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Crowing in two voices: The cultural transformation of the Portuguese rooster in postcolonial Macau

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The Barcelos Rooster, an emblem rooted in Portuguese folklore, has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a local curiosity to an icon of national pride and subsequently into a symbol of Macau's post-sovereignty transfer to China in 1999. This study examines the rooster's metamorphosis in Macau. In this former Portuguese territory, the rooster has transcended its original symbolism, aligning with the Chinese cultural values of honesty, bravery, and prosperity and becoming ingrained in the city's identity. By tracing its journey from Portugal to Macau, the study explores the rooster's role as a transcultural object within postcolonial tourism and transculturalism frameworks. It investigates how the rooster's adaptation reflects the complex interplay of power, identity, and culture, contributing to the discourse on cultural symbols and collective identity in postcolonial societies.

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Introduction

In the northern Portuguese town of Barcelos, a legend recounts how a lifeless rooster, set as a feast on a banquet table, miraculously crowed to vindicate a condemned pilgrim. The spared man later commemorated this event with an 18th-century wayside cross. This narrative contributed to the genesis of the Barcelos Rooster, an emblem of the town, tying into both the Jacobean legend related to Saint James the Greater and the longstanding craft of ceramic roosters in the region (Gonçalves and Costa, 2016). This artefact's journey took a pivotal turn under Portugal's *Estado Novo* regime, as the rooster was elevated to a national symbol (Fig. 1), integral to the country's cultural and touristic identity (Alves, 2007, 2013; Ribeiro, 2021; Sampaio, 2012). Its transformation from a local curiosity to a national icon in the mid-20th century exemplifies the power of cultural symbols in shaping and reflecting a nation's identity.

In the dynamic environs of Macau's tourist hubs, the transformation of the Barcelos Rooster from a Portuguese emblem to a marker of this Chinese region's wealth and good fortune is a vivid testament to the over 400-year Portuguese influence on its culture and heritage. Tourists, particularly those from Mainland China, are captivated by the myriad representations of the rooster at Ms Lei's souvenir shop within the Historical Centre (Fig. 2), ranging from ornamental items to utilitarian artefacts like bottle openers and keychains. The transformation of the rooster's symbolism from its Portuguese origins is illustrated through narratives shared by local guides. One such narrative involves Stanley Ho, who maintained a gambling monopoly in Macau until 2002 and has become part of an emerging 'legend.' A tour guide recounts: 'In Macau, this rooster is regarded as a charm for good luck. At Ho's residence, a *feng shui* master would adjust the rooster's head

daily to ensure continued prosperity. Consequently, the rooster has become a symbol of the city, associated with its history of prosperity and luck.'

This narrative exemplifies the Barcelos Rooster's evolution as a transcultural object, warranting academic inquiry to understand its influence and metamorphosis in the context of Macau's cultural identity. It constitutes one aspect of the rooster's multifaceted character, which this study investigates. Grounded in postcolonial tourism theory and ethnographic research, this study examines the rooster's significance as a transcultural figure in Macau. It analyses the complex dynamics of power, identity, and culture in postcolonial urban settings, drawing on Ortiz's (1995) transculturation concept, Pratt's (1992) 'contact zones', and Welsch's (1999) 'transculturality' theoretical framework. The research traces the transformation of the Barcelos Rooster from an emblem of Portuguese nationalistic sentiment in the mid-20th century to a significant cultural icon in Macau, notably following the transfer of sovereignty from Portugal to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1999. This shift in cultural significance is particularly marked by the alteration of inscriptions from 'Portugal' to 'Macau' on the rooster replicas (Fig. 3), indicating a notable change in cultural affiliation.

Moreover, the research investigates the rooster's reimagined and hybridised forms in Macau. This rebranding and the genesis of mixed forms resonate with objects' social and global trajectories, as Appadurai (1986) and Gerritsen and Riello (2016) discussed. These transformations not only represent the merging of cultural identities but also elevate the rooster to a symbol of Macau's cultural interplay, embodying the continuous reshaping of local identity through its changing image and meaning. The



Fig. 1 The Barcelos Rooster is a traditional Portuguese icon popularised by the *Estado Novo* regime in the 1960s as a symbol of Portuguese culture and identity. Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.



Fig. 2 A Macau souvenir shop showcases rooster-themed items to represent local culture. Photo credit: Gonalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.



Fig. 3 The image depicts the Barcelos Rooster, transitioning from a Portuguese emblem to a unique symbol of Macau, as indicated by the modified inscription on the artefact's base. Photo credit: Gonalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

study transcends the conventional view of the rooster as a mere souvenir, instead portraying it as a transcultural object.

Thus, this study poses critical inquiries to further unravel the nuances of Barcelos Rooster's transcultural odyssey. It seeks to comprehend how the rooster's symbolism has altered from a Portuguese national symbol to a recontextualised icon in post-colonial Macau and how these adaptations symbolise the intricate interdependencies of power, identity, and culture in a post-colonial tourism landscape such as Macau. Additionally, the research contemplates the rooster's contribution to and its shaping by the Portuguese-Chinese cultural synthesis in Macau. Ultimately, it examines the broader cultural ramifications of such transformations, aiming to enrich the discourse on the mutable essence of cultural symbols and their influence on collective identity formation in postcolonial settings.

The forthcoming sections of our study present a systematic narrative that begins by charting the Barcelos Rooster's inception as a symbol of Portuguese national identity. This narrative outlines Macau's historical development, emphasising the pivotal moments facilitating its transition to a tourism-centric economy. Attention is then directed towards the government's role in nurturing creative and cultural industries, which has been instrumental in the rooster's appropriation, adaptation, and transformation. Through several examples and anecdotes, the narrative articulates the rooster's journey of adaptation, culminating in its transformation within Macau's context. The final analytical section situates these developments within the theoretical paradigms of transculturalism, evaluating the rooster's emblematic significance against a backdrop of global cultural exchange and postcolonial identity formation.

Methodological approach

Our ethnographic investigation into the Barcelos Rooster's cultural metamorphosis in Macau harnesses the strength of ethnography to uncover the nuanced practices, meanings, and interpersonal dynamics within this context (Briggs, 1986; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Marcus and O'Reilly, 2005). Striving for Geertz's 'thick description' (1973), we aim to unravel its symbolic stature in Macau.

Forty open-ended interviews were conducted across a diverse demographic spectrum to capture the rooster's cultural imprint. Interviewees included business owners, souvenir merchants, tour guides, longstanding residents, designers, art enthusiasts, and tourists. This varied pool was selected to comprehensively understand the Portuguese rooster's cultural resonance in Macau. The selection was based on their direct or indirect connection with the rooster's cultural footprint in Macau. Before the interviews, participants were briefed on the study's purpose and provided their written consent. Visual elicitation techniques were integrated during the interviews to enhance the depth of participants' responses (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Conversations, primarily in Chinese, Portuguese, and English, were recorded and translated into English.

Visual materials significantly informed this research. Drawing on Kopytoff's 'biography of things' (1986), our analysis encompassed a variety of rooster-inspired objects, from mugs to event flyers, amassed over the past decade.

The analysis of our data unfolded in two distinct phases. Initially, we applied thematic analysis as delineated by Boyatzis (1998) to discern and interpret recurring themes within interview responses, thereby tracing patterns and divergences in the perceptions shared by participants. Subsequently, we utilised critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) to examine the influence of discourse on the construction and representation of social identities. This two-pronged approach allowed for a comprehensive

examination of the data, integrating thematic patterns and the discursive mechanisms at play.

In-depth engagement with the subject matter facilitated a comprehensive understanding. Triangulation of data from interviews, field observations, and archival research enhanced the validity of the findings. Participant verification procedures and peer review were implemented to ensure fidelity between the research outcomes and the subjects' lived experiences.

Next, we delve into the historical and political context under Portugal's *Estado Novo* regime, examining the symbolic strategies employed to transform the Barcelos Rooster from a mere local artefact to an emblem of national identity. This exploration is crucial for understanding how the rooster was co-opted and reimagined as a symbol within the framework of nationalistic ideologies, reflecting the regime's efforts in crafting a specific national narrative and identity.

Symbolic strategies and the Barcelos' Rooster in Portugal's *Estado Novo*

During the *Estado Novo* era in Portugal (1933–1974), the authoritarian regime employed various strategies to create symbolic representations of Portuguese national identity (Alves, 2013; Corkill and Almeida, 2009; Correia, 2016; Cunha, 2001; Mendes, 2020; Ribeiro, 2018). The regime aimed to establish a unified and authentic depiction of the people and steer the nation towards what it perceived as the 'true' path. These efforts formed the foundation for narrative constructions that fostered a sense of national identification. Popular culture, particularly folklore, played a significant role in cultivating a sense of belonging and patriotism within the community (Melo, 2001). Folk art, recognised for its origins among the people, was pivotal in this process (Castelo-Branco and Branco, 2003).

The *Estado Novo* regime sought to promote a traditionalist image of Portugal and transform the country into a museum that championed national identity and conservatism. It regarded traditional culture, religious traditions, and love for the homeland as essential elements of Portuguese identity (Melo, 2001). The regime's message rested on the pillars of religion, nationalism, and traditional ruralism, opposing cosmopolitan progress.

The Secretariat of National Propaganda (SPN), later renamed the Secretariat of National Popular Culture and Tourism Information (SNI), played a central role in propagating these values. Through art, culture, and media, SPN/SNI aimed to create a national identity that glorified the *Estado Novo* regime (Cadavez, 2015; Costa, 2013; Gori, 2018; Ribeiro, 2018). Through large-scale events and exhibitions that celebrated Portugal's history and achievements, the regime sought to establish 'invented traditions' by repeating symbolic practices from the past, as fabricated by the SPN/SNI, to solidify the urban public's adherence to official cultural practices and cultivate a sense of nationalism (Cunha, 1991; Sapega, 2008).

The promotion of the Barcelos Rooster as a Portuguese national icon originated from its introduction at the Exhibit of the Portuguese World in 1940 as a small clay rooster crafted in the traditional pottery wheel style. In the 1950s, a modernised version of the rooster emerged, featuring a new shape and decoration, including red hearts as the primary motif. It swiftly became Portugal's tourist emblem and gained international recognition through its features in French and other interior design magazines. The *Estado Novo* regime actively promoted this revamped Barcelos Rooster, solidifying its status as a national symbol and integrating it into the regime's efforts to cultivate a distinctive Portuguese identity.

The SPN/SNI's cultural events and propaganda effectively utilised miniatures and rural artefacts to express patriotism subtly

within homes and daily life, aligning with the concept of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995). These decorative items, easily adapted into souvenirs, facilitated a routine emotional connection to the nation (Alves, 2007). This daily affection towards the country, cultivated through commonplace objects, echoes Billig’s notion of the hidden spread of nationalist ideology.

In 2021, following a protracted process and several failed attempts, the Municipality of Barcelos registered the Barcelos Rooster as a national trademark, thus taking a step towards protecting the creative and intellectual property of the artisans associated with the Barcelos region. In an interview, a representative from the Municipal Council of Barcelos mentioned that numerous issues were raised during the process due to the widespread presence of the rooster in Portugal, that is, ‘this element is very prevalent throughout the Portuguese territory’, and thus, ‘the argument focused on the fact that the rooster is a reflection of the cultural, artistic, and creative identity of a creative community anchored in Barcelos.’ After a failed attempt to also register the Barcelos Rooster as an international trademark, the Municipal Council of Barcelos was, at the time (June 2023), preparing a counter-response, arguing that it pertains to ‘an international protection for something that is unquestionably Portuguese, it was born in Barcelos, it is from Barcelos, it has an ethnohistorical context that leaves no one in doubt.’

The goal, however, is not to prevent the reproduction of copies of the Barcelos Rooster wherever it may be, but rather, according to the official representative, ‘to ensure the recognition that, despite the rooster being an icon of Portugal and of Portuguese identity in the world, this element was born in Barcelos, in a particular context linked to creativity and traditional figurative art.’ According to official data, the production of artisanal rooster figures in Barcelos represents 8% of the municipality’s GDP. According to the representative of the Municipal Council, ‘the rooster is, without a doubt, the most produced and most commercially successful tourist souvenir in Portugal.’

Macau’s transformation into a tourist destination

Portuguese explorers established a trading post in Macau in 1557, transforming it into a maritime hub for East-West trade. Over four centuries, this presence influenced Macau’s culture, architecture, and economy, yet Portugal never fully asserted colonial dominion. Clayton (2010) notes this ‘sort-of sovereignty’ resulted in a socio-political landscape where Portuguese and Chinese administrative domains coexisted under separate jurisdictions. Despite geographic proximity, the two enclaves were governed distinctly: the Portuguese operated under Portugal’s administration, while the Chinese entities followed local governance, often recognised by Chinese authorities. This led to a unique duality in governance, contributing to Macau’s hybrid cultural identity.

In the late 19th century, Portugal legalised gambling to promote economic development. Simultaneously with the *Estado Novo* regime’s endorsement of the Barcelos Rooster as a national symbol, Macau was categorised as an ‘overseas province,’ a strategic response to international decolonisation mandates, allowing the authoritarian regime to maintain its ties with Macau while nominally aligning with the global push towards the dissolution of colonial empires. This status foreshadowed Macau’s reintegration with China and reflected the nuanced colonial relationship. Macau’s present identity as a Special Administrative Region, with its legal system and autonomy, remains informed by this hybrid past.

Macau’s economy has been historically tied to ethically contentious industries, including the coolie trade, opium, and gambling. The tourism sector expanded in the 1970s, driven by China’s gambling ban and the modernisation of Macau’s casinos.

Enhancements in transport links with Hong Kong and the 1987 Joint Declaration catalysed infrastructural development, which was pivotal for Macau’s tourism growth (Hobson, 1995).

The increase in tourism prompted efforts to preserve historic structures. The Committee for the Preservation of Macau’s Heritage was founded in 1976, aiming to collaborate with the Information and Tourism Centre to augment Macau’s appeal. A comprehensive assessment led to the classification of key sites, reflecting the Portuguese administration’s late-term emphasis on Macau as a cultural crossroads (du Cros, 2009; Marreiros, 1987). Investments in conservation, cultural institutions, and urban beautification, like the construction of the *calçada* (Zandonai and Amaro, 2018), were intended to create a lasting ‘cultural legacy’ (Chung, 2009; Clayton, 2010). In the early 1990s, Macau experienced a surge in tourism, with arrivals – primarily from Hong Kong – far outnumbering the resident population. The primary lure for these tourists was Macau’s burgeoning gambling industry, the city’s foremost attraction at the time.

The handover of Macau’s sovereignty to the PRC on 20 December 1999 marked a significant departure from the typical narrative of postcolonial independence. Macau’s ‘decolonisation’ process did not aim for nationhood but involved integration into the PRC. This significantly altered tourism demographics, resulting in most visitors coming from mainland China. This transition is crucial for understanding Macau’s historical development’s unique trajectory and contemporary socio-economic landscape. Since the establishment of the Macau SAR, the gambling sector has been experiencing rapid growth, propelled by industry liberalisation in 2002 and foreign investment. The Individual Visit Scheme (IVS) in 2003 also spurred tourism growth by easing travel restrictions to Macau for mainland Chinese.

In the last two decades, Macau underwent a remarkable transformation, with reclaimed lands being reshaped into distinctive spatial assemblages featuring themed environments and replicas of renowned world landmarks, including structures like Paris’ Eiffel Tower, Venice canals, London’s Big Ben, or a collection of European and American *façades* showcased in the pedestrian area known as Fishermen’s Wharf. These themed environments served as captivating backdrops for entertainment complexes and integrated resorts, turning Macau into a playground of fantasy and spectacle.

Before the onset of the pandemic, Macau’s tourism industry thrived, driven by its dominant gaming industry-driven economy. In 2019 alone, the influx of tourists reached 39.4 million, representing a growth rate of 10.1% compared to the previous year (DSEC, 2020). The gross gaming revenue experienced a ninefold growth rate over 18 years, establishing the city as the world’s leading gaming destination (Sheng and Gu, 2018). The Macau government strategically emphasised cultural and gastronomic tourism as crucial pillars to diversify the industry and reduce economic dependence on gaming. Notably, in 2005, the Historic Centre of Macau was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2017, the city was designated as a UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy.

Transcultural dynamics in postcolonial tourism

As a transnational phenomenon, tourism has drawn significant academic interest (Apostolopoulos, Leivadi and Yiannakis, 1996; Pfoser and Keightley, 2021; Salazar, 2011; Williams, 2014). Yet, there remains to be an underrepresentation of research exploring tourism within postcolonial contexts (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2007; d’Hautesserre, 2004; Hall and Tucker, 2004). The term ‘postcolonial’ relates to a temporal stage or political shift that challenges colonial knowledge structures, Eurocentric

perspectives, and generic cultural depictions (Kwok, 2005). Scholars like Hollinshead (1998) have pointed out the influential role of tourism in ‘othering,’ assisting in the essentialising of identities for individuals, places, and histories.

The prevailing discourse on postcolonial destinations highlights their enduring economic struggles post-independence, with a persistent reliance on their former colonial rulers for tourism and financial investment. Macau, however, deviates from this norm. As noted earlier, Macau’s decolonisation led not to independence but to a transfer of sovereignty to the PRC (Clayton, 2010; Pina-Cabral, 2002). This transition was characterised by a significant increase in visitors from mainland China, who now make up the majority of tourists (Wong and McKercher, 2012). This shift is underscored by the fact that only 0.3% of Macau’s population was born in Portugal, and just 1.9% hold Portuguese nationality (DSEC, 2022a), signalling a departure from typical postcolonial demographics. Consequently, Macau has emerged as a developed economy that diverges from the standard post-colonial narrative of attracting affluent tourists from former ruling nations. Instead, it stands out for its unique identity as a transcultural hub where Chinese, Portuguese, and local heritages are interwoven (Zhang, Yankholmes and Morgan, 2022), and its Portuguese legacy is strategically utilised as a cultural differentiator (Linehan et al., 2020).

Numerous studies have emphasised the centrality of post-colonial characteristics in destination tourism promotion strategies. The widely-used slogan ‘East meets West’ presents a unique selling proposition by blending local culture with Western traditions, appealing particularly to Western tourists (Carrigan, 2011; McKercher and Decosta, 2007). Some researchers have examined how postcolonial destinations leverage their ethnic culture and colonial past as cultural tourism products (du Cros and McKercher, 2020), while others have explored how destination images and the construction of national identity appeal to tourists from former colonial metropolises by depicting colonisers as explorers (Echtner and Prasad, 2003; Frew and White, 2011; McKercher and Decosta, 2007). Chang (2005) has observed the emergence of the ‘New Asia’ identity, where former colonial territories evoke images of exoticism and modernity in their marketing campaigns, as intense competition compels destinations to devise innovative survival strategies, leading to de-differentiation driven by forces of globalisation and post-modernism in various ways (Smith, 2015).

Wang and Law (2017) proffer a conceptual schema, ‘Objects/Other Objects’, which reimagines the traditional Occidental/Oriental dichotomy in the context of Hong Kong’s postcolonial tourism. This framework advocates for an inward touristic gaze that prompts self-reflection and identity contemplation, underscoring the enduring impact of colonial legacies on tourists’ perceptions, destination marketing, and the transformation of spaces into attractions. The emergent narratives within tourism marketing are increasingly nuanced, subtly engaging with the colonial past to curate encounters that resonate with the selected historical and mnemonic attributes. In this context, Souvenirs become symbolic vessels, encapsulating and communicating the essence of colonial heritage.

A transcultural viewpoint is indispensable for unpacking the complexities of cultural exchanges in postcolonial tourism. This perspective recognises cultural interactions’ dynamic and fluid nature, not as passive transfers but as active processes of reconstitution, hybridisation, and commodification. These processes give rise to new cultural forms rich in power dynamics and historical contexts (Ortiz, 1995; Pratt, 1992). Bhabha’s (1994) concept of ‘hybridity’ portrays colonised spaces as crucibles of resistance, forging new identities that transcend their original cultural contexts. Similarly, Hall (1990) describes cultural identity

as an ongoing process of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’, highlighting its ever-evolving nature.

Transcultural objects, dislocated from their original setting and woven into new narratives, take root in postcolonial destinations. In the tourism sector, this transcultural interplay is evident in the aestheticisation of cultural differences, as marketers and communities selectively curate cultural elements to fulfil tourists’ desires for exoticism and perceived authenticity (Urry, 1990). Central to this discourse is the recognition that transcultural perspectives challenge the traditional narrative of ‘epistemic violence’ (Juneja and Grasskamp, 2018). These perspectives refute the notion that alterations in cultural artefacts signify an ‘erosion of originality and authenticity’ (Juneja and Grasskamp, 2018). Instead, they are integral to the ongoing dialogue and evolution of cultural identity, illuminating the intricate ways global and local dynamics intersect and the transformative potential inherent in transcultural exchanges.

Souvenir consumption is a salient component of the tourist experience, acting as a motivator, a source of pleasure (Timothy, 2005), and a defining element of the travel narrative (Hu and Yu, 2007; Law and Au, 2000). The discourse around souvenirs has traditionally emphasised artisanal items, critiquing the dilution of authenticity and the commodification brought on by tourism and globalisation. This narrative often defaults to a Western tourist perspective, overlooking the variegated tastes of a global tourist demographic. Winter (2009) challenges this perspective, highlighting Northeast Asian tourists’ preference for mass-produced souvenirs at Angkor, thus reframing our understanding of material culture in tourism and the cultural acceptance of ‘kitsch.’

Souvenirs in postcolonial tourism encapsulate the transcultural processes, acting as tangible intermediaries of cultural exchange (Hitchcock, 1999; Swanson and Timothy, 2012). They are not simply mementoes but artefacts of transculturation, signifying cultural elements’ appropriation, hybridisation, and reconfiguration, thereby acquiring new significances that reflect the tourists’ cultural frameworks and their interactions with the host culture. The Portuguese rooster exemplifies this phenomenon, as it serves as a narrative framework for Macau’s heritage, documenting its past and encapsulating its cultural development within the context of modernisation.

Cultivating cultural identity through souvenirs

The Macau government’s strategic redirection from gambling to a diverse cultural tourism hub is increasingly evident (Chung and Tieben, 2009; Huang, Tsaur and Yang, 2012; Kong, du Cros and Ong, 2015). UNESCO’s recognition of Macau’s heritage has been pivotal in fostering cultural tourism and rebranding the city’s image. Research indicates that the Historic Centre’s inscription has attracted more Asian visitors, especially from Southeast Asia, who find the Portuguese cultural elements particularly appealing (Huang, Tsaur and Yang, 2012; Lam and Vong, 2009). Concomitantly, official government websites aimed to present a more diverse and inclusive representation of Macau, moving beyond its perception as a day trip from Hong Kong or a gambling hub (Choi, Lehto and Morrison, 2007), resourcing to the explanation of Macau as a historical maritime trade centre to justify the Portuguese architectural apparatus. Wong (2013) notes that while Macau’s colonial past is celebrated for its tangible heritage, the intangible legacy is often downplayed, sanitised, and minimally exposed.

Despite increased tourism, the souvenir market in Macau has remained largely uniform, still showcasing traditional items, such as almond cookies, miniatures of famous historical buildings, and beef jerky. Addressing the growing demand for unique souvenirs, the Macau government initiated the Cultural Industries Fund,



Fig. 4 Stationery material displays ‘Galo Chicken,’ a small black rooster mascot, depicted in various situations reflecting local culture. Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

which, by 2020, had invested in 316 creative projects totalling MOP 518 million (approximately USD 64.75 million). This investment indicates the burgeoning of a creative sector, which expanded from 726 companies in 2014 to 1470 by 2021, providing jobs for over 4000 individuals (DSEC, 2016; 2022b).

The Cultural Industries Fund has been a pivotal mechanism for reconfiguring Macau’s souvenir market. The absence of the Barcelos Rooster within this commercial milieu before the fund’s establishment underscores a former lack of transcultural artefacts. Through the allocation of government subsidies, a conduit was established for the Barcelos Rooster to undergo a process of cultural transplantation and reinterpretation by emergent designers. This intervention has been instrumental in redefining the symbol’s narrative, facilitating its transition from a distinctively Portuguese iconography to a component of Macau’s cultural lexicon. This recontextualisation is not merely an act of adoption but a complex interplay of adaptation and modification, signifying transcultural exchange’s layered and dynamic nature. Over two decades removed from Portuguese administration, the rooster’s reinvention emulates Macau’s cultural identity evolution.

In the forthcoming section, we will delineate the manifestations of this transcultural adaptation. By examining varied instances of the rooster’s integration into Macau’s souvenir offerings, we aim to elucidate the nuanced intercultural dialogues that inform these new cultural expressions, uniquely situated within the post-colonial context of Macau.

Adopting and adapting the Portuguese rooster

Traditionally presented on a black background, the Barcelos Rooster is adorned with hand-painted red hearts or flowers,

embodying themes of love and nature from Portuguese folklore. These motifs, alongside additional yellow, blue, and white designs, often feature the inscription ‘Portugal’ on a blue base, symbolising the nation’s cultural heritage. Initially, these roosters, no taller than 20 cm, were handcrafted from clay by local artisans. With Portugal’s emergence as a significant tourist destination, the demand for this emblematic souvenir increased, prompting its production to diversify in shape and colour. Contemporary manufacturing now occurs on a larger scale in factories across Portugal and China, including more durable metal versions. The rooster’s application has broadened from mere decoration to practical use, appearing on items such as bottle openers, mugs, socks, and fridge magnets. Among its various adaptations, the ‘weather rooster,’ a small velvet figure that alters colour with changes in humidity, has gained popularity for its unique functional appeal.

In 2014, encouraged by the creative industries grants mentioned in the previous section, designer K.W. took the initiative to open his studio. He aimed to design a symbol representing Macau’s ‘East meets West’ identity and be versatile enough for a range of commercial products. After checking online sources for inspiration, K.W. chose the Portuguese rooster as the ideal emblem for his project. During our interview, he noted, ‘Each tourism destination has its unique mascot. Japan has Kumamon, but Macau had none... Given the city’s Sino-Portuguese culture, the rooster, a symbol of luck, is an appropriate basis for a new Macau mascot.’ His efforts culminated in the ‘Galo Chicken,’ a small black rooster distinguished by oversized eyes, a red heart on its chest, and a red mane, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

K.W. symbolically regards it as a representation of cultural fusion, akin to a marriage between the original Portuguese rooster



Fig. 5 Eight Portuguese rooster replicas with Macau's heritage motifs, standing in a square in Coloane village, are part of a concerted effort to stimulate local tourism and commerce produced by a Chinese creative team. Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

and the local cultural influences of Macau, thus evolving into a style reminiscent of East Asian *kawaii* aesthetic, emphasising cuteness and approachability. In addition to the main character, primarily commercialised in a plush toy format, the designer developed an extensive portfolio showcasing the mascot in diverse settings, highlighting its association with Macau. Scenes include the mascot eating noodles, exploring the city's historic streets, posing next to historical buildings, wearing a Grand Prix outfit, and participating in other local activities.

The mascot's Chinese name, 加路雞 (*gā louh gāi* in Cantonese), enhances its visual identity. Using 加 (*gā*) and 路 (*louh*), the name phonetically mirrors the Portuguese word *galo*, showcasing a deliberate linguistic adaptation. This method of employing Chinese characters to replicate the sound of a foreign term indicates a thoughtful engagement with transcultural practices. It highlights the flexibility of language and further cements the mascot's significance as a symbol of Macau's rich cultural synthesis. According to K.W., the choice of this name was deliberate to preserve the term's originality while incorporating a local dimension.

The company has effectively utilised the mascot's image in creating a diverse range of children's souvenirs, including umbrellas, puzzles, t-shirts, postcards, and red envelopes. Additionally, K.W. has innovated a mobile inflatable park themed around the mascot. This park, assembled at fairs and family-oriented events across Macau, offers an immersive experience that, according to him, 'resonates with the playful spirit of the mascot.' Recognising a niche in the tourism market, especially in light of the government's efforts to promote Macau as a family-friendly destination, K.W. was motivated to develop unique children's souvenirs.

While K.W. seeks funding for his 3D models and an animated series, expanding the reach of the iconic rooster into new realms of digital entertainment and interactive audience engagement, there is also a movement towards the reinvention of tangible experiences. The shift to physical spaces is exemplified by the work of K.C.'s company. They have crafted a collection that epitomises the concept of transculturation, merging cultural symbols to elevate Macau's unique visual narrative. K.C. aims not just to recount historical narratives but to create immersive experiences that resonate with tourists. This mission is embodied in installing an array of Portuguese rooster replicas in Coloane village's square (Fig. 5), varying in size and designed to enhance tourism and commercial activity, inviting visitors to interact with and disseminate Macau's cultural heritage through social media.

These redesigned replicas, diverging from the traditional rooster motif with hearts and floral patterns, embrace elements from Macau's UNESCO World Heritage-listed historic buildings instead. K.C. emphasised in our interview the goal of not merely replicating the Portuguese model but enhancing the rooster's role in Macau's identity. 'Upon visiting any tourist attraction or souvenir shop in Macau, the rooster immediately garners attention. Given its popularity, we redesigned it to strengthen its connection to Macau, incorporating designs inspired by the city's architectural heritage.' Following nearly a year on public display, the roosters were relocated to various government offices, designated as representations of Macau's diverse cultural heritage, a term coined by a local government representative.

This evolving perception of the Portuguese rooster, transitioning from a mere decorative item to a cultural emblem, is further evidenced in the commercial sector. Ms Lei, who has managed a souvenir shop for around 15 years, recalled the initial

import of the roosters into Macau. Starting about 2012, a Chinese entrepreneur began mass-producing these roosters in China. Initially targeting souvenir shops in Portugal with affordable replicas, the strategy soon expanded to Macau, capitalising on the region's Portuguese heritage to appeal to Chinese tourists. This shift highlights the rooster's growing significance as a symbol of post-handover Macau, embraced by business owners and tour guides alike.

Initially, Ms. Lei was cautious about stocking the black rooster in her shop, unsure of its appeal to customers. She began with a modest inventory, primarily for consignment sales. However, in 2017, the situation changed significantly. Coinciding with the Year of the Rooster in the Chinese zodiac, a period imbued with cultural significance where the rooster symbolises honesty, grit, and luck, she observed a substantial increase in sales. This surge in demand was partly due to the rooster's cultural resonance in the Chinese context. As the demand grew, Ms. Lei started to diversify her inventory, introducing a more extensive variety of colours, sizes, and applications of the rooster motif into other useful objects.

Interestingly, the roosters Ms Lei sources are still produced in a Chinese factory that mainly manufactures these souvenirs for export to Portugal. However, a particular batch is made with the inscription 'Macau,' specifically tailored for souvenir shops in the Chinese region. While the rooster's design remained unchanged, its cultural association shifted, becoming more closely aligned with Macau, as indicated by this alteration. Despite this, the name used for the object in Chinese still makes direct reference to Portugal, as it reads 葡國公雞 (*pòuh gwok gūng gāi* in Cantonese, or *pú guó gōng jī* in Mandarin), translating to 'Portuguese rooster.' Ms. Lei explained that this designation adds a layer of authenticity, making the rooster more appealing to customers, especially those from Mainland China. She says, 'For the business, it's better to say Portuguese, as the visitors from Mainland China are interested in having something that is somehow foreign, but at the same time from Macau.' Today, these rooster-themed items are bestsellers in her shop in their varied forms and applications. Reflecting on the rooster's evolving role as a cultural emblem, Ms Lei noted, 'There is no doubt that the rooster is now an iconic symbol of Macau.'

Similarly, Mr Wong, a tour guide since 2001, has noticed an increase in the prevalence of rooster-themed items in local shops, particularly from the late 2010s. This trend highlights the rooster's growing appeal and influence across different sectors in Macau. Wong notes that the rooster holds significant value, pointing out that modern tourists often seek unique, aesthetically appealing, and functional souvenirs. This preference has raised the status of rooster-themed items, aligning them with traditional favourites like almond cookies and beef jerky.

In this context, some tour guides have been instrumental in promoting the rooster souvenirs, partly motivated by commissions from sales. Our fieldwork observations revealed numerous instances where tour guides weave a local and contemporary narrative around the rooster's legend, frequently invoking the name and the success of Stanley Ho, a local gambling tycoon, to heighten its allure. To capture visitors' attention and pique their interest in the rooster souvenirs, these guides adeptly narrate the rooster's transformation into a cherished symbol of good luck, prosperity, and fortune in Macau. This storytelling approach not only captivates tourists but also significantly contributes to the escalating popularity and sales of these souvenirs, thus establishing the rooster's position as a cultural emblem of Macau.

In alignment with this perspective, the visit by a group of four women from Shenzhen, aged 42 to 55, to a retail establishment in Macau's Historic Centre provides additional insights into the cultural significance of the rooster. This particular example,

drawn from several instances observed during our fieldwork, exemplifies the rooster's acquisition of a distinct aura that resonates with tourists. One of them mentioned the motif's uniqueness compared to Mainland China's souvenirs, while another found personal significance in the rooster, correlating it with her zodiac sign and auspiciousness, leading her to spend around MOP 600 (USD 75). Interestingly, they did not explicitly associate the rooster with Macau's Portuguese heritage. A store employee confirmed that tourists increasingly view the rooster as a distinctive symbol of Macau's identity, which has translated into strong sales for these items imported from Chinese factories.

Several blocks away, a wall painted to emulate traditional Portuguese *azulejos* (ceramic tiles), distinguished by blue and white hues and interspersed with sayings in the Portuguese language, captures the attention of passers-by who pause to photograph against this unique backdrop. Near the entrance of the souvenir shop, a depiction of the Barcelos Rooster complements the external theme, marked by the sign 'Portuguese Street' – a reference to the shop's name rather than the actual street. Inside the shop, souvenirs portraying the rooster are a prevalent feature, often chosen by customers. Although the external and internal decor of the shop heavily reference Portuguese elements, the commercialisation of these rooster-themed souvenirs positions them as traditional symbols of Macau, historically linked to prosperity and fortune, and indicative of the city's historical interactions with 'early foreigners who lived in Macau before,' as a shop employee tells us. The shop's presentation and merchandise subtly imply a Portuguese influence, yet explicit acknowledgement of this heritage is predominantly prompted by customer inquiries, especially those from Japan, Taiwan, and Korea.

Transitioning from the Macau peninsula to the erstwhile island region, in Taipa village, another souvenir shop prominently featuring a *façade* inspired by Portuguese blue and white tiles has recently expanded its range of rooster-themed merchandise. This shop, seeking to differentiate itself in the market, has recently broadened its offerings to include an extensive range of rooster-themed merchandise. The diverse inventory features items like mobile phone chargers, leather bags, hand-painted tiles, notebooks, silk scarves, and facial masks. Each product showcases a blend of Portuguese elements, redesigned to embody the 'Made in Macau' ethos. Departing from the norm of importing ready-made goods from Chinese factories, the shop engages a dedicated team of designers. Their task is to creatively reinterpret aspects integral to Macau's identity, drawing heavily on Portuguese influences such as the *azulejos* and the rooster image. This innovative approach leads to creating a unique product line, produced in limited runs in China, which intriguingly often includes *kawaii* elements like Hello Kitty or Little Twin Stars, adding a contemporary twist to traditional motifs.

This business model transcends the usual retail framework, embracing both online and physical platforms to meet the diverse needs of tourists. Furthermore, this establishment caters to a broader clientele, including hotels and corporate entities, offering its unique merchandise as a slice of Macau's cultural fusion. Within a mere five-year span, the enterprise has successfully opened four stores in prime tourist areas, a growth supported by government loans and subsidies. This expansion underscores the appeal of their culturally rich, Portuguese-inspired Macau products.

The success of this business in utilising traditional Portuguese elements, deeply rooted in Macau's past, to forge a new identity for Macau is not just evident in its rapid growth and varied product offerings. It also mirrors a more significant movement within the local market. This movement sees various Macau enterprises embracing Portuguese motifs to define and distinguish a post-handover identity.



Fig. 6 A local coconut ice cream business demonstrates the integration of the Barcelos Rooster image into their signage, accompanied by the affirmation of 'Macau tradition.' Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

The rooster's emblematic stature, in fact, extends beyond mere tokens in tourist boutiques. A comprehensive review of visual resources collated over the past decade foregrounds local establishments and government departments' utilisation of the rooster's symbol to denote the notion of 'authentic Macau', a 'Macau tradition', 'manufactured in Macau.' Out of numerous instances, four specific cases stand out. For example, a local business specialising in coconut ice cream (Fig. 6), with outlets near major tourist attractions, integrates the image of the Barcelos Rooster into their signage, accompanied by the phrase 'Macau tradition.' According to a store representative, this symbolises an effort to 'communicate the notion that coconut ice cream, much like the rooster, forms an integral part of Macau's enduring traditions.'

This notion is further corroborated by a brand manufacturing traditional Chinese medicinal commodities, marketed under the tagline 'Macau Original' (Fig. 7). The rooster's image, embossed on the entirety of their product range, including oils, creams, and medicinal herbs, serves as a company logo. This branding strategy intends to establish credibility with their customer base since, according to a company spokesperson, 'the Macau rooster symbolises trust, impartiality, and prosperity,' traits highly sought after in traditional medicine. They avow, 'The Macau rooster, a fragment of Portuguese cultural legacy, bolsters our image and strengthens our reputation.'

The integration of the rooster motif into marketing strategies, particularly in targeting tourists, underscores its cultural resonance. For instance, a local bakery has adopted the rooster image across all packaging for its range of 'Macau's traditional baked goods' (Fig. 8), which includes almond cookies, cheese cookies, and egg rolls. A representative from the bakery emphasised that the rooster imagery on their packaging is more than a visual

motif; it is a declaration of the product's origins. It symbolises the items' local craftsmanship, authentic to Macau's traditions. This imagery aligns with the bakery's objective of attracting tourists who value souvenirs that are distinctive and symbolic of Macau's cultural heritage.

Building on the theme of cultural symbolism, a Chinese-language newspaper founded in 2010 has chosen the Portuguese rooster as its emblem. Operating independently and dedicated to investigative journalism, All About Macau's mission is to offer a critical perspective on contentious issues. Adopting the rooster symbol in their branding is a deliberate move to forge a unique identity in the Macau media landscape. By aligning with the values traditionally associated with Macau's Portuguese-language media, known for its critical journalism, the organisation leverages the rooster emblem to differentiate itself from other Chinese-language media outlets.

Furthermore, the decision to employ the Portuguese rooster as a logo extends beyond mere branding; it is a statement of the outlet's journalistic philosophy. The journalists with the newspaper expressed the rooster as an emblem of honesty and justice – a beacon that guides their reporting style and serves as a cultural touchstone, connecting their mission to the historical and current identity of Macau. This choice not only reflects a reverence for the city's Portuguese past but also affirms the media outlet's commitment to critical and value-driven journalism.

The rooster's significance is multifaceted in the broader context of Macau's postcolonial cultural identity. The Monopoly Macau edition, with its rooster token, is emblematic of this integration. Launched in 2012, the board game's properties reflect Macau's streets and landmarks, embedding the territory's geographic and cultural essence within the gameplay. The limited release of the



Fig. 7 The rooster's image appears on a range of traditional Chinese medicinal products, branded as 'Macau Original,' serving as a visual identity for the company. Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

bilingual Chinese-English edition further cements the rooster's role as a symbol that resonates within the collective consciousness of Macau, symbolising both a bridge and a boundary between the past and present, the local and the tourist, the traditional and the modern.

Such cultural integration and adaptation of the Portuguese rooster in Macau's local industries, as seen in the Monopoly game, reveal a broader narrative of transcultural engagement. Within this narrative, the rooster assumes a spectrum of values and meanings, as interpreted by different community actors, from business proprietors to visiting tourists. This variety of interpretations provides a deeper understanding of the Portuguese heritage in Macau and the dynamic processes shaping its cultural landscape. As a bridge connecting historical and contemporary realms, the rooster emerges not just as a game token but as a potent symbol of the complex layers of Macau's identity. It reflects the fluidity of cultural symbols within a postcolonial milieu, underscoring the intricate interplay of cultural negotiation and identity formation. In the ensuing analysis, we will explore the notion of the rooster as a 'transcultural object,' shedding light on its pivotal role in the evolution of Macau's cultural identity.

Discussion: The Portuguese rooster's transcultural journey in Macau

The integration of the Portuguese rooster into Macau's cultural and commercial landscape, as elucidated by the examples in the previous section, exemplifies a transformation that transcends the physicality of a cultural artefact, positioning it as a 'theoretical

object' within Damisch's (1994) theoretical framework. This metamorphosis into a 'theoretical object' reflects the rooster's absorption of a multitude of meanings, encapsulating the complex layering of historical significance, contemporary cultural identity, and the socio-economic influences underpinning its adoption and adaptation. This transition, indicative of Pieterse's (1995) hybridity concept, marks the rooster's evolution from a Portuguese nationalist emblem to a transcultural icon. The rooster, in its new context, embodies the dialogue between global modernity and local traditions, as noted by Tomlinson (1999), and acts as one of the 'things that talk' as per Daston (2004), engaging with its new environment and adopting new meanings (Grasskamp and Juneja, 2018).

The rooster's adaptation from a national symbol of the *Estado Novo* regime in Portugal to a marker of Macau's Sino-Portuguese heritage embodies the malleable nature of cultural symbols within a world where borders are increasingly permeable, an idea articulated by Appadurai (1996). The examples of the 'Galo Chicken,' alongside the heritage-themed roosters and various souvenirs that infuse Portuguese elements with modern design at souvenir shops, indicate a creative adaptation. This adaptation, supported by local government initiatives promoting creative and cultural industries, signifies more than aesthetic innovation; it demonstrates active participation in the transcultural discourse, enabling cultural icons to evolve and retain relevance for tourism.

The 'Galo Chicken's' Chinese name reflects a conscious choice to maintain linguistic ties to the original Portuguese symbol while simultaneously accommodating it within Macau's cultural milieu. This linguistic adaptation, coupled with the inclusion of



Fig. 8 The rooster image adorns the packaging materials of a local bakery specialising in ‘Macau’s traditional baked goods.’ Photo credit: Gonçalo Lobo Pinheiro, 2023.

‘Portuguese’ in the naming of Barcelos Rooster replicas found in Macau’s souvenir shops, suggests a balance between upholding historical legacies and embracing new cultural narratives, indicative of the nuanced exchange between Macau’s past and its current cultural amalgamation.

Echoing Odell’s (2018) analysis, which delves into the Dutch reinterpretation of Chinese porcelain, the rooster in Macau exemplifies a similar ‘domestication’ process. This term, as Odell articulates, describes how a foreign object is redefined as a national symbol, in this case, how blue-and-white ceramics came to be seen as distinctly Dutch. Odell’s work traces the historical journey of Chinese porcelain from its initial domestic appreciation in the Netherlands to the moral panic it stirred in 18th-century England and its eventual revival and rebranding as a hallmark of Dutch culture by American consumers and entrepreneurs in the 19th century. The painted surfaces of Delftware, rather than the material itself, became a canvas upon which notions of ‘Dutchness’ were projected and popularised.

In Macau, the Portuguese rooster has undergone a parallel transformation. Once an emblem of Portuguese nationalism, it has been embraced and reinterpreted within the local context to become a symbolic figure of Macau’s postcolonial identity. Just as the Delftware’s surfaces provided a medium for Dutch entrepreneurs to construct and communicate a national identity, the various depictions of the rooster in Macau’s commercial and cultural domains have become a means for expressing and negotiating the territory’s unique cultural narrative. This process reflects the broader dynamics of transcultural engagement, with stakeholders from different sectors assigning new values and

significance to the rooster, thus contributing to the ongoing construction and understanding of Macau’s cultural heritage and identity.

Ströber’s (2018) research into the transcultural odyssey of Chinese ceramics, specifically the crayfish ewer, underscores the rooster’s similar path. Like the ewer, the Portuguese rooster has travelled across cultural boundaries, acquiring new roles and symbolism. The local bakery’s use of the rooster on packaging for ‘made in Macau’ almond cookies, the traditional medicine company’s branding, and the Chinese-language newspaper’s logo exemplify the strategic repurposing of the rooster to convey authenticity and quality, highlighting its role as a symbol reflective of Macau’s postcolonial identity and heritage.

These instances reveal the rooster as a transcultural object within Macau’s cultural narrative, transitioning from a Portuguese symbol to a local emblem of Macau’s hybrid identity. The Portuguese rooster’s trajectory in Macau thus provides a compelling narrative of transculturalism, underscoring the transformative potential of cultural objects to mediate and sculpt cultural identities within the global cultural milieu.

Conclusion

This study has traced the transformation of the Barcelos Rooster from a symbol of Portuguese national identity to a transcultural icon in Macau, thereby answering our primary research questions. We have witnessed the rooster’s journey from a representation of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995) to a ‘theoretical object’ (Damisch, 1994), embodying the intersection of diverse cultural narratives and theoretical interpretations.

Macau's socio-cultural evolution from a Portuguese colony to a Special Administrative Region of China has been accompanied by significant changes in its cultural symbols. The remarkable increase in tourism, from 7.44 million visitors in 1999 to 39.4 million in 2019, has necessitated the creation of new tourist-oriented products, including appealing souvenirs. In response, Macau has reinterpreted the Barcelos Rooster, aligning it with qualities esteemed in Chinese culture – honesty, grit, and prosperity – thereby enhancing its appeal as a souvenir and ensuring its place within Macau's cultural identity.

The convergence of Portuguese and Chinese details in creating Macau's transcultural rooster souvenir is particularly compelling. The rooster, integrating Chinese symbols of fortune and prosperity into the traditional Portuguese motifs, exemplifies the intricate melding of two distinct cultural narratives. This blend of influences has elevated the rooster from a national emblem to a complex symbol of Macau's postcolonial identity – a tactile token of transculturation that encapsulates the city's historical narrative and cultural amalgamation. By engaging with theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Ortiz (1995), Welsch (1999), and Bhabha (1994), this paper contributes to our understanding of transcultural objects as agents of cultural negotiation and identity construction in postcolonial settings.

In essence, the story of the Portuguese rooster in Macau, as unveiled through our research, provides an example of the dynamic and evolving nature of cultural symbols in a globalised world. It highlights the transformative potential of cultural objects to mediate and shape cultural identities within the postcolonial and global milieu. As such, the narrative of the Portuguese rooster in Macau, enriched by its transcultural materiality, invites further scholarly exploration into the rich tapestry of history, commerce, and culture that characterises global postcolonial discourses. Future analyses will explore the rooster's significance in Macau's expanding tourist economy and gaming sector.

Data availability

The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

The author is fully and solely responsible for conducting the study and preparing the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This research design was revised and approved by the Research Committee of the Macao Polytechnic University in December 2022.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Additional information

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