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Macau sees future in Portuguese past

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Portuguese is back in vogue in Macau as China forges business ties with lusophone nations such as Brazil, Angola and Mozambique and casts Macau as a key link because of its cultural ties and history. — AFP

HONG KONG: Sitting in his university office in Macau, professor Lei Heong Lok opens what he calls his "treasure" — a dog-eared Portuguese dictionary, its velvet cover worn and frayed.

Lei's decades-long love for the language has turned him into a campaigner for its survival in the southern Chinese enclave, a former Portuguese colony now best-known for casino resorts.

Learning Portuguese fell out of fashion in Macau after it was handed back to China in 1999, becoming a semi-autonomous territory loyal to Beijing and growing into the world's biggest gambling destination.

Although Portuguese remained an official language and street signage is still bilingual, many in the predominantly Cantonese-speaking territory switched their study focus to Mandarin, spoken in mainland China.

But Portuguese is back in vogue as China forges business ties with lusophone nations such as Brazil, Angola and Mozambique and casts Macau as a key link because of its cultural ties and history.

Students in the enclave see studying Portuguese as a shrewd career move.

Lei — who was born in mainland China, learned Portuguese in Macau in the 1970s and has been president of the Macau Polytechnic Institute for almost 20 years — says the resurgence in interest indicates the years he spent in the post-handover wilderness, travelling all over China trying to attract students to study the language and insisting Macau should value its unique past.

"I said we should keep Macau as a different flower, with different characteristics from other flowers in the Chinese garden," he told AFP.

"Today it's a reality."

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Passion and curiosity

China's interest in Portuguese-speaking nations is part of a wider push for global influence as well as a search for new export markets and energy reserves.

Macau hosts a conference every three years where ministers from China and Portuguese-speaking countries gather to discuss business and trade ties.

The territory's government has also pledged to make it a hub for Portuguese learning — last year the University of Macau opened a new teaching centre aimed at nurturing bilingual professionals.

Numbers on MPI's Chinese-Portuguese translation course fell as low as 10 following the handover.

There are now more than 270 students from Macau and mainland China taking the four-year degree, with graduates going on to work in government, banks and businesses at home as well as finding jobs in Portuguese-speaking countries.

"Portuguese is a very pretty language," course student Ana Tu, 21, from Beijing, told *AFP*.

"There are also a lot of companies doing business with Portuguese-speaking countries, so if I learn Portuguese I can help them to communicate with each other."

Classmate Marcelino Luis do Rosario Sousa, 22, says he is going back to his roots — born in Macau, his father is Portuguese but Sousa grew up speaking only Cantonese.

After discovering a passion for the language in secondary school, he hopes to work as an interpreter for the Macau government when he graduates.

"(Studying Portuguese) definitely will improve my career prospects. The salary is good. But the major reason is I have curiosity in studying Portuguese. I'd love to work in a job I'm interested in."

Portuguese flavour

Many visitors spend their trip to Macau holed up at a gaming table, but its colonial heritage is also a tourist draw.

Historic ruins, churches, cosy tavernas and cobbled streets are an echo of its history and the ubiquitous bakeries selling Portuguese-style custard tarts do a roaring trade.

Chef Santos Pinto runs one of the best-known Portuguese restaurants in town, 'O Santos'. Its walls are covered in Portuguese football memorabilia and pictures of famous guests, including Mick Jagger.

On a weekday lunchtime, the restaurant buzzes with regulars and tourists, welcomed by Pinto, wearing a white apron and operating the cash register.

Before the handover, the vast majority of the clientele were Portuguese, he says. But with an exodus after 1999, they are now mainly Chinese, Korean and Japanese.

Despite the changes he has seen, Pinto believes Portuguese culture will always be a fundamental element of Macau and that residents value the territory's unique history.

"They like the fact that Macau is different: it's Chinese with Portuguese culture," he told *AFP*.

He is pleased that a growing number of Macanese and mainland Chinese are learning Portuguese and believes they see the enclave as a door to the lusophone world.

For his part, he aims to preserve a slice of Portugal in Macau.

"I only do Portuguese food," he says.

"I do not know how to do any other. Also I do not want to do any other! Because I think that the Portuguese culture should be maintained here." — *AFP*

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