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"Macao's Opening of Ports" from the Perspective of Pacifying the Japanese Pirates

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Abstract

The *wokou* (Japanese pirates) in the Jiajing era of the Ming Dynasty is a very broad concept, including real Japanese pirates from Japan, Chinese armed smuggling groups, and Portuguese colonists. After the war of Shuangyu port, under the continuous attack of Zhu Wan, Yu Dayou, and other generals, the armed smuggling group led by Wang Zhi went to Japan, while the Portuguese colonists went south to Guangdong. In this regard, Yan Song cabinet adopted the strategy of division and rule. In the southeast, Zhang Jing and Hu Zongxian were successively sent as the governor of Zhejiang Province to continue the war against Japan pirates, while in Guangdong, Wang Bai was sent as the *haidao-fushi* (deputy envoy of maritime channels) to negotiate with the Portuguese and allow them to do business. The wokou crisis is the biggest political event faced after the thirtieth years of Jiajing reign of Ming Dynasty. From the perspective of pacifying the wokou, we can find that the opening of Macao is a part of the established pacifying the Japanese strategy of the Ming court, not due to "bribery", "negotiation", or other reasons.

Keywords: Wang Bai, Armorial Porcelain, Ambergris, Macao's opening of ports

Introduction

The "opening of Macau" was a major event in Chinese history and a key issue widely discussed in the literature. However, the reasons behind Macau's opening remain a subject of debate. Major viewpoints are generalized as the bribery theory, the anti-piracy theory, the negotiation theory, and the spice theory. The first three theories attribute the opening to Wang Bai or local Guangdong authorities. However, a closer analysis will suggest that such views overlook the broader context: Macau's opening is closely related to the fundamental policies of the Ming court, and local authorities lack the authority to make such decisions independently. Some scholars link it to Emperor Jiajing's need for ambergris (see Jin & Wu [1]), However, *The Ming Shi-lu* (*Veritable Records of the Ming*) reveals that the Ming government actually recognized ambergris as an overseas product after Macau's opening, suggesting no direct link between the two. Scholars like Chen Wenyuan [2] see it as a response to early globalization, yet this view oversimplifies the Portuguese agenda. During the Age of Exploration, European fleets served dual roles as merchant ships and military vessels, their commanders exercising quasi-state powers. Thus, to frame the opening of Macau as a pure commercial activity is historically inaccurate.

This paper contends that Macau's opening should be understood within the broader context of the challenges and policies of the Ming court, particularly the *wokou* issue. By returning to this historical context, we can reassess Macau's opening as part of the anti-*wokou* strategies.

The Transformation of the Portuguese

In the mid-15th century, the rise of European capitalism spurred demand for precious metals and stable trade routes, igniting the search for maritime passages to Asia. Portugal and Spain

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led this exploration, which involved both trade expansion and brutal colonial exploitation. The Portuguese concept of "Descobrir" (discovery) justified their claim over Asian territories as "Descobrimentos" (fruits of discovery) (Zhang [3]). Thus, they aimed to trade when possible and wage war when necessary (Suramyaam [4]). While European navigation advanced globalization, it brought devastation to Africa and Asia.

In the early 16th century, the Portuguese, after occupying Goa, turned to East Asia, disrupting the Chinese-centered tributary system. They captured Malacca in 1511, entered the East Asian trade circle, and began probing the Chinese coast. Portuguese familiarity with Chinese goods like Jingdezhen porcelain, acquired via Malacca, preceded their incursions into Guangdong (Huang [5]). Preparations included intelligence-gathering through Chinese smugglers and naval reconnaissance. In 1514, Jorge Álvares erected a stone pillar with the Portuguese royal emblem on Shangchuan Island, symbolizing their "discovery" of China (Zhang [3]). Subsequent expeditions, such as Rafael Perestrello's 1515 mission, mapped the Pearl River Delta's trade and defenses (Ma [6]).

In 1517, Portuguese commander Fernão Pires de Andrade led an eight-ship fleet to invade China. Landing on Shangchuan, they built fortifications and flaunted firearms (Yan [7]). *Dongguan Xianzhi* (*The Dongguan County Gazette*) records their atrocities: They defied regulations, refused taxes, boiled infants, enslaved men, fortified themselves with barricades, and wielded firearms indiscriminately, their savage force unstoppable, and their wolfish ambitions unfathomable (Wang [8]). Diogo Calvo, a participant, later admitted that defying the decrees of the Chinese emperor, they sought to wage war on Chinese soil, plunder the nation, and perpetrate numerous atrocities (Zhang [9]). British Museum manuscripts corroborate these accounts, detailing Portuguese extortion, slave-taking, and piracy:

> This commander treated the Chinese in the same manner he had treated all other Asians. Without authorization, he erected a fortress on Tunmen (Shangchuan) Island, lying in wait to extort ships traveling to and from China. He seized young women from coastal areas, captured Chinese men to enslave them, and indulged in unrestrained acts of piracy-utterly shameful and debauched. His sailors and soldiers followed his example (Zhang [9]).

A comparison of the aforementioned historical records reveals that, with the exception of the dubious claim of "boiling infants", the accounts from Chinese and Western sources are largely consistent. This confirms that Portuguese colonizers indeed perpetrated numerous atrocities on Shangchuan Island.

Military conquest proved futile against China's coastal defenses, prompting Portugal to combine force with diplomacy. In 1514, the Portuguese king dispatched Fernão Pires de Andrade to lead a fleet to the East, escorting ambassador Tomé Pires on a diplomatic mission to China. In August 1517, they arrived at Tunmen, where they explained their purpose to the *beiwoguan* (anti-piracy defence officials) at Nantou and requested the dispatch of navigators to Guangzhou. By late December, they reached Guangzhou city, mooring their ships at the Huaiyuan Post (a designated maritime trade station). Pires ordered cannons to be fired as a "salute" and hoisted the Portuguese national flag on the mast. This action provoked dissatisfaction among the Chinese authorities. They assumed that the Portuguese, whose origins were then unclear, arrived under the pretense of paying tribute and the thunderous noise of their cannons upon reaching Macau terrified the entire city (Huang [10]). In response, the Portuguese explained that they merely intended to show respect (Zhang, 2000: 36). After the *haidao-fushi* (deputy envoy of maritime channels) Gu Yingxiang reported the incident, according to the record, governor Chen Xixuan, stationed in Guangdong, deemed the Portuguese ignorant of proper etiquette. He ordered them to undergo three days of ritual training at Guangxiao Temple before granting them an audience (Hu [11]). The Ming contemporaries appeared to accept the Portuguese explanation. Modern scholars such as Wan Ming [8] and Tang Kaijian [12] also support this view, interpreting the cannon fire as a salute with ceremonial cannons. However, this is not unproblematic. Firstly, if the Portuguese genuinely intended to express respect, they should have communicated with the *beiwoguan* at Nantou during their stay in Tunmen to establish mutual understanding and avoid misinterpretation. Secondly, if the Portuguese claimed it was a "ceremonial salute", we must examine the origin and context of such a practice. According to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the custom of firing ceremonial salutes originated in Britain. By the 17th–18th centuries, as the British Empire expanded globally, its warships demanded colonial ports to fire salutes as a gesture of submission and reverence. Therefore, I argue that the Portuguese true motive was intimidation, and their claim of "showing respect" was mere sophistry. Between 1521 and 1522, two conflicts erupted between China and Portugal at Tunmen and Xicaowan Bay, resulting in Portuguese defeats and their expulsion from Guangdong. However, the trade with China was too lucrative to abandon, prompting Portuguese merchants to bypass Guangdong and sail directly from Malacca to Zhejiang and Fujian (Wan, 2001: 48).

Before the Jiajing *wokou* raids, Shuangyu Port was the largest smuggling base along the Zhejiang coast. According to research by scholars such as Wan Ming [8] and Tang Kaijian [12], the Portuguese arrived at Shuangyu Port around 1526. In the record, their presence in Shuangyu resulted from collaboration with Chinese smugglers: Fujianese smugglers redirected them to Haicang and Yuegang, while Zhejiang merchants further guided them to Shuangyu (Hu: 399). And the Chinese invited the Portuguese northward for two main reasons: on the one hand, after seizing Malacca, the Portuguese controlled Southeast Asian pepper production, severely squeezing the survival space of Chinese merchants; on the other hand, smugglers like Xu Dong lacked sufficient capital to sustain independent operations, forcing them to cooperate with foreign traders (Pan [13]). Strategically located off the coast of Ningbo and backed by the affluent Yangtze River Delta, Shuangyu Port enjoyed unparalleled logistical advantages. Jingdezhen porcelain and Jiang-Zhe raw silk could be transported directly via waterways. The port thus thrived as a hub for Chinese silk and ceramics, Japanese silver, and Portuguese pepper and sappanwood. Its prosperity led

Japanese historian Fujita Toyohachi [14] to dub it the "Shanghai of the 16th Century".

The smuggling trade at Shuangyu Port operated in a state of chaos. Debt disputes, once arising, were difficult to control effectively and often escalated into violent conflicts. As noted in the literature, by the mid-Jiajing period, foreign goods would be sold on credit to unscrupulous merchants. Over time, these merchants defaulted on payments-some owing tens of thousands of taels, others no less than a thousand. When pressed, they shifted debts to powerful officials' households. Yet even these households, greedier than the merchants themselves, refused repayment. Foreign traders, anchored offshore, sent envoys to demand their dues, but ultimately received nothing (Zheng [15]). As the debt crisis deepened, Lin Jian lured more than seventy pirate ships from Pahang to Zhejiang's coast, where they joined forces with Xu Er and Xu Si, plundering coastal regions. The estate of Grand Secretary Xie Qian was ransacked entirely (Zheng [16]). This incident, known as the "Yuyao Xie Clan Affair", marked a turning point in the smuggling trade along the southeastern coast. Following the event, local officials reported it to the imperial court. The Ming government promptly appointed Zhu Wan as Governor of Zhejiang, with concurrent authority over maritime affairs in Fujian (Fuxing, Jianning, Zhangzhou, and Quanzhou) and military command. Upholding the principle of "Securing the periphery to stabilize the interior; governing the near to subdue the distant" (Zhu [17]), Zhu Wan launched relentless campaigns against the Portuguese. He achieved decisive victories at Shuangyu Port and Zouxia Bay, dealing a severe blow to Portuguese activities.

Zhang Tianze [3] posits that the Portuguese harbored intentions to conquer China, only abandoning this illusion after Afonso's fleet was defeated off the coast of Guangdong in 1522. While this view may overstate Portuguese ambitions, Zhang Weihua's [9] assertion-the Portuguese came to China to expand their trade in the East, and at the time, they lacked both the ambition and the capacity to occupy China-also diverges from historical realities. The Portuguese actually has been focusing on occupying strategic coastal ports, building military fortresses, securing maritime routes, and consolidating their regional interests.

After their defeats in Guangdong and Zhejiang, the Portuguese came to recognize China as "the sole nation capable of confronting and engaging in serious dialogue with an expanding Europe" (Loureiro [12]). Realizing that their Goa and Malacca model of territorial conquest was untenable here, they severed ties with pirates and *wokou* collaborators (Luo [18]) and shifted toward a strategy of pragmatic engagement with Chinese authorities, seeking to secure a legitimate foothold through negotiated cooperation.

The Policies of the Ming government

Macau's opening was a landmark event in the history of Sino-foreign relations. Modern scholars often neglect the Ming central government's role in this process. As a matter of fact, whether to open involved the core state policy of the Ming court, while local authorities like Guangdong could not act autonomously. It is thus imperative to examine the policy orientation of the Ming government.

1.1. Shifting Perspectives

After the 1523 Ningbo (Tribute) Incident, the Ming government adopted the recommendation of *Jishizhong* (Supervising Secretary) Xia Yan and abolished the Ningbo *shibosi* (maritime trade supervisorates). Unfortunately, this policy inadvertently intensified maritime smuggling activities. Zheng Xiao, a Ming scholar-official, critically noted:

> *Jishizhong* Xia Yan reported that the root of the turmoil lay in the *shibosi*, prompting the *libu* (Ministry of Rites) to advocate their abolition. Yet the true target should have been the corrupt *shibo-taijian* (eunuch administrators overseeing the *shibosi*), not the institutions themselves. Foreign goods-essential to China's economy-were mutually sought by foreign traders and Chinese markets. Although ancestral prohibitions severed official ties with Japan, the three *shibosi*s (Ningbo, Quanzhou, Guangzhou) were never fully dismantled. The shibosi facilitated Sino-foreign exchanges, balanced supply and demand, generated tax revenue, reduced military expenditures, restrained illicit maritime merchants, and curbed unscrupulous traders, ensuring state control over profits. Abolishing the *shibosi* shifted economic gains to private hands, emboldening collusion between rogue elites and foreign interests, plunging the coast into chaos (Luo [18]).

As we can see, while Zheng Xiao recognized the indispensability of the *shibosi*, his analysis remained constrained by the ideological framework of the tributary system, which prioritized ritualized diplomacy over pragmatic economic governance.

After Zhu Wan's suicide, the outbreak of the Jiajing *wokou* raid created an atmosphere where officials across the empire avoided even mentioning maritime restrictions out of fear (Zhang, 1974: 5405) on the surface, yet privately, debates on relaxing the *haijin* (maritime prohibition) gained momentum. Among these discussions, the proposals of Tang Shu and Hu Zongxian stand out as particularly noteworthy.

As *Zhezhi-zongdu* (Governor-General of Zhejiang and Southern Zhili), Hu Zongxian operated on the frontlines of anti-*wokou* efforts. He dispatched envoys Jiang Zhou and Chen Keyuan to Japan to negotiate the surrender of Wang Zhi, the pirate king, granting him unparalleled insight into Japan's domestic conditions. In his memorial to the throne, Hu noted:

> Japan's clothing, utensils, and daily necessities overwhelmingly depend on Chinese goods-needs that cannot tolerate the decade-long intervals of tributary trade or the meager quotas of three ships per mission...To resolve this, we must simultaneously strengthen coastal defenses to bar foreign ships from unauthorized trade, rigorously inspect outgoing vessels to prevent smuggling of strategic materials like saltpeter, and levy tariffs on incoming goods to fund military expenditures. Would this not benefit both China and foreign states

while pacifying coastal unrest? This is what is meant by "governing through non-intervention". Currently, the Guangdong *shibosi* applies such methods to Western traders. If permitted for Eastern maritime peoples (e.g. the Japanese) to engage in sustained trade in Guangdong, there would likely be no objection (Fujita [14]).

Hu Zongxian recognized Japan's immense demand for Chinese goods and realized that the rigidly regulated *hushi* (mutual trade) under the tributary system, which imposed severe restrictions on timing and locations. Consequently, the key to resolving the problem rested on dismantling these constraints. Thus, he advocated for relaxing the *haijin* to alleviate the *wokou* disturbances.

After capturing Wang Zhi, Hu Zongxian consulted Tang Shu on how to address the issue. In Tang's reply, he noted:

> Given the national conditions of China and foreign lands (e.g. Japan), mutual exchange between nations is a necessity. China and foreign lands each possess unique goods; thus, trade is inevitable, as people invariably pursue profit. Our dynasty's laws permit tribute but prohibit private trade. Yet tribute inherently involves the exchange of goods, blurring the line between tribute and commerce...

Since the Tianshun era (1457–1464), the *shibosi* gained excessive authority, and private trade flourished despite official bans. Though the legal ban almost collapsed, the seas remained peaceful for a century-clear proof that open trade works. Critics today may argue that Wang Zhi deserves no pardon, but to claim that trade regulations should never be relaxed reflects a failure to deliberate deeply or examine history (Tang [19]).

Tang Shu asserted that *hushi* was an intrinsic component of the tributary system, rendering abolishing the *shibosi* untenable. He further identified the root issue in ancestral regulations, remarking that if the Hongwu Emperor had lived longer, even he might have amended these decrees (Tang [19]). This critique fundamentally rejected the ideological foundations of the *haijin* policy of the Ming court.

Amidst the expansion of illicit maritime commerce and the destabilization of East Asian littoral frontiers, Ming elites began rethinking the *haijin* policy. Through scholarly treatises, epistolary debates, or direct memorials to the court, their discourse not only reshaped intellectual currents among the *shidafu* (scholar-official) class but also permeated broader societal consciousness. This epistemic shift signaled a gradual yet profound transformation in the maritime consciousness of the ruling elite.

Policy Adjustments

Following the Battle of Zoumaxi in 1548, the Portuguese retreated to Guangdong, continuing their involvement in smuggling trade. One contemporary Portuguese then lamented: "For three years, I traversed China, transaction after transaction, yet profits remained meager. At every port, fortresses were heavily fortified, and fleets remained on high alert, utterly forbidding our trade". Despite these challenges, the Portuguese issued orders for all ships to maintain strict vigilance and instructed their compatriots to avoid any actions that might provoke local discontent or repeat past provocations (Jin [20]). Their apparent compliance in Guangdong led the Ming government to withhold heightened scrutiny. However, after the Renzhi Incident of 1552, Portuguese activities were reinterpreted through the lens of *wokou* threats. To prevent simultaneous unrest in northern and southern frontiers, the Ming court adopted a strategy of appeasement and negotiation. The *Ming Shiji Jishi Benmo* (*Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty*) records that in the fourth month of summer during the 30th year of Jiajing (1551), Zhejiang *Xunan Yushi* (Surveillance Commissioners) Dong Wei and Su Yingcan successively petitioned to relax the *haijin*. The *Xia Binbu* (The Ministry of War), under Zhao Jin, deliberated and approved the measure (Gu, 1977: 847). Although absent from canonical texts like the *Ming Shilu* (*Veritable Records of the Ming*) and *Ming Shi* (*History of Ming*), this archival fragment holds critical significance as it marks the turning point of the Ming *haijin* policy.

In 1553, Wang Bai assumed the post of the *haidao-fushi* in Guangdong. Prior to his arrival in Guangzhou, news of impending negotiations had already circulated. Portuguese merchants imprisoned in Guangzhou were among the first to receive word. In December of 1551, Lopes, a detained Portuguese trader, wrote to his compatriot Pereira pleading for assistance, stating: "The Guangdong authorities have assured us that you may safely return to pay taxes and demanded our release" (Jin & Wu [21]). In 1552, Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary, wrote to Father Gaspar Barzeus in Goa: "According to reliable intelligence, the Chinese emperor has dispatched envoys abroad to investigate foreign political and judicial systems. Thus, it is said that the emperor will inevitably promulgate new laws" (Jin [21]). During Wang Bai's negotiations with Leonel de Sousa, the Portuguese envoy, the issue of tax rates arose. Wang noted that he could not reduce the tax rates, as these were fixed by imperial decree. This matter required memorializing the court. A resolution would only arrive the following year, given the three-to-four-month journey to the emperor's seat of power (Jin [20]). From these accounts, it is evident that the Ming government indeed contemplated revising its *haijin* policy, and Wang Bai's negotiations with Sousa were conducted under explicit central authorization.

Following Hu Zongxian's successful inducement of Wang Zhi's surrender, Zhao Wenhua remarked that the strategies employed by himself and Zongxian were instructed by their mentor, Yan Song (Zhang, 1974: 7919). According to the *Ming Shi*, Zongxian thus petitioned to dispatch envoys to inform the Japanese king, urging the recall of illicit maritime collaborators and offering amnesty in exchange for meritorious service. Upon receiving imperial approval, he sent Jiang Zhou and Chen Keyuan-Ningbo literati-as envoys. After Chen Keyuan's return, Hu Zongxian relayed intelligence on Japan's domestic conditions to the court. The *Binbu* (Ministry of War) advised: Issue directives to Dengzhou, ordering the elimination of bandits in Zhoushan to demonstrate loyalty. Should the coastal regions be pacified, due rewards shall follow. And this proposal was approved (Zhang, 1974: 8354). These records demonstrate that at every critical juncture of Wang Zhi's surrender, Hu Zongxian sought

explicit instructions from the imperial court, underscoring the Ming government's centralized oversight over the operation. Thus, this was not a unilateral decision by Hu Zongxian but a coordinated effort under the dynasty's hierarchical military bureaucracy.

Based on historical records from both Chinese and Western sources, as well as the actions of local officials in Zhejiang and Guangdong provinces, we can assume that although the Ming court did not formally promulgate explicit edicts to relax maritime restriction, de facto steps toward the opening of ports were already underway through practical measures.

The Opening of Macau

After the Gengxu Incident, the Ming government might began addressing threats posed by southern *wokou* and Portuguese activities. After the Renzhi Incident in 1552, coastal instability intensified. To fragment pirate coalitions, the Ming court signaled willingness to negotiate with the Portuguese. In 1553, Wang Bai was appointed as the *haidao-fushi* in Guangdong. Scholar Tan Shibao (2006) attributes Wang's appointment to a fortuitous opportunity. However, there seems to be no compelling evidence for this view. Three key factors refute Tan's claim: First, Wang Bai earned acclaim early in his career as a talent unrivaled under heaven (Wang: 506), gaining patronage from *Jishizhong* Xia Yan. Even Yan Song, then allied with Xia, recognized Wang's capabilities. Second, by the mid-Ming era, Jingdezhen porcelain was already exported to Europe. Wang's familial ties to ceramic smuggling networks granted him unparalleled insight into southeastern coastal dynamics. Third, Wang's strategic prowess in naval defense made him the Ming court's deliberate choice for Guangdong's critical maritime post. Thus, Wang Bai's appointment was not serendipitous but a calculated decision by the Ming government to stabilize coastal governance through technocratic leadership.

Trade Negotiations

After returning to the Guangdong coast, the Portuguese selected Shangchuan Island and Langbaijiao as trading bases. However, their commercial efforts faltered, as one account laments: "Local inhabitants persistently refused to supply provisions, plunging us into severe hardship and scarcity" (Jin [20]). In the 32nd year of Jiajing [10], following Wang Bai's appointment as the *haidao-fushi*, he initiated contact with Portuguese traders through smuggling networks. The Portuguese then noted that: "Guangdong's maritime authorities dispatched envoys to negotiate peace and fix tax rates. The *haidao* (envoy of maritime channels), a high-ranking official akin to our admiral, held jurisdiction over all coastal affairs-economic, military, and administrative" (Jin [20]). The Portuguese swiftly responded by appointing Leonel de Sousa, their fleet commander, as chief negotiator. Sousa declared: "By my sovereign's authority, I was elected to negotiate and formalize customary tariff agreements" (Jin [20]).

As recorded in Jin [20], from Sousa's correspondence, we discern three primary points of negotiation:

I. Renaming Protocol: "Imperial edicts previously barred the Portuguese from entering China. To resolve hostilities, we must cease using the designation Folangji".

II. Tariff Negotiations: "We were obliged to adhere to the customary 20% tax rate, payable in China under royal sanction. However, I agreed to only 10%. The *haidao* replied that he could not lower the rate, as it was fixed by imperial decree. This required memorializing the court, with a resolution delayed until the following year due to the three-to-four-month journey to the emperor's court. Consequently, half of our cargo was taxed at 20%, averaging to the 10% I proposed".

III. Treatment of Tax Officials: "He demanded that I courteously receive officials boarding our ships for tax inspections...reminding me that prior Portuguese misconduct toward an official had provoked the emperor's ban on Portuguese entry".

Thus, we can see that pending imperial approval on tariffs, Wang Bai adopted a flexible ad hoc approach, balancing fiscal compliance with pragmatic diplomacy to stabilize negotiations.

The decision to permit Portuguese trade was contentious at the time. As recorded in *Guangdong Tongzhi* (*Guangdong Provincial Gazetteer*):

> Ding Yizhong, the *anchashi* (Surveillance Commissioner), adhered strictly to legal principles, exonerating dozens of wrongly accused individuals. When the Portuguese violated prohibitions by heading to Nan'ao, *haidao-fushi* Wang Bai, allegedly bribed, advocated appeasement, claiming that foreigners could be enticed to submit. Ding Yizhong countered that this will inevitably become a latent peril for Guangdong. Yet his objections were overruled (Lu [22]).

Hierarchically, Ding Yizhong, as *anchashi*, was Wang Bai's superior. Ding's failure to block the policy stemmed from his conservative adherence to the *haijin* orthodoxy, whereas Wang prevailed precisely because regulated trade aligned with the Ming court's strategic recalibration. Thus, whether Wang Bai accepted bribes is historiographically secondary to the broader policy shift sanctioned by the central government.

Kegang Keji (Leader of Private Merchants)

According to the *Guangdong Tongzhi* (*Guangdong Provincial Gazetteer*), "In the 35th year of the Jiajing reign (1556), *haidao-fushi* Wang Bai established the *Kegang Keji* system, appointing merchants from Guangdong, Huizhou, Quanzhou, and other regions to these roles" (Guo [23]).

The term "*Kegang Keji*" has attracted significant academic attention. The *Hanyu Da Cidian* (*Comprehensive Chinese Dictionary*) interprets it literally as "rules for travelers to abide by". Unfortunately, this translation seems to be superficial. Alternatively, Xu Shaofeng's *Modern Chinese Dictionary* [24] defines it as "seasoned itinerant merchants", which aligns more closely with its historical context. Dr. Ming Xu [25] posits that Kegang Keji, synonymous with *Kezhang* (merchant chiefs), first emerged during the

Chenghua reign (1465–1487) as a salt industry role mediating between licensed salt merchants and the state. By 1556, the term appeared in maritime trade contexts, referring to merchant leaders rather than transport guilds. This interpretation is corroborated by Ling Mengchu's [26] *Chuke Paian Jingqi* (*Amazing Tales: First Series*), in which the Persian merchant Mabao'er is addressed as "Kegang Keji" by the protagonist Wen Ruoxu, while the smuggler Zhang Chengyun is called "Old Kezhang". The equivalence of these titles confirms Ming Xu's analysis. Since the Kegang Keji was established by Wang Bai, their leaders were state-appointed, imbuing the role with dual commercial and official authority. Initially, thirteen merchant households were designated, hence the term "Thirteen Hongs" (Zhu [27]). The *Yuehaiguan Zhi* (*Gazetteer of the Guangdong Customs*) records:

> "When the dynasty first established customs, only twenty-odd foreign ships traded here. They were greeted with ceremonial oxen and wine, managed by *yahang* (licensed brokers), following Ming precedents, labeled the *shisanhang* (Thirteen Hongs)" (Liang & Yuan [28]).

The expression "following Ming precedents" underscores that Wang Bai's *Kegang Keji* system served as the institutional precursor to the Qing-era Canton System.

I argue that appointing merchants from Guangdong, Huizhou, and Quanzhou as *Kegang Keji* holds profound significance. Historical records indicate that during the Jiajing reign, smuggling networks were dominated by three key groups: Huizhou merchants, Fujianese merchants, and Guangdongese merchants. By designating these merchants as *Kegang Keji*, Wang Bai co-opted illicit traders into the state-regulated system, granting them legal status. This policy effectively cleaved merchants pursuing legitimate overseas trade from the *wokou* pirate coalitions, weakening their forces and easing the Ming government's anti-*wokou* efforts.

A case in point is Lin Hongzhong, a Fujianese smuggler and longtime associate of anti-*wokou* general Yu Dayou (Yu [29]). During the rise of Shuangyu Port's trade, Lin collaborated extensively with Portuguese merchants along the Fujian-Zhejiang coast. Captured in the 1548 Battle of Shuangyu, he was denounced by Zhu Wan as "habitually colluding with foreign powers" (Tang [19]), but later rescued by Ningbo literati. After the Portuguese returned to Guangdong, Lin relocated there, resuming trade. In Macau's formative decade, where stable governance was absent, Lin spearheaded a Chinese merchant association that contributed to regional stability. In 1564, he supported Yu Dayou in quelling the Chaozhou Tuolin Mutiny, and in 1568, during raids by remnants of Zeng Yiben's forces on Xiangshan's Tangjia Bay, Sino-Portuguese merchants volunteered to assist in exterminating the bandits (Zhang [30]). By legitimizing such figures, the Ming government not only severed their ties to *wokou* but transformed them into allies in pacifying coastal unrest. Thus, Wang Bai's policy initiatives bore monumental significance [31-36].

Conclusion

Modern discussions on Macau's opening often emphasize globalization; however, this seems to overlook the historical context. For the Portuguese, the goal was commercial-colonial expansion-securing Asian trade routes and maximizing profits-not the abstract historical role of "pioneering globalization". For the Ming, repelling Portuguese incursions was a matter of sovereign integrity and preserving the tributary system. When the Portuguese first sought trade, Guangdong officials rejected their requests due to the absence of precedents in the *Ming Huidian* (*The Legal Canon*). Subsequent Portuguese attempts at military occupation triggered instinctive counterstrikes, a reflex rooted in Ming geopolitical survivalism.

Thus, I argue that analyzing Macau's opening demands grounding in the Jiajing Crisis Context: the dual existential threats of "northern nomads (*beilu*) and southern pirates (*nanwo*)". Following the Gengxu Incident of 1550 and the subsequent Jiajing *Wokou* Eruption of 1550s, the Ming court faced unprecedented pressures, compelling it to adopt bifurcated regional strategies: In Zhejiang, Zhao Wenhua and Hu Zongxian pursued co-optation, offering amnesty to the pirate king Wang Zhi. In Guangdong, Wang Bai negotiated with the Portuguese, sanctioning regulated trade to isolate pirates. It is this crisis-driven pragmatism, not globalization, that catalyzed Macau's opening-up.

Declaration of Interest

None

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None

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