and Tamil. Most names of Macanese dishes can be traced back to these languages.

Some authors consider Papiá as a creole language of African origin. Others indicate Papiá as an extension of Indo-Portuguese.

Monsignor Sebastião Rodolfo Dalgado,¹² a well-known etymologist, refutes this and states:

*Macanese Creole, does not belong to the group of Indo-Portuguese (dialect), there are many common traces in grammar as well as in vocabulary for three reasons: the common source, all of them represent XVI and XVII century Portuguese spoken by the people, especially in southern Portugal; The same rules and construction apply to similar dialects; mutual influence, notably vocabulary and because of close and frequent earlier ties between India and the Far-east.*¹³

Some would claim that the origin of Patoá is a dialect resulting from mixing old popular Portuguese and Chinese. This is misleading because dialects do not happen as a result of mixing language. They evolve as an imperfect and quick assimilation of a foreign language, Portuguese in this case, by a people, the population of Macao to fulfill the need to communicate.

Patoá is easy to learn because it is flexible, easily adapting and adopting foreign words and expressions which eased the integration of Macanese mothers of different cultural and social backgrounds into Macanese mainstream society.

It is thanks to Patoá that *Filhos da Terra* remained alive in many of the centuries-old Portuguese traditions, long after the Portuguese departed the regions. Examples abound but I would like to recall

the Kristangs from Malacca who continue to speak Papiá Kristang, Topasses or Larantuqueiros from Larantuka on the Island of Flores who continue to celebrate *Semana Santa* organised by *Confreria Reinha Rosaria* in Papiá, the *Zwarten Portugeesen* or black Portuguese in Jakarta who continue to sing *Keroncong Kafrindo* and *Nana Bobo* a lullaby in Papiá, to babies.

For the Macanese, *minchi* is a favourite dish. It does not fall within the definition of fusion dishes because it does not combine different elements from current cuisines nor different culinary cultures.

Minchi evolved from *nikujaga*, a Japanese dish brought to Macao by exiled mothers from Nagasaki when Christians were expelled by an Edit of 1614 issued by Shogun Tokugawa.

A close look at the components of *minchi* leads us to conclude that the ingredients have not changed over time,¹⁴ they are basically ground or finely sliced meat and potatoes.

The *Filhos da Terra* refugees¹⁵ from Japan, upon arrival in Macao settled around the Church of Our Lady of Hope, better known as St. Lazarus in Campo,¹⁶ and later in the poor neighbourhoods of Horta da Mitra or Chók-Chei 雀仔園, in Barra, Patane, Mainato, Mong-Há 望廈, Fát-Chi-Kei 筷子基¹⁷ where they mingled with the Chinese population.¹⁸ Their language of communication was a mixture of Patoá and Cantonese. *Nikujaga* became *mun-chee yôk* 爛豬肉 among the Cantonese, a description of the cooking method and main ingredient: pork.

Patoá contracted *mun-chee yôk* to *mun-chee* and several decades later into *minchi*.¹⁹

A second hypothesis presented by some authors is that the iconic dishes in Macanese cuisine are simply an adaptation of old Portuguese recipes. When taking into consideration old Portuguese cooking books²⁰ or Chinese sources such as *Ou-Mun Kei-Leok* 澳門記畧 published in 1751 where the historical framework of some Macanese recipe is set, this hypothesis does not stand up.

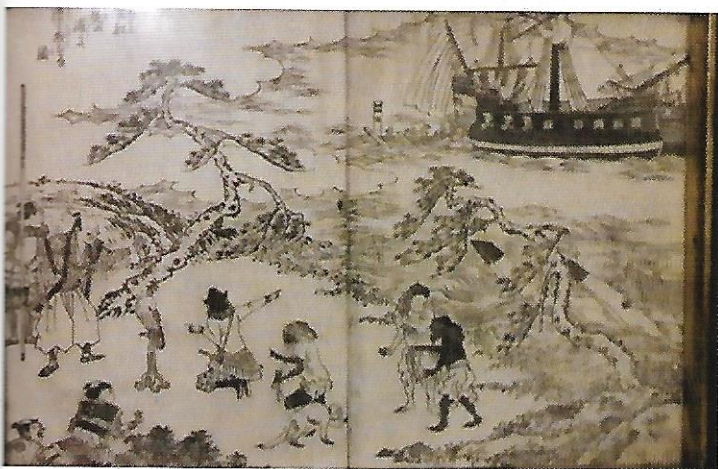
For example, the Macanese dessert *sarā-surabe* is often said to be an adaptation of the Portuguese *pão-de-ló* where baking has been replaced by steaming.

Four features stand out in considering this possibility. First, the etymology of the word; second, the cooking method employed; third, the historical events of the time and fourth, the resemblance between *sarā-surabe* and *pão-de-ló*.

Market Malay was a commercial language²¹ used in the Orient in the fifteenth century. *Sarā-surabe* is derived from *sarang serabai* meaning a bird's nest in Market Malay, describing its rounded shape that resembles a sea bird's nest very common in Malacca. The price of bird nests in Malacca was quite high reaching at times twice its weight in silver.²² This exorbitant price led the *Filhos da Terra* to find a replacement by using egg yolks that, when beaten for a long period, become a whitish creamy batter that when steamed resembles a bird's nest.

Afonso de Albuquerque implemented a policy of mixed marriage between Portuguese men and local women who converted to Christianity after the conquest of Malacca in 1511.

By 1556, Malacca had a large²³ mixed-race population, *Filhos da Terra*.²⁴ Macao had affinities with and was closer to Malacca²⁵ than anywhere else because of the large number of Portuguese in Macao who married women from Malacca.²⁶



Kurofune XVI century blockprint — Private collection. Courtesy of José Eduardo Azevedo.

Sarā-surabe is one of many recipes brought to Macao by these women. To this day the recipe for *sarā-surabe* has remained unchanged.

There is however a dessert in Portuguese cuisine that closely resembles *sarā-surabe* and is known as *fatias da China*.

Fatias da China (the name was changed to *fatias de Tomar* in the late twentieth century) is a dessert made with beaten egg yolks served steeped in a sugar syrup. Some authors believe *fatias da China* inspired Macanese *sarā-surabe*.

Tomar is a city located to the north of Lisbon with a monastery which was the seat of the Order of Christ whose first governor was Prince Henry the Navigator.

The recipe for *fatias da China* is not mentioned in the recipe book written by Princess Maria of Portugal in the fifteenth century for obvious reasons. It is prior to any direct or indirect contact between Portugal and China. Nor is it mentioned in Domingos Rodrigues *Arte de cozinha* published in 1693 which is considered to be the first Portuguese cook book.

Fatias da China is first mentioned by João da Mata in *Arte de cozinha* published in 1888.

The ingredients are identical in both recipes including the method of beating egg yolks until they become whitish in colour and creamy.

History and steaming as the method of cooking point to the possibility that *fatias da China* are based on *sarā-surabe*. Macao is referred to, in Portuguese documents of the time, as *Cidade de Nome de Deus na China* (City of God's name in China) and whoever, monk or sailor, took the recipe of sliced *sarā-surabe* to the monastery in Tomar, called the dessert simply slices from China as a reminder of the city where the dessert was first made.

Many of the mariners and crews for the caravels were hired from this region of Portugal for their knowledge of sailing against the wind. Tomar was also the financial seat of Prince Henry the Navigator's endeavours.

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Sarā-surabe is not fusion food because it does not borrow any particular element from Portuguese *pão-de-ló* and was possibly the basis for the *fatias da China*.

Consideration has also been given to British or other influences on Macanese cuisine.

Pan-pan di mamã or *bolo mammon*, is presented as named after the god of wealth²⁷, and is often given as an example of British influence on Macanese cuisine.

But what are the facts?

The British East India Company (BEIC) arrived in Macao in 1773. It rented premises in Praia Grande to establish the Select Committee of super cargoes which controlled the issuing of licenses to merchants trading in China. With the BEIC the first British families came to live in Macao. British influence would only be felt from 1773 at the earliest.

Pan-pan di mamã is much older because it is mentioned in *Ou-Mun Kei-Leok*²⁸ or *A Brief Monograph of Macau*, written in the first half of the eighteenth century and published in 1751, decades before the arrival of the British in Macao.

The translation version of the book by L.G. Gomes²⁹ in 1950 mentions:

fán p'ut p'ut 番餽餽, a foreign cream and butter cake baked on a sheet of paper with a golden crust.

In the version translated by Yin Guangren and Zhang Rulin in 2009, we find:

the barbarian cake is presented on a sheet of paper with a golden topping and a toasted crust from melted butter.

Both translations refer to the same cake highlighting its presentation. In addition, *p'ut p'ut* corresponds to the transliteration of the old Portuguese pronunciation of *pan* meaning bread which became *pan-pan* (plural of bread) in Patoá.



Peixe tèmpra — author's collection.

To the Chinese ear *pan-pan* sounds like *p'ut p'ut* to which they added the character *fán* 番, to indicate that it was a foreign cake.

This brief analysis shows that the possibility of British influence on Macanese cookery should take into account historical sources.

Moreover, *pan-pan di mamã* that was renamed later as *bolo mammon*, does not fall within the definition of fusion cuisine because the recipe has no elements from other cuisines and has changed very little. Any change of ingredients is mainly because of lack of availability. Thus, cane sugar replaced palm jaggery and raisins are used in the modern topping instead of a mixture of grated coconut, butter and sugar in the older recipe.

The Portuguese settled in the Orient at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Not all settlements were part of the Portuguese formal empire. Nevertheless, these communities had basically two common features, they were populated by *Filhos da Terra* and spoke *Asio-Portuguese* or *Papiá/Patoá*.

Since some Macanese dishes resemble Portuguese food, it is easy to assume that they were adaptations of old Portuguese recipes. However historical, geographical and social events point us in a different direction.

The best example to help settle the question of whether Macanese cuisine is fusion or evolution is *peixe tèmpra*.

Peixe tèmpra is made with small anchovies, which are very abundant in Macao and called *beliz maroto* in Patoá or *pák-fán-yü* 白飯魚 in Cantonese.

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The origin of this dish can be traced back to sixteenth-century Macao, the base of the Padroado Português do Oriente with religious and secular responsibilities over China, Japan, Timor and surrounding territories. The Jesuits were the most important and influential Catholic religious order.

“Quator tempora” is a precept consisting of three days of fasting and abstinence observed every three months. During abstinence, food is consumed sparingly. A typical meal was small deep-fried anchovies in a watery batter without any salt or other seasoning. This dish became known in Patoá as *peixe tẽmpora* and later *peixe tẽmpra*.

The dish became popular³⁰ amongst the least fortunate Macanese. Wealthier Macanese and the Chinese population considered *beliz maroto* or *pák-fán-yü* a tasteless fish which can be caught in muddy pools at low tide. *Peixe tẽmpra* was adopted by the catholic population who practiced weekly abstinence and became the dish consumed on Friday. This precept was followed by the Catholics until the mid-twentieth century when it was modified³¹ by the Catholic Church.

Peixe tẽmpra was taken by the Jesuits, Portuguese merchants, traders and adventurers to Japan from 1549 onward and to Portugal in the eighteenth century in the form of *peixinhos da horta*, battered and fried green beans.

Deep-fried food in a light batter was unknown to the Japanese. *Tẽmpora* had no equivalent word in Japanese and was transliterated to the closest sound in the Japanese language. Since *tẽmpora* was also a religious precept, the Japanese Christians in Nagasaki transliterated *tẽmpora* into *tempura* with the character 天 (*tem*) meaning heaven to account for its religious connotation.

Tempura is today considered as a truly Japanese food. Since *tempura* and *peixe tẽmpra* have the same origin, *peixe tẽmpra*, a typical Macanese dish, is for obvious reasons an evolutionary dish.

To complete my list of examples of Macanese dishes and their origin I would like to mention *porco balichão tamarindo*.

This is a quintessential Macanese dish. This pork stew is seasoned with tamarind and balichã. This recipe is unique to Macao and yet opinions abound about its different places of origin including Goa and Portugal.

Goa is given as a possible origin because of *balichã*, a shrimp paste developed by Macanese mothers from Malacca which is also used in Goa. Some authors claim *balichã* is derived from Goan *balsão*.³²

Etymologically, this is unlikely to be the case because the word *balichã* is a transliteration of the Malay *balachan* with a nasal sound and as such, is not from Indo-Portuguese because Indo-Portuguese is a mix of Portuguese with Konkani, the language of Goa.

In the Patoá spoken in the nineteenth century the word *balichã* was also written as *baleichão*. *Balsão* is most likely to be a corruption of *baleichão*.

After the conquest of Malacca in 1511, Tamils, Kwelings, the Chinese and other communities, who were allies of the Portuguese helped Rui Brito Palatim, the first Captain of Malacca, to organise new trade routes along the coast of the Gulf of Bengal, the Malay Archipelago and further East. The large Gujarati Muslim population in Malacca, enemies of the Portuguese, abandoned Malacca and headed north to their homeland of Gujarat on the Indian Malabar Coast.³³



Sará-sarabe — author's collection.

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When the migration of a population occurs, by design or by force, migrating peoples take with them the cooking traditions to which they are accustomed. For example, the Portuguese abroad remain partial to bacalhau (dry salted cod). However, *balichã* was not traditionally used on the Malabar Coast where Goa, Daman, Diu and Cannanore (Kannur), the major strongholds of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century were located. This allows us to surmise that *balichã* was not used by the Guajarati communities and consequently there was no gastronomic identification of the population with *balichã*.

The iconic dishes of Macanese cuisine are grounded in a historical context and weave the fabric of social experience and ethnic integration. Food and its preparation are an important facet of history pointing to peoples' aspirations, successes and failures. Social, political and economic circumstances determine the Macanese perception of history. Through Macanese cuisine we can better understand who, what and why people feel Macanese regardless of their place of birth.

These are the traditions that help shape our identity. We should safeguard and above all promote them to reinforce our self-esteem and our sense of belonging. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 In 1742 Menon introduced the term *Nouvelle cuisine* as the title of the third volume of his *Nouveau traité de la cuisine* published in 1739.
- 2 One of the objectives of the Portuguese Voyages of Discovery was to seek the source of spices and control trade. Swahn, J.O. (1992). *The Lore of Spices. Their history and uses around the world*. Grange book.
- 3 Couto, Diogo de (Décadas V) was the official historian of Portuguese India where he worked and lived between 1559 and 1616.
- 4 *Haojingao* or *Chronicle of Bay of Mirror* by Bao Yu, states that the Portuguese arrived in Macao in 1553.
- 5 Subrahmanyam, Sanjay (1993). *The Portuguese Empire in Asia 1500–1700. A political and Economic History*. London: Longman.
- 6 In Macao the number of Portuguese born in Portugal was less than 10% of the Portuguese population.
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- 8 In the late sixteenth century, the total population of *Filhos da Terra* was estimated to be around 100,000 people. Hespanha, António M. (2019). *Ibidem*.
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- 12 Dalgado, Monsignor Sebastião Rodolfo (1855–1922) was a linguist and etymologist who has made in-depth studies of the influence of Portuguese in South East Asia languages.
- 13 'Ta-Ssi-Yang-Kuo Review (1899–90:360) series II Vol. III and IV.
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- 16 Fields lying outside the city walls.
- 17 The Kamia family left in the 1950s.
- 18 Until 1825 Mandarin Law did not allow the Chinese to remain within the City after sunset.
- 19 *Minchi* is pronounced *mean tchee*.
- 20 Rodrigues, Domingos, *A Arte de Cozinha*, from 1693 and J. Mata, *Arte de cozinha*, from 1888.
- 21 Thomaz, Luis F. (2009). "As competências linguísticas de Fernão Mendes Pinto e o seu uso do malaio". *Revista Biblos*, 7: pp. 295–322. Coimbra: Universidade de Coimbra.
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- 25 Coates, Austin (1978), *ibidem*.
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- 30 In Macao and Hong Kong anchovies were considered fare for the poor. *Pik-fân-yü* became an expression in Cantonese for the very inexpensive white canvas shoes worn daily by the poor.
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- 32 Sousa, M. F. N. da C. (1998). *Cozinha indo-portuguesa: receitas da bisavó*. Lisboa: Assírio e Alvim, Consider *balichã*, known in Goa as *balsão*, as an Indo-Portuguese word derived from Malay.
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