

Roots and “uproots”: the challenges of returning home

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1. Introduction

Despite all the personal and family expectations associated with the migratory experience, the process of integration in a new physical, social and cultural environment is rarely easy being frequently considered a challenge for those who participate in it, because most times it represents a movement from the known to the unknown. Similarly, the return of migrants to the society of origin (or reference) when the migratory cycle comes to an end, could also constitute a huge challenge, since that independently of being desired or not, the movement always implies the individual's participation in another process of social de-entailment and re-entailment, their identities being “packed” and “unpacked” again.

Usually migrants have to leave the roots created in the host society, as well as friends and places of reference (home, school, leisure spaces). They may have to face new standards of living and life-styles; to start new routines, to deal with new patterns of reference and behaviour codes; to re-establish old friendships and/or renew their social ties, that is, to adjust themselves to a new living context. Returning home can also be a challenge to migrants due to the country's and local people's transformation as well as to the migrants' identity reconfiguration during their stay abroad.

The present research is based on a biographical approach supported by life-stories of Portuguese young people, aged between 15 and 34 years old, that lived in Macao¹ with their parents an expressive part of their primary and/or secondary process of socialization in the last two decades of the twentieth century - a stay which varied in length from three to fifteen years. Thus, our purpose is to analyse how they have dealt with their re-integration process in Portugal, regarding their living conditions and life-styles; prior and new friendships, cultural references, and their sense of belonging to both: Macao, the place they left; and Portugal, the place to which they returned.

Firstly, one should underline that despite the undoubtedly positive evaluation of the period of time spent in Macao, as a result of the privileged living conditions and life-

¹ Until December nineteen ninety nine Macao was a Chinese territory under Portuguese Administration.

styles found in the host society, together with the solid and durable friendships developed with other Portuguese young migrants, the return to Portugal was expected and even desired by almost all the interviewees.

Indeed, during their stay abroad they built a nostalgic and lyrical image of Portugal which was created both directly in their sporadic visits to the country and through the mediated narratives brought to Macao by the Portuguese newcomers. The enthusiasm on returning was motivated by several reasons: the spirit of adventure incorporated with the movement to the territory and during their stay (chiefly due to the trips made in Asia); the willingness to follow the friends that were also returning, who had constituted one of the most important elements in structuring their identities and daily lives in the host society, having, thus, contributed largely to the success of the stay; the wish to meet some relatives; the expectations of starting a degree in their elected courses; the curiosity for knowing the diversity of Portuguese youth leisure places and to accede to a wider cultural offer which were slightly scarce in Macao; the interest to explore geographically and culturally a country that the majority did not have time to know because they left during their childhood; the desire to acquire freedom and social autonomy; the intention to create roots in Portugal - their country of origin or reference - among others.

“I was working in the Macao Cultural Institute and I was even enjoying being there (...) but I remember having every day that satisfaction of knowing that I was there temporarily because I will leave and will study other things and it has eased my return. (...) I thought I would finally know people who were interested in the same things as me (...). (...) since I used to come [to Portugal] in the summer I was conscious that during the year I had missed many things, concerts, etc. (...) I had several unhappiness' attacks (...) because you are much more conscious of the things you miss than the things you immediately gain (...). I think it was a shared feeling by almost everybody that Portugal was great and all of us wanted to come to Portugal (...). (...) It made me unhappy that people talked about the Cinemateca films and that I have been in Cinemateca once (...) I considered myself very stupid, very ignorant (...).” Rita

“I used to listen to everyone talking about Bairro Alto (...) and about the camping they have done somewhere, there were a set of stories about my own country and I had to know what it was. (...). There were guys that arrived there, newcomers, and everybody wanted to hear the stories of Bairro Alto and of 24 [of July], so, there was a wish to know our city that we did not know.” Tomás

Additionally, some youngsters started getting saturated with Macao, chiefly due to the small size of the territory and of the Portuguese community. In fact, the social cohesion and solidarity among Portuguese people went along with the collateral effects of that cohesion, that is, the “hidden sociability costs” (Portes, 1999), represented by a huge informal vigilance, a kind of “Panoptism” to use an expression of Foucault (1987). Indeed, that “Panoptism” was translated into a rigid social control and coercion among fellow countrymen, resulting in a social environment of gossip.

“I hate gossips (...) but in Macao (...) a person has to be very careful with everything he or she does not to be gossiped about because everybody knew everything about each other, it is impressive! It seems that there are informants (...), things run with such speed (...) in this aspect it is not very good (...)” João

However, despite the desire to return to Portugal and although the familiarity they kept with the Portuguese cultural references during their stay abroad (such as language, religion, school system, food, TV programs, literature, music, and so fourth), as noticed above, the return to Portugal presented many challenges to young migrants who had to adapt themselves to several dimensions of the country, which initially caused them some strangeness: colder and drier weather; a higher insecurity in the public space; a different perception of time, felt as less extensive and more constraining; the relative deterioration of their economic levels and purchasing power; the lesser variety of consumption goods; more dispersed and superficial social networks; a conservative and closed mentality, and for some, the feeling of being an outsider within their own country.

Some youngsters were even surprised by the contrasts between the idealized physical, social and cultural country and the reality they end up finding. That is why we are in accordance with Jones (1999: 18) when she says that “returning to a community can be almost as hard as the migration to a new one”.

2. Living Conditions and life-styles

Despite the variety of factors that stimulated the Portuguese young people’s parents to move to Macao, such as the attraction for the “Orient”, the opportunity to develop a successful career, the wish to run away from identity problems, the break down of matrimonial ties, among others, the youngsters’ narratives show that their parents’ high expectations regarding the improvement of their standards of living was a determinant

in the decision to move on, expectations which were largely created by the success of other Portuguese migrants still living in Macao or already returned to Portugal with an upper social position - that is why the use of the “Pataca’s tree” metaphor to reflect Macao’s migrants’ enrichment is not casual.

In fact, even not having made a fortune and although that mobility wasn’t similar for all Portuguese migrants (it depended on the duration of the stay; on the wages earned by each person as well as on the financial capital accumulated and spent), the comparison of the Portuguese young people’s households’ economic and social conditions before and after the departure to Macao let us conclude that the majority experienced a process of upward social mobility as a result of their stay in the territory - an upgrading also observed in other migratory experiences (Jackson, 1991: 46; Punch, 2007). The rise of the youngsters’ parents’ professional status and the acquisition of real estate in Portugal were the most visible signs of the success of the stay.

However, if we take into account Macao’s “exceptional” living conditions, almost all Portuguese young people observed a relative reduction in their household incomes, the decrease of their purchasing power, along with the change of their consumption patterns and life styles when they came back to Portugal, due to the following reasons: the Portuguese cost of living was much higher than in Macao and the perks Portuguese migrants used to earn there, mainly those who worked in the public sector of the territory, ceased with the return. In Macao they were offered a place to live; they didn’t have to pay utilities, nor even taxes. On the contrary, in Portugal, these expenses had to be paid. Additionally, the high wages earned in Macao, two or three times higher than in Portugal before the departure, decreased to the current values paid in the latter country.

Consequently, their parents tended not to be allowed to acquire the same amount and kind of goods bought in Macao, such as jewellery, domestic appliances, state-of-the-art technological equipment, gadgets, games and toys, etc. The frequency of eating out (daily for some) also lessened, as well as the number of trips, which during their sojourns in South East China was very high – almost all Portuguese youngsters went to Hong-Kong more than once, Thailand, India, Nepal, The Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and so on.

“[In Macao] I had the opportunity to travel and (...) to have things that here I knew that obviously I couldn’t have because I hadn’t the same financial resources: [in Macao] goods

are much more accessible and much cheaper. (...) there was Toys 'R' Us (...), huge stores, and we were kids, we loved it (...). [in Macao] (...) a person could truly have what they wanted (...). (...) to stroll in the street...my parents didn't mind... In the primary school I used to come back alone from school on foot, when here in Portugal it wouldn't happen (...), one felt a different security (...). (...) here things become very different, everything, the labour schedules, free time (...). My mother, for instance, used to have lunch at home; here, she never can have lunch at home. (...) in Portugal each one has lunch by their side (...) there, there was much more free time. (...) the rhythm is different." Alice

Besides the economic living standards, another challenge faced by the Portuguese youngsters with the return has to do with their conceptions on life quality, chiefly public security, easy mobility, a dynamic urban life during the day and night, free time to spend with their family and friends, which were found in Macao and not in Portugal.

"(...) [In Macao] it was not necessary to phone anybody, people used to meet (...). I considered that this [Portugal] was a mental retardation: everything was closed, always, the shops (...). (...) the standard of living is very good there (...) you never think if you have money for this or that, it is a worry that does not exist and you have the possibility to know spectacular places (...). I truly enjoyed it [Macao]. The acquaintanceship is also amazing together with the time you have for everything: here in Portugal (...) you must to take one entire day to get your Identity Card (...)." Madalena

The return to Portugal also represented to some youngsters the household de-aggregation together with the opportunity of emancipation: while the departure to Macao showed a tendency to a family pattern, the movement to Portugal occurred often drop by drop, since many youngsters returned alone after ending secondary school, leaving their parents and/or their siblings in the territory².

"I came back alone. My sister was already here; my brother too (...); my sister went to university three years before me; my brother one year before (...); in the last year that I was in Macao it was only me and my parents, and I came back and they remained one more year (...)." Rita

Furthermore, those who started living alone or with their siblings in Portugal had to assume the task of managing their time and their houses (paying the bills, shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc.) as well as solving problems by themselves, responsibilities that

² Until the middle of 90's, the number of universities and the variety of courses was very limited in Macao, which largely motivated the Portuguese youngsters' return to Portugal. Besides, their application in a Portuguese university used to benefit from the "Macao contingent", a privilege that practically guaranteed their entrance to the university.

for many represented the first path in their trajectories towards adulthood, although with the benefits of being economically supported at a distance by their parents. It also represented an appreciated opportunity to acquire privacy, freedom and autonomy at a relatively early life stage, that is, to take advantage of living outside their parents' control. Nevertheless, for some youngsters this advantage ended or decreased after a period of time, when their parents returned from Macao, obliging them to face once again new adjustments regarding practices, habits and rules, which was seen by the youngsters as a reversal of their emancipation process.

3. Friendships and networks

The migratory movement that took Portuguese young people with their parents to Macao lead to young migrants facing strong disruptions, mainly the weakening or breaking of some of their former commitments, chiefly prior friendships. If when they arrived in the host society they had to renew their networks and social ties, the same happened when they re-settled in Portugal.

Among the friendships left in Portugal when the youngsters departed, very few survived the time and distance (eighteen thousand kilometres), mainly for those whose absence was longest.

Once re-settled in Portugal, some youngsters tried to meet old friends and cousins but not rarely the reencounter was as a big challenge as a huge disappointment, since they felt that those who did not move from the country had not changed, and therefore, had not developed, feelings also observed in other studies on the return of young migrants to their homelands (Jones, 1999: 12; Gabriel, 2006: 37-42). According to the interviewees the majority of their prior friends kept the same life-styles, routines, practices, references, interests, tastes and preferences, showing unaltered identities, which were seen as largely in contrast with the pronounced changes they themselves had suffered during their stay abroad.

“(...) It disturbed me a lot when I returned (...); I saw (...) and lived completely different things (...) and they [my prior friends] had not changed (...) they attended the same places, they lived in the same places, they went to the same café. I hated that, I was on a different wavelength; I had discovered other things and wanted to discover more things, I did not want that. (...) they used to say that I came back very different, that I was not the same

person. (...) I felt I had nothing to do with them, if I had had at any time. And even if I had not moved to Macao, I would have discovered that my pathway had to be another. (...) musical tastes, way of dressing, way of thinking, personal interests, it was everything different [from them]. (...) They considered that we dress in a different way (...). Everybody got a bit freaky, we used to dress in some Indian things and Chinese coats (...) that they had never seen and found all of that very strange (...)." Catarina

Actually, the period spent in Macao and the trips made around the Far East enabled Portuguese young migrants to widen their horizons due to the contact with a huge diversity of cultural references, and to absorb some of those references which were misunderstood by their prior friends who remained in Portugal. Even the outward appearances and hair styles of some interviewees were considered strange, confirming the lack of affinities among those who have been on the move and those who lingered. Thus, it stimulated Portuguese youngsters returned from Macao to keep strong ties with their Macao friends and to search for new networks.

In Portugal - or in the city of Lisbon to where the majority returned - not all the interviewees had the possibility to meet daily their Macao friends, as happened while living in the territory (the 21 Km² of Macao's dimension allowed that closeness), since they became geographically much more dispersed. However, they used to keep in touch by phone and stay together during the weekends, filling that time by finding out the leisure places available in Lisbon or in other cities - such as bars and discos³, and exploring the country from north to south, chiefly the variety of cities and villages they used to hear about while living abroad.

³ Despite the variety of leisure places and areas available in Lisbon in the 90's when the majority of Portuguese young people returned from Macao, such as "24 de Julho", "Docas de Alcântara" and "Bairro Alto", there was a visible preference by the youngsters for the latter. It is curious noticing that if nowadays Bairro Alto, a popular and also historic Lisbon neighbourhood, is often frequented by people from all social and cultural youth groups, until the middle of the 90's it was associated with a bohemian intellectual and artistic elite, being characterized by its alternative and cosmopolitan environment. Therefore, since Portuguese young people got use to dealing with the difference while living in Macao, it is understandable that they felt comfortable in such a place, as much as because it reminds them of Macao (regarding the night movement, some buildings fallen into decay, the lower social condition of the neighbourhood's local people, the tavern styles, etc).

In those encounters they have also spent a long time remembering their memories about the period abroad and reaffirming their feelings of belonging to the territory, keeping alive their solid and durable friendships due to the affinities, experiences, complicities and sympathy shared.

“(...) you have created friendships that are for life because [while abroad you share] things that unite people. (...) I lived very strong things with those people together with the experience of going to a place that is radically different from your home country and having cultural references that are not the same as those that people from here [Portugal] have.”

Catarina

However, among the interviewees a few had considered that some youngsters were excessively tied to the past and to their Macao friendships which created some difficulties in taking advantage of the present new life in Portugal and to make part of new networks. In fact, that behaviour can be understood through the words of Merton (1968: 356) when affirming that the inclusion of individuals in groups already constituted can be difficult, leading to the “intensification of individuals’ old ties, which are imbued of disproportional big affections”.

“(...) there was a kind of syndrome of many people that returned and remained very much tied to Macao, to the memories, they were always with people from Macao and still today, probably, they keep acquainting. (...). It seems that they had difficulty in communicating with “Tugas” [Portuguese people] (...) [I] have tried that besides being marked by Macao, something marks me in the present too (...).” Duarte

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Macao friends constituted an important social capital and affective support concerning the Portuguese young people’s reintegration process in the country, contributing to assure the ontological security of the youngsters when facing the vulnerabilities associated with the project of return. As happened among the Portuguese young people “community” in Macao, those who previously settled in Portugal and had already established their networks used to introduce the Portuguese newcomers to their friends, making their inclusion in the groups easier⁴.

⁴ The value of social networks in diminishing the emotional and social impacts of migration has been underlined in several studies on migration (Portes, 1999; Punch, 2007: 102-103).

“I made friends very quickly because I met a [Portuguese] girl from Macao that (...) got me accustomed to the environment. It is always people from Macao that give us the clues.”
Madalena

“(...) Sara came back three or four years before me (...); she made friends and when I used to come back [on holidays] I was with her (...), therefore her friends also became my friends. I socialized with my sister, with Sara and the friends of Macao (...), and with the friends of the Macao friends (...), all those people were here and all of them had new friends made in the University, with whom I also started acquaintances.” Rita

Regarding the new friendships developed in Portugal, after the first period of adaptation, it was not too difficult for the interviewees to meet new people, something that usually happened in the university and in the leisure spaces they used to go to, being the networks supported by affinities other than the migratory experience in Macao.

That renovation of networks went hand in hand with the willingness to live, in Portugal, different experiences, to develop new practices, interests and tastes, and also to change the way they introduced themselves - the alteration of the name or surname by which they were known in Macao constitutes an example that strongly marks the inauguration of a new biographical chapter, showing at the same time the dynamic, situational, relational and strategic character of identities (Gabriel, 2006: 43; Scheibelhofer, 2007: 326; Sarup, 1994; Hall, 1992; Phoenix, 1998).

“(...) People that met me in Macao, chiefly in the first years (...) all of them call me Quica and only those people call me Quica (...); all people here in Portugal call me Rita (...)”. Rita

Additionally, it is interesting to highlight that the same reason which contributed to the distance between the interviewees and their Portuguese prior friends - the capital of “difference” accumulated during their period abroad - has also constituted a factor of attraction to the new ones, among whom they acquired social distinction and symbolic power⁵.

Within the capital of “difference” presented one should point out the knowledge gained on different places, people and cultures; the exhibition of state-of-the-art technological

⁵ In Macao Portuguese people also benefited from symbolic power, which was based on “ethnic” capital, since they represented the Administration power, a kind of capital lost with the return.

equipment and other goods brought by their parents from Macao (furniture, antiques, decorative objects), together with some symbols commonly associated with the Asian countries visited, such as gastronomy, clothes and trinkets.

Thus, the perception by the interviewees that some of those references were socially appreciated, because they were seen in Portugal as original, exotic and sophisticated, having, therefore, a huge “symbolic value” (Baudrillard, 1995) - besides the “exchange value” (their cost) and the “use value” (their function and utility) - led these youngsters to cultivate them, even in an unconscious, mundane or banal way, as they could bring with them social distinction. Distinctiveness usually attributed by the youngster’s peers who never had the opportunity to leave Portugal, or to directly deal, for a relatively long period of time, with spatial, social and cultural references and patterns largely different from their own⁶.

It was also a challenge to some youngsters who had returned from Macao to decode the distinction symbols displayed by some particular Portuguese youth groups (chiefly those portrayed as conservative) which until then were completely unfamiliar to them - such as the importance given to the youngsters’ family surname and to the possession of land, symbols associated with high social positions. That unfamiliarity was also expressed towards the country’s social stratification which was much more perceptible than within the Portuguese “community” in Macao, where the social differences were apparently diluted (since the youngsters’ parents were almost all skilled or highly skilled workers who occupied intermediate or top positions in the public or private sectors of the territory). Thus, within the Portuguese community in Macao the symbolic power used to derive not from the lineage - that is, was not inherited - but resulted essentially from the prestige of their parents’ labour position, being, therefore, acquired.

However, even not displaying the traditional signs of distinction valued in those specific Portuguese social contexts, the majority of the youngsters who had returned

⁶ If nowadays, as a result of the rise of cultural, social and economic flows and exchanges that characterize the globalisation process, we can see lesser exclusiveness of some of these objects and practices, both in terms of demand and supply, when Portuguese youngsters returned from Macao, in the late 80’s and in the mid 90’s, the value of difference of these Asian symbols was very high in Portugal, as they were quite invisible in the market and there were very few who had access to them, mainly among young people. To some extent, the present availability of those symbols has taken away part of the distinctiveness acquired in the past by the youngsters.

from Macao took advantage of a cosmopolitan disposition acquired in the territory⁷ - materialized in a great capacity of adaptation to different people, practices and consumptions - which became a powerful instrument of social circulation. Therefore, they started moving very easily and quite nonchalantly through different youth “tribes”, expression of Maffesoli (2000: 204, 207), using, according to those different social and cultural contexts, the variety of codes and languages required.

In fact, the interviewees’ former attachments to a relatively concentrated group with whom they established “multiplex” ties⁸, as happened in Macao, where the social scenarios tended to be interconnected, has given place to a variety of decentralized connections developed in different contexts of interaction - with their neighbours, colleagues from the university or work, friends from Macao, friends of friends, among others, exploring in this way their plural dispositions.

But also the nature of those ties has generally changed: despite several exceptions, their relationships tended to become more impersonal, superficial and transitory - adjectives pointed out by Wirth (1997: 53) when characterising the dominant pattern of the urban life style as well as the respective social relationships - showing, therefore, a “neo-tribal” character (Maffesoli, 2000: 107).

4. Multiple sense of belonging: Portugal, Macao...the world

As referred to above, although almost all the interviewees had shared the desire to return to Portugal, they felt sentimentally divided regarding their social-spatial identities since they were strongly connected to Portugal, Macao and some of them to further countries where they had lived before the movement to Macao (Angola, Mozambique, Brazil, etc.). Places where they have spent a significant part of their biographies (childhood, adolescence and/or youth); have been socialized by different references and cultural patterns; have lived important experiences of their lives; have created roots. Their sense of belonging was, therefore, double or even multiple. But these

⁷ It resulted from the processes of de-entailment and re-entailment implied on the migration and, thus, to the need to adjust themselves to the social and cultural characteristics of the host society.

⁸ According to Portes (1999: 111) “multiplex” ties refers to the interaction of the same individuals in a variety of contexts, resulting in a superposition of ties in diverse domains: for instance, colleagues at school are also neighbours and informal friends, participating in the same extra-school activities. On the contrary, the “uniplex” relationships bring us forward to one exclusive context of interaction.

places, chiefly Portugal and Macao, were physically too far from each other to allow their idealized presence in both. They felt “in-between”.

It explains why, on the one hand, during their time in Macao they used to idealize Portugal, the Portuguese life and the Portuguese symbols, which were something sacred to the youngsters due to their rarity value in the territory, also being a way to affirm their former cultural commitments. On the other hand, it clarifies why after returning to Portugal and despite the distant and superficial relationship the majority developed with local dwellers, mainly Chinese people, they started valuing Asian symbols (language⁹, gastronomy, outward appearances, domestic esthetics, alternative medicines, *Feng-Shui*, *Yoga* and *Tai-Chi*, popular Chinese amulets, etc.), references to which almost all of them gave little importance when living in Macao, since in that stage of life they followed chiefly Lusophone and Anglo-Saxon references. So, they began romanticizing about Macao and the period of time spent there, in part, as a strategy to consolidate an Easternized identity the youngsters felt fragmented with the departure. That distant reality has, thus, become extremely desirable.

Besides, for the majority of the youngsters the return to Portugal did not represent the end of their migratory trajectory. A cosmopolitan disposition created and developed during their stay in Macao, already referred to above, stimulated the desire to know different people and cultures as well as to be on the move. Some re-emigrated to other countries to continue their studies or work and a number went to Macao again, implying these movements the multiplication of departures and arrivals, of presences and absences, of separations and re-unions.

“In the first time [of the movement to Macao] all of us went, then, my parents got divorced there and meanwhile my father returned, and after a while we also returned; then we came back to Macao: me, my mother and my sisters, that was the household, we went there, we settled and came back; then we stayed here [in Portugal] for one year, the four; and in the last time only me and my mother returned to Macao.” Duarte

In comparison to the first movement to Macao, their subsequent period in the territory was characterized by a much more open attitude towards the surrounding environment, the cultural differences and the local people - a number even started relationships with Chinese youngsters - intensively taking advantage of the social and cultural

⁹ Some youngsters started studying Chinese when they returned to Portugal, although while living in Macao they only learnt some words and sentences in Cantonese in order to survive in their daily lives in the territory.

opportunities offered by a place where they felt completely at home. Hence, if nowadays Portugal is, for the majority, their shelter harbour, Macao together with other countries has a prominent place in their lives, being the period spent abroad regarded as a determinant in the way they see the others and themselves, that is, as citizens of the world.

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