

Visual Politics and Cultural Significance of Macao Stamps under Portuguese Colonialism: The 1948 Macao Scenery and 1950 Porta do Cerco Stamps

Kent, Ieong Chi Kin^{1*}

¹ Design at the Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macao University of Science and Technology, Macau, China

Email Address

chikent@gmail.com (Kent, Ieong Chi Kin)

*Correspondence: chikent@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Far beyond their utilitarian postal function, postage stamps serve as potent vehicles of visual politics and cultural signification. This study examines the 1948 Macao Scenery and 1950 Porta do Cerco stamps to elucidate how the Portuguese colonial regime leveraged visual design to legitimize its governance and construct Macao's identity. Employing semiotics and postcolonial theory, the analysis reveals that Macao Scenery utilizes European symbols to glorify colonial authority while marginalizing Chinese cultural elements. Conversely, the Porta do Cerco stamp, entangled in border disputes and cultural misinterpretations, sparked local contestation, transforming it into a site of cultural negotiation. Shaped by evolving Sino-Portuguese relations, these stamps underscore their dual roles as emblems of power and arenas of cultural interaction. By highlighting the distinctiveness of Macao's stamps within Portugal's colonial framework, this study offers fresh insights into visual politics and colonial cultural studies.

Keywords:

Macao Stamps, Visual Politics, Cultural Significance, Colonial Governance, Postcolonial Theory, Cultural Hybridity

1. Introduction

Postage stamps, often regarded as “national icon,” transcend their practical functions of facilitating postal circulation and serving as proof of postage. Through their design, stamps embody multifaceted significations of national identity, historical memory, and cultural symbolism. In the twentieth century, stamps emerged as pivotal visual symbols, frequently harnessed by regimes as tools to propagate ideological narratives [2]. By employing selective imagery and compositional strategies, stamps reinforce the legitimacy of governance and construct localized identities. In colonial contexts, the visual politics of stamps assume heightened significance, functioning both as mediums for colonial authorities to assert dominance and as carriers of

sovereign symbolism within the international postal system. Yet, how are these visual symbols unilaterally crafted? What meanings do they encode? How do colonial powers leverage stamp design to construct narratives legitimizing their rule? These questions not only illuminate the distinctive political role of stamps but also underscore their potential as cultural symbols. In the unique historical context of Macao, these issues gain particular prominence, as the stamps issued there reflect Portuguese colonial strategies while navigating the intricate interplay of Chinese, Portuguese, local Chinese, and Macanese communities.

Macao, Portugal's earliest stronghold in China, long occupied an ambiguous status oscillating between leased territory and colony, yet it remained a strategic outpost in East Asia. The Portuguese government maintained stringent control over the issuance, design, and production of Macao's stamps. In the mid-twentieth century, Portugal reclassified Macao as an "overseas province," transforming stamps into visual extensions of colonial governance aimed at proclaiming Portugal's maritime hegemony. Unlike the coercive administration of its African colonies, Macao's governance was constrained by its lack of natural resources and its position as a southernmost territorial link to mainland China. Consequently, Portuguese rule in Macao adopted a more laissez-faire approach, described as "governing by inaction yet achieving all" [11]. The colonial administration relied heavily on economic exploitation and cultural propaganda rather than military oppression. Following World War II and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, profound geopolitical shifts imbued Macao's stamps with a distinctive visual character, tasked with both asserting sovereignty and responding to cultural pressures from the local Chinese community and mainland China.

For example, in 1948, stamps issued in Portuguese Timor and Guinea-Bissau depicted bare-chested indigenous men and women, exotic fauna, tribal huts, and ethnic attire, emphasizing the "primitiveness" and "backwardness" of these colonies to justify Portuguese rule and its "*Missão Civilizadora*" [23]. In stark contrast, Macao's 1948 *Macao Scenery* stamps (Figure 1) foregrounded urban landscapes, endeavoring to project a harmonious fusion of European and Asian cultures.



Figure 1. *Macao Scenery Stamps.*

This divergence in visual narratives underscores the distinctiveness of Macao's stamps within Portugal's global colonial framework, offering a unique entry point for exploring their cultural significance. However, these stamps conspicuously excluded depictions of local Chinese daily life, revealing a colonial visual politics that marginalized indigenous culture. Issued amid the post-World War II global anti-colonial wave, the Portuguese government sought to bolster the legitimacy of its rule in Macao through various channels, including currency, exhibitions, films, and stamps, as a response to international pressures and the shifting dynamics following China's

civil war. This context further highlights the strategic intent of the *Macao Scenery* stamps as instruments of visual politics.

By contrast, the 1950 blue-and-white *Porta do Cerco* stamp (Figure 2) directly engaged the contentious issue of Macao's border sovereignty. As the dividing line between Macao and mainland China, Porta do Cerco was not merely a geographical marker but a potent political symbol. Allegedly, the stamp's blue-and-white color scheme, perceived as culturally inauspicious or politically sensitive, provoked backlash from the local Chinese community, leading to its withdrawal and reissue. Although no official record documents this incident, the withdrawal exposed cultural blind spots in Portugal's visual political designs. The blue-and-white *Porta do Cerco* stamp inadvertently drew attention from both the local Chinese community and the Chinese government, marking the beginning of recurring stamp withdrawal controversies. This episode inadvertently positioned stamps as flashpoints of contention, revealing their multifaceted roles: as symbols of Portuguese authority and as sites of local resistance and cultural misunderstanding laden with rich signification.



Figure 2. Blue *Porta do Cerco* Stamp.

This study takes the *Macao Scenery* and blue-and-white *Porta do Cerco* stamps as case studies to investigate how Macao's stamps functioned as tools of visual politics, shaping local identity and reflecting dynamic power relations. By integrating historical textual analysis with postcolonial theory, it examines how stamp designs conveyed power structures and how evolving Sino-Portuguese relations influenced their issuance and interpretation. Drawing on semiotic perspectives to decode visual symbols and employing postcolonial theory to explore the new meanings generated through cultural conflict and convergence, this research elucidates the significance of the *Macao Scenery* and *Porta do Cerco* stamps in Macao's postal history.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on colonial postage stamps predominantly focuses on the design strategies of European and American empires. For instance, studies have explored how British stamps in India and African colonies propagated imperial hegemony, and how French stamps portrayed Sudan as a "civilized" colonial territory [6]. However, academic discourse on Macao's stamps remains severely underdeveloped, and research on Portuguese colonial stamps is relatively sparse. Even rarer are analyses that employ postcolonial theory to examine the cultural power dynamics between colonizers and colonized, or that investigate stamps as sites of colonial power, visual politics, and cultural resistance.

In the international field of stamp studies, semiotics provides a critical framework for analyzing visual politics. French semiotician Gérard Deledalle (1979), in *théorie et*

pratique du signe, first conceptualized stamps as semiotic systems, positing that they serve as both physical markers and bearers of national identity and cultural symbolism. This foundational insight paved the way for subsequent research. Building on Deledalle's work, David Scott [6]) applied Charles Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze the evolution of French stamps across different regimes, identifying over thirty national symbols. In his 1995 work, *European Stamp Design: A Semiotic Approach to Design Messages*, Scott systematically explored the visual meanings of European stamps. These studies demonstrate that stamp designs not only reflect political power but also engage with the cultural backgrounds of their audiences, generating multilayered cultural significations [22]. Australian scholar Dennis Altman, in *Paper Ambassadors: The Politics of Stamps* (1991), approached stamps from a philatelist's perspective, examining their role as national symbols that encompass political propaganda, aesthetic expression, and market value. Altman argues that the visual political functions of stamps serve ruling authorities while also mirroring socio-cultural transformations, offering a dual perspective on visual politics and cultural significance that informs this study.

Research on Portuguese colonial stamps, though limited, has addressed themes of ideology and national identity. Igor Cusack, in "Tiny Transmitters of Nationalist and Colonial Ideology: The Postage Stamps of Portugal and Its Empire" [2], analyzes how Portuguese stamps functioned as tools of colonial governance, reinforcing nationalism and colonial ideology. He highlights how nationalism and imperialism were projected through depictions of women, historical victories, and the "Age of Exploration," contributing to the construction and maintenance of national identity. Similarly, António Duarte's *Filatelias e ideologia: Emissão de selos postais e difusão de valores no Estado Novo* [33] focuses on stamp issuance under the Salazar regime, exploring how stamps promoted the core values of "God, Homeland, Family," particularly in response to post-World War II anti-colonial pressures to sustain the legitimacy of colonial rule. These studies illuminate Portugal's visual political strategies in stamp design and issuance, though their focus remains largely on African colonies.

In contrast, research on Macao's stamps remains fragmentary, with existing literature primarily centered on postal history and philatelic documentation, lacking in-depth analysis of visual politics or cultural significance. For instance, Wong and Wong's *Macao Postal History* (1995) compiles issuance histories and philatelic perspectives, providing foundational historical data. Situ's *Macao Stamps* [28] introduces stamp themes and issuance chronologies, while Fan's two-volume *History and Development of Macao's Postal and Telecommunications* (2006) chronicles postal developments from 1798 to 1999 in a historiographical format, incorporating government documents and postal records. These works establish the historical context of Macao's stamps within colonial governance but do not engage with the political, design, or cultural processes underlying their creation. Wu's article, "Fragmented Pieces: Seeking Collective Memory through Macao's Transport Infrastructure Stamps (1949–1999)" (2016), adopts a sociological perspective, exploring how transport-themed stamps shaped Macao's collective memory and noting the coexistence of colonial and local elements. However, its analysis is confined to transport and infrastructure themes, offering limited discussion of visual politics.

Synthesizing the above literature, stamp studies span semiotics, ideology, and national identity. Internationally, Scott's semiotic framework provides a methodological foundation for parsing stamps' visual politics, while Cusack's work

elucidates the ideological functions of colonial stamps. However, despite some mention of Macao, these studies devote insufficient attention to its context. To address this gap, this study examines the *Macao Scenery* and *Porta do Cerco* stamps to investigate their visual politics within Portugal's colonial system. By applying postcolonial theory to analyze their multidimensional cultural significance, this research seeks to fill the scholarly void in Macao stamp design studies and offer new perspectives for integrating visual politics and postcolonial theory into the analysis of Macao's graphic design history.

3. Theoretical Framework: Visual Politics through a Postcolonial Lens

To investigate the visual politics and cultural significance of Macao's postage stamps, this study centers on the semiotic processes through which stamps generate meaning as visual symbols. By employing postcolonial theory, it seeks to illuminate the power dynamics and cultural negotiations embedded in stamps within a colonial context, thereby uncovering their deeper cultural implications.

Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for analyzing the visual politics and cultural significations embedded in Macao's stamps, particularly through the prism of cultural power. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said [21] posits that colonial powers construct the colonized as the "Other" through cultural representations, thereby legitimizing their rule and reinforcing their own sense of superiority (pp. 191–192). This mechanism is vividly manifest in the 1948 *Macao Scenery* stamp series, which endeavors to portray Macao as a harmonious colonial territory sanctified by "Western civilization." Notably, symbols of Chinese culture and everyday customs are systematically excluded from these depictions. This aligns with Said's central argument that the "Orient" is not an authentic entity but a deliberately crafted product of Western power structures. The *Macao Scenery* stamps embody the Portuguese aspiration to present Macao as a paragon of modern and civilized colonial governance. This visual strategy not only obscures the economic exploitation and cultural suppression inherent in colonial rule but also projects a fabricated message to the international community: that Macao, under Portuguese administration, is an orderly and exemplary colonial territory.

Homi Bhabha's theory of "cultural hybridity" [16] complements this framework by introducing an additional dimension, conceptualizing culture as a dynamic process shaped by power relations and colonial legacies rather than a static entity. In colonial contexts, hybridity is not a mere amalgamation of two cultures but a complex mode of cultural expression that reflects how power operates within culture and renders identities ambiguous and fluid [16]. The 1950 *Porta do Cerco* stamp, issued independently, provides a rich case study for this concept. The "Porta do Cerco," transitioning from a physical to an imagined space, ultimately emerges as Bhabha's "third space"—a realm that transcends binary oppositions, enabling the interplay and fusion of diverse cultures, histories, and identities to generate new forms of cultural expression and self-identification [16]. In this space, the authority of colonial visual politics is destabilized by local reinterpretations, giving rise to novel cultural meanings.

To further elucidate the distinctiveness of Macao's stamps, this study compares the 1948 *Macao Scenery* series with contemporaneous stamps issued in Portuguese African and Asian colonies, with a particular focus on Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and

Príncipe, and Timor. Stamps from these territories frequently emphasize “primitive” or “exotic” elements, reflecting a colonial ethnographic gaze. As Maria Kakavoulia observes in her discussion of visuality and anthropology, Western societies have long associated visual perception with cognition and the acquisition of truth, elevating “observation” as a central method and metaphor for understanding human communities [24]. In colonial contexts, however, this reliance on visuality often translates into a power practice—a tool for defining, classifying, and controlling the “Other.”

In stark contrast, the *Macao Scenery* series adopts a markedly different visual strategy. It deliberately eschews direct depictions of local Chinese subjects and their daily lives, sidestepping the classificatory ethnographic gaze. Instead, it focuses on presenting urban landscapes, colonial landmark architecture, and public infrastructure, all aestheticized through a European lens. Even when Chinese elements are included, they are typically decontextualized and rendered as static, scenic motifs. This pronounced divergence in visual narratives underscores Portugal’s tailored visual political strategies, calibrated to the historical, cultural, and strategic specificities of its various colonies. It vividly reflects Portugal’s colonial hierarchical policies and its assessments of the distinct political, economic, and strategic values of each territory, enabling customized visual political approaches to navigate the complex dynamics of the early postcolonial era.

4. Ideological Shifts in Stamps: From “Imperial Unity” to “Exotic Diversity”

4.1. Colonial Policy Shifts and the “Overseas Province” Discourse

In the wake of World War II, the Portuguese colonial empire confronted intense international anti-colonial pressures and escalating nationalist sentiments within its territories. The Salazar regime (1932–1968), led by António de Oliveira Salazar, was compelled to recalibrate its colonial policies to preserve the integrity of its imperial dominion. In 1951, Portugal formally repealed the Colonial Act (*Ato Colonial*), reclassifying its “colonies” as “overseas provinces” and amending the constitution to proclaim that metropolitan Portugal and its overseas territories constituted a singular, indivisible nation-state. This legal redefinition was a strategic response to the surging global anti-colonial sentiment, particularly aimed at deflecting the United Nations’ decolonization agenda. By masking the colonial nature of these relationships and asserting legal parity between the metropole and its territories, Portugal sought to circumvent international mandates for colonial self-governance while maintaining its imperial framework.

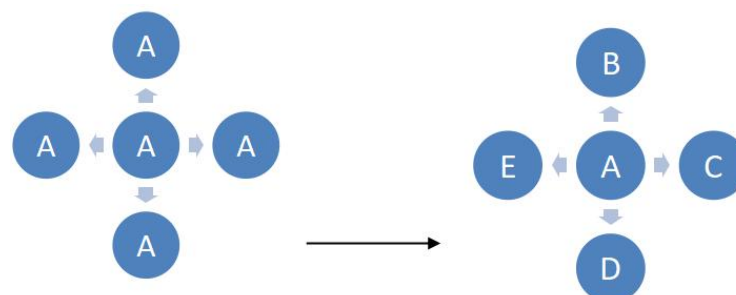
However, beneath the rhetoric of a “unified nation,” the Portuguese colonial administration continued to differentiate its territories based on their strategic and economic significance, perpetuating an ideological hierarchy rooted in earlier colonial practices. Portuguese overseas territories can be broadly classified into three categories: (1) core African colonies, such as Angola and Mozambique, which were expansive, resource-rich, and populated by significant European settler communities, serving as the economic linchpins of the empire; (2) secondary colonies, typically smaller African coastal outposts or archipelagos like Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, and São Tomé and Príncipe, which held limited economic and strategic value and occupied a subordinate role in imperial priorities; and (3) special colonial territories, including Macao and Portuguese India, distinguished by their unique historical

trajectories and relatively developed socio-cultural structures, distinct from the tribal frameworks of African societies. Crucially, the “special” status of these Asian enclaves stemmed from their geopolitical positioning adjacent to powerful neighboring states—China and India—which severely constrained Portugal’s administrative latitude. This reality precluded the wholesale application of governance and representational models used in African colonies, necessitating more cautious and circuitous strategies. Consequently, despite official claims of uniform treatment across all overseas provinces, stark disparities persisted in practice, evident in resource allocation, governance modalities, and cultural propaganda strategies.

To ideologically buttress the “overseas province” policy and counter decolonization critiques, the Portuguese regime shifted its imperial narrative from an exclusive focus on “imperial unity” to a curated portrayal of the empire’s “multicultural” character. The theoretical framework of “Luso-Tropicalism,” advanced by Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, provided intellectual scaffolding for this transition. Initially viewed with reservation by the Salazar regime, Luso-Tropicalism was selectively embraced in the 1950s as a potent ideological tool to resist global decolonization pressures. It posited that Portuguese colonialism was uniquely humane, characterized by a propensity for cultural and racial integration, purportedly achieving a form of “racial democracy.” This narrative was leveraged to underscore the “exceptionalism” and “humanity” of Portuguese colonial rule, distinguishing it from other imperial models. However, despite official proclamations of imperial unity and racial harmony, practical colonial governance and resource distribution continued to reflect hierarchical distinctions driven by pragmatic interests. These disparities were also manifest in the formulation of visual propaganda, including postage stamps, which served as key vehicles for disseminating this revised imperial narrative.

4.2. Shifts in Stamp Issuance Strategies: The Presentation of “Exotic Diversity”

In alignment with these colonial policy and ideological transformations, the design and issuance strategies of Portuguese colonial stamps underwent a significant evolution, transitioning from an emphasis on symbols of “imperial unity” to a superficial celebration of the “exotic diversity” of individual territories (Figure 3). Historically, Portugal issued stamps with uniform designs across its empire, such as the early twentieth-century *Ceres* series (Figure 4), which varied only in territorial inscriptions to project a cohesive imperial identity. From the late 1940s to the 1950s, however, the adoption of the “overseas province” framework and the imperative to project “diversity” spurred the introduction of stamp series that increasingly reflected local characteristics, gradually displacing the standardized, empire-wide imagery of earlier decades.



A = Uniform Pattern; A, B, C, D, E = Distinct Patterns

Figure 3. The Shift in Stamp Issuance Policy from “Imperial Unity” to “Exotic Diversity”.



Figure 4. *Ceres Stamp.*

This shift was evident in the diversification of stamp themes. For example, Angola issued series featuring local birds (1951) and wildlife (1953), Mozambique highlighted fish (1951) and butterflies (1953), and Guinea-Bissau showcased insects (1953). Additionally, stamps began to depict local landscapes, architecture, traditional attire, customs, and even portraits of tribal ethnic groups (Table 1). This thematic expansion served dual purposes. On one hand, it catered to the philatelic market's fascination with exotic motifs, generating revenue for colonial administrations. On the other, it visually reinforced Portugal's revised imperial narrative, which sought to project the breadth and inclusivity of its empire by showcasing the "multicultural" and natural diversity of its territories. This portrayal ostensibly validated Portuguese governance as benevolent and integrative. As Cusack [2] observes, stamps functioned as "tiny transmitters" of ruling ideologies (p.591). In the Portuguese context, these stamps became propaganda tools, substantiating the empire's distinctiveness and justifying its refusal to relinquish overseas territories.

Nevertheless, this pivot toward "exotic diversity" was predominantly strategic rather than substantive. While stamp imagery began to incorporate local elements, their selection, interpretation, and representation remained firmly under colonial control. The "exotic" motifs were meticulously curated, favoring apolitical, spectacular symbols—such as traditional costumes, festivals, or flora and fauna—that portrayed colonies as static, picturesque, and compliant locales. This approach systematically elided the realities of colonial exploitation, discrimination, and resistance. Representations of local populations were often idealized and typified, reducing complex social realities to controllable visual symbols. Ultimately, this curated "exotic diversity" was subsumed within the overarching framework of "imperial unity," presenting each territory's culture and populace as harmoniously integrated under Portugal's "benevolent" stewardship, collectively constituting a cohesive "Greater Portugal." This meticulously crafted narrative of "imperial unity through exotic diversity" epitomized the ideological underpinnings of Portugal's late colonial strategy, with stamps serving as pivotal visual mediums for its dissemination. The subsequent analysis of the 1948 *Macao Scenery* and 1950 *Porta do Cerco* stamps will explore how these broader trends were uniquely instantiated within Macao's specific colonial and geopolitical context.

Table 1. *Stamps Issued in Portuguese Territories in 1948.*

Issuing Location	Design Theme	Designer	Quantity	Content
Angola	Angola Liberation Centennial	Alberto de Sousa	10	Portuguese historical figures, Portuguese architecture, churches
Cape Verde	Cape Verde Scenery	M. Jorge, Alberto de Sousa	9	Urban landscapes, wilderness scenery
Guinea-Bissau	Guinea Scenery (<i>Figure 5</i>)	Alberto de Sousa	13	Semi-nude indigenous portraits, tribal scenes, exotic fauna
Portuguese India	Indian Figures	—	5	Portuguese historical figures
Macao	Macao Scenery	Alberto de Sousa	12	Urban landscapes, Chinese temples, Portuguese architecture
Mozambique	Mozambique Scenery	M. Jorge, Alberto de Sousa	12	Urban scenery, infrastructure, wilderness landscapes
São Tomé and Príncipe	Fruits of São Tomé and Príncipe (<i>Figure 6</i>)	Alberto de Sousa	10	Fruits, agricultural products
Timor	Indigenous People (<i>Figure 8</i>)	Alberto de Sousa	8	Ethnic costumes, indigenous portraits



Figure 5. *Guinea Scenery Stamp.*



Figure 6. *Fruits of São Tomé and Príncipe Stamp.*



Figure 7. *Reddish-Brown Porta do Cerco Stamp.*



Figure 8. *Portuguese Timor Stamp.*

5. Visual Construction: The 1948 Macao Scenery Stamps

Against the backdrop of the Portuguese colonial policy shifts and ideological transformations discussed earlier, the visual strategies of stamps issued across different colonies exhibited marked variations. For instance, stamps from African colonies such as Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Timor, issued around 1948 (Table 2), frequently emphasized elements perceived as “primitive” or “exotic.” These designs epitomized a colonial ethnographic gaze, as described by Maria Kakavoulia, who notes that Western societies have historically equated visual perception with cognition and the acquisition of truth, elevating “observation” as a central method and metaphor for understanding human communities [24]. In colonial contexts, this reliance on visibility often translated into a power practice—a mechanism for defining, classifying, and controlling the “Other.” In these African stamps, the ethnographic gaze manifested in the prominent depiction of local inhabitants’ distinctive attire, physical appearances (often semi-nude), and unique flora, fauna, and tribal landscapes. Such choices not only catered to the colonizers’ fascination with exoticism but, more critically, employed a seemingly objective “observational” perspective to typify and objectify local populations, akin to presenting specimens within a scientific framework [24]. The portrayal of figures often leaned toward standardized frontal or profile portraits, emphasizing easily identifiable physical traits or cultural markers, stripped of their vibrant social contexts and molded into static, readily definable “racial types” or “cultural representatives.” This practice of “freezing everything under a third-person gaze” encapsulates the power of the ethnographic gaze, which simplifies complex realities into controllable visual symbols. These symbols serve the goal of “Othering” the colonized, accentuating their difference and supposed “backwardness” from the metropole, thereby legitimizing Portugal’s “civilizing mission” and resource control. As Donna Haraway [4] argues, such a gaze often carries the connotation of a “conquering gaze from nowhere” (p. 582), obscuring the specific power positions and cultural biases embedded within it.

In stark contrast, the *Macao Scenery* stamp series, issued in Macao in the same year, adopted a radically different visual strategy. It strategically eschewed the direct, classificatory ethnographic gaze, opting instead to focus on urban landscapes, colonial landmark architecture, and public infrastructure, all aestheticized through a European lens. Even when Chinese elements were incorporated, they were typically decontextualized and presented as static, scenic motifs. The series, designed by watercolorist Alberto de Sousa, leveraged his signature European watercolor style to evoke a serene, orderly, and nostalgic atmosphere. This design choice was not incidental; it was meticulously crafted to portray Macao as a “civilized” and “harmonious” model colony under Portuguese governance—an Eastern outpost successfully integrated into the Portuguese imperial system. This visual narrative served to counter the intensifying post-war anti-colonial pressures and to project the “legitimacy” of Portuguese rule to the international community. The pronounced divergence in visual strategies underscores Portugal’s tailored approaches to its colonies, calibrated to their distinct historical, cultural, and strategic contexts. This approach clearly reflects Portugal’s colonial hierarchical policies and its assessments of the varying political, economic, and strategic values of each territory (as discussed in Section 3), enabling customized visual political strategies to navigate the complex dynamics of the early postcolonial era.

Table 2. *Comparative Analysis of Stamp Elements in Four Portuguese Territories, 1948.*

Stamp Series	Visual Elements	Design Style	Conveyed Message
Guinea-Bissau	Theme: Local culture, people, natural landscapes (traditional attire, animals such as birds and antelopes, village scenes, tropical plants like palm trees). Color: Vibrant (e.g., red, blue, green, orange), high contrast. Pattern: Figures often in standing or seated poses, with natural elements (e.g., mountains, trees) in the background.	Realistic style with clear details (e.g., clothing, animal fur) Simple composition focusing on a single theme. Borders with minimal floral or geometric patterns	Cultural Showcase: Emphasizes indigenous culture and natural resources. Colonial Propaganda: Projects the diversity and “harmonious” image of the colony.
Timor	Theme: Indigenous portraits (traditional attire, headgear, daily activities such as holding weapons or riding horses) Color: Soft, natural tones (e.g., blue, green, orange), often with monochromatic backgrounds Pattern: Static figures, typically in frontal or profile portraits, with detailed attire and headgear.	Classical realism, resembling portraiture Minimalist composition with simple backgrounds to highlight figures Simple borders, occasionally with small decorative elements (e.g., shield motifs).	Ethnic Identity: Highlights indigenous traditional culture. Cultural Record under Colonial Rule: Reflects cultural documentation and governance, infused with exotic allure for propaganda.
São Tomé and Príncipe	Theme: Tropical agricultural products. (cocoa, coffee, pineapples, mangoes) Color: Vibrant and varied (e.g., yellow, green, red, blue), echoing the hues of agricultural products. Pattern: Agricultural products as central motifs, often with leaves or plant backgrounds. Pattern: Detailed scenes with clear layouts of buildings and streets, occasionally including figures	Blend of realism and decorative elements, with meticulous detailing of products Focused on a single theme with clear composition Simple borders, some with leaf-shaped decorations	Economic Resources: Emphasizes agricultural resources and economic value. Natural Wealth: Showcases natural abundance to attract investment or tourism.

5.1. The Macao Scenery Stamps

The *Macao Scenery* stamp series stands as a vivid exemplar of Portuguese colonial visual politics. Issued on December 20, 1948, this set comprised 12 single-color stamps, with a total issuance of 6,500,000. Marking Portugal’s first new stamp series in Macao following World War II, it showcased a curated selection of iconic Macao

landscapes, including *Uma Residência* (a residence), *Fortaleza do Monte* (Mount Fortress), *Vista Parcial* (Bishop's Hill), *Baía da Praia Grande* (South Bay), *Largo do Leal Senado* (Senate Square), *Colina de S. Jerónimo* (northern vista), *Avenida Marginal* (Lower Ring Street), *Relevo da Deusa Ma* (A-Ma Temple relief), *Porta do Cerco* (Porta do Cerco Arch), *Pagode da Barra* (A-Ma Temple exterior), *Edifício dos Correios* (Post Office Building), and *Estrada da Solidão* (Solitude Road). Notably, the series was designed by the renowned Portuguese watercolorist Alberto de Sousa, celebrated for his romanticist style. Sousa's expertise in soft watercolor techniques and traditional European academic composition imbued the stamps with a nostalgic and elegant evocation of Portuguese national sensibilities. Encompassing themes of religious heritage, historical architecture, and urban aesthetics, these landscapes collectively constructed a colonial vision of Macao as perceived through the lens of Portuguese governance.

5.2. Orientalist Visual Strategies and Semiotic Construction

The imagery of the *Macao Scenery* stamp series reveals a visual strategy that can be interpreted as a quintessential manifestation of the Orientalist paradigm articulated by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* [21]. This strategy is realized through meticulous semiotic selection and construction, a mechanism vividly exemplified in the *Macao Scenery* stamps, whose visual language is imbued with specific symbolic connotations. From a semiotic perspective, the stamps first employ a deliberate selection of signifiers, such as European-style architectural landmarks like the Senate Square, Mount Fortress, and the Post Office Building. Within the colonial context, these signifiers transcend mere geographical markers; their signifieds evoke Portuguese authority, historical presence, administrative control, and the imposition of "order" and "civilization." Even natural features, such as the South Bay, are depicted in a serene and regimented manner, reinforcing impressions of harmony and control.

Concomitantly, this selective representation is paralleled by a systematic exclusion of certain symbols. Signifiers of local Chinese daily life, social vibrancy, or potential disorder are almost entirely absent. The stamp imagery conspicuously lacks depictions of ordinary Chinese residents, the bustling clamor of markets, traditional commercial activities, or non-European residential spaces. This visual "absence" constitutes a potent symbol in itself, what Roland Barthes terms a "zero-degree sign" [15], which conveys meaning through omission. This exclusion effectively marginalizes local subjects, implying their irrelevance to the colonial vision of a "modern civilized" landscape or suggesting that their presence requires disciplining.

Furthermore, the European watercolor style employed by artist Alberto de Sousa, characterized by its soft, romantic, and nostalgic qualities, emerges as a significant symbol in its own right. This stylized approach "de-realizes" and "aestheticizes" Macao, effacing potential social tensions and conflicts. It transforms Macao into a static, idyllic tableau crafted for external (Western) consumption, aligning with Orientalism's tendency to romanticize the "exotic." Lastly, even the inclusion of sparse Chinese elements, such as the A-Ma Temple or the Sampan Rock, is rendered in a scenic, decontextualized manner. The A-Ma Temple, as a symbol, is likely employed here to denote "locality" or "exoticism," yet it is stripped of its role as a vibrant cultural hub, reduced to a visual component within a colonial-dominated scenic composition. This reflects Orientalism's strategy of appropriating and domesticating "exotic" elements to serve the broader colonial narrative.

Through this intricate interplay of carefully curated selection, exclusion, and stylistic treatment, the *Macao Scenery* stamps successfully construct an idealized image of Macao that aligns with colonial interests—a model colony under Portuguese governance, characterized by order, European dominance, and a neutralized presentation of local culture. This semiotic construction, rooted in Orientalist principles, not only obscures the realities of colonial rule but also cloaks its legitimacy in a veneer of cultural and aesthetic refinement, deftly reinforcing Portuguese colonial authority.

6. Borders, Power, and Cultural Conflict: The Porta do Cerco Stamp Case Study

In contrast to the *Macao Scenery* series, which constructed a harmonious image through urban landscapes, the *Porta do Cerco* stamp directly engaged with the contentious issues of Macao's borders ballpark and sovereignty, revealing a distinct facet of colonial visual politics. Amid the geopolitical shifts following World War II and the change in China's political regime, the Portuguese-Macao administration began leveraging postage stamps to bolster the legitimacy of its colonial governance. Between 1948 and 1951, Macao issued its first series of stamps themed around local scenery, including a 1-pataca stamp featuring the Porta do Cerco, the boundary marker between Portuguese Macao and mainland China. As a symbol of Macao's frontier, Porta do Cerco carried profound political significance: the Portuguese authorities sought to underscore the territorial limits of Macao and the continuity of their rule by depicting this landmark on a stamp.

However, the trajectory from the design to the issuance of the *Porta do Cerco* stamp exposed a critical political fault line. Initially designed in a blue-and-white color scheme, the stamp faced backlash from the local Chinese community upon its planned circulation in 1950, compelling the Portuguese government to abruptly withdraw the already-issued but uncirculated blue-and-white version. Ultimately, the stamp was reissued in a more auspicious color palette to complete its public release. This rapid sequence of issuance and withdrawal encapsulates the colonial rulers' attempt to wield stamp symbolism to uphold power, only to encounter unintended resistance, revealing the fragility of their visual political strategy.

6.1. The 1950 Porta do Cerco Stamp

The *Porta do Cerco* stamp exists in three distinct versions. The first appeared as part of the 1948 *Macao Scenery* series, printed in green and designed to emphasize general visual aesthetics and tourism promotion through urban landscapes. On March 11, 1950, the Portuguese-Macao administration formally announced in the *Government Gazette* the independent issuance of a blue-and-white *Porta do Cerco* stamp, valued at one pataca, with a total issuance of 200,000. This version adopted the blue-and-white palette of Portugal's traditional *Azulejo* tiles, a color scheme rooted in eighth-century Moorish influences on the Iberian Peninsula and later infused with elements of Ming dynasty Chinese blue-and-white porcelain, forming a distinctive cultural symbol. While blue-and-white connoted nobility and royal prestige in Portuguese culture, the rapid withdrawal of this stamp prior to circulation has been attributed to its color scheme's sensitivity, with at least two widely circulated explanations pointing to cultural and political factors.

The first explanation pertains to cultural taboos. In Chinese culture, the combination of blue and white is often associated with traditional funerary practices, deemed inauspicious. According to later sources and philatelic accounts, this color pairing likely provoked dissatisfaction and resistance among Macao's local Chinese community. For instance, the Portuguese website *Beautiful Macao Must-See* attributes the withdrawal to a "cultural misunderstanding," while an article in the April 2015 issue of *Macao Magazine* notes the stamp's non-issuance due to cultural differences. This interpretation underscores potential cross-cultural blind spots in the colonial government's visual design choices.

The second explanation highlights the political sensitivities of the time. Interviews conducted by the author in April 2025 with the Macao World Philatelic Society, alongside references on the All-China Philatelic Federation website to "legends of political and color taboos," reveal another prevalent theory within philatelic circles: the blue-and-white palette closely resembled the primary colors of the Republic of China's Nationalist government flag (the Blue Sky with a White Sun), which had recently relocated to Taiwan. In early 1950, the People's Republic of China had just been established, with the Chinese Civil War's tensions still unresolved. Critically, Portugal had not yet established diplomatic relations with the PRC, maintaining ties with the ROC government. In this delicate political and geopolitical context, the Portuguese-Macao administration likely feared that the stamp's colors could be misconstrued as a partisan gesture toward a specific political faction, potentially triggering undesirable political associations or adverse reactions from mainland China, including diplomatic pressure. Consequently, the stamp was urgently withdrawn to mitigate these risks.

Efforts to locate direct official records or explicit contemporary reports in gazettes and newspapers have been unsuccessful, and verification of the withdrawal's precise reasons relies primarily on later accounts, philatelic interviews, and historical contextual inference. The blue-and-white version is believed to have never entered circulation, with only a minuscule quantity surfacing in mainland Portugal. On April 2, 1950, the *Masses Daily* published a report stating: "Local authorities recently received approval from the Portuguese Colonial Ministry's Prosperity Department to print and issue a new one-pataca stamp in Macao. The Portuguese authorities issued Directive No. 13073, instructing Macao to issue new one-pataca stamps totaling 200,000 patacas, featuring the Porta do Cerco scenery." This referred to the reddish-brown *Porta do Cerco* stamp (Figure 7), also issued in 200,000 copies. The hasty redesign and official silence suggest that the original version encountered unforeseen obstacles. This rapid design shift directly reflects the challenges faced by Portugal's visual politics when confronted with local cultural interpretations and reactions, exposing the colonial administration's misjudgments stemming from inadequate attention to local cultural and political contexts, and highlighting the fragility of colonial visual political operations. Over time, the rare blue-and-white *Porta do Cerco* stamps that surfaced became coveted philatelic treasures, imbued with unique historical significance.

The issuance of the *Porta do Cerco* stamp coincided with a pivotal moment: the nascent establishment of the People's Republic of China, the recent conclusion of the Chinese Civil War, and the rising global tide of decolonization. Portugal's decision to issue a standalone *Porta do Cerco*-themed stamp at this juncture served dual purposes. First, it capitalized on the positive reception of the 1949 *Macao Scenery* series, reiterating this theme to further promote colonial governance achievements. More crucially, it aimed to assert and reinforce Portugal's control over Macao, signaling to

both international audiences and China that Macao remained firmly under its dominion. In other words, the stamp bore explicit political objectives: to consolidate the narrative of “Portuguese Macao” through idealized colonial imagery, serving as an auxiliary tool for identity construction and power legitimization. The *Porta do Cerco* stamp thus functioned as a conduit for Portuguese colonial ideology, advancing colonial governance within its diminutive frame.

Analyzing the stamp’s design, the standalone *Porta do Cerco* stamp diverged from the purely aesthetic and tourism-driven objectives of the *Macao Scenery* series, emerging as a deliberate and provocative political symbol. The central image depicts the Porta do Cerco arch, with Zhuhai’s Banzhang Hill clearly visible in the background, visually articulating the spatial and political demarcation between Macao and mainland China. Additionally, the inclusion of two women in traditional attire walking within the scene attempts to evoke a tranquil, everyday ambiance, mitigating the sensitivity of Porta do Cerco as a boundary barrier and site of political contention. However, this visual narrative deliberately obscures the escalating tensions between China and Portugal in 1950, as well as the widespread discontent among the Chinese community toward colonial rule. Notably, Porta do Cerco has long been a sensitive landmark in Macao’s colonial history: during the Qing dynasty’s Daoguang era, the Chinese government established a checkpoint to restrict Portuguese movements; in 1848, the Portuguese-Macao authorities erected a Portuguese-language stele to proclaim sovereignty; and in 1871, they reconstructed a Western-style arch inscribed with “Porta do Cerco, Macao,” styling it as a Portuguese “triumphal arch.” Thus, selecting Porta do Cerco as the stamp’s theme carried profound territorial symbolism. By issuing this stamp in 1950, Portugal sought to harness the historical symbolism of Porta do Cerco to bolster its colonial narrative—insinuating the “fact” of Macao’s borders as Portuguese territory. Internally, it aimed to consolidate colonial governance identity; externally, it responded to China’s new regime.

6.2. Borders, Politics, and Cultural Hybridity Analysis

The 1950 *Porta do Cerco* stamp controversy and its hurried redesign reveal a moment of disruption and disarray in the Portuguese government’s visual political operations. Portugal had intended to consolidate its sovereignty discourse through a singular, unambiguous visual symbol, yet it failed to adequately account for the complexities of local cultural interpretations and political realities. This oversight led to a rapid transformation of the symbol’s meaning within the cultural context of the Chinese community, thwarting the intended political effect. Although no formal records document negotiations or compromises, the redesign likely represents a reactive, ad hoc response to cultural backlash from the Chinese community. This informal and implicit cultural confrontation underscores the fragility and passivity of Portuguese-Macao’s visual politics, exposing the contradictory and ambiguous nature of colonial governance itself. The stamp incident not only highlights the intricate workings of colonial visual politics in Macao but also exerted a profound and lasting influence on subsequent cultural policies and the use of visual symbols in Macao.

Homi Bhabha’s theoretical framework, particularly his analysis of mimicry and ambivalence in colonial discourse, provides a deeper lens for understanding the *Porta do Cerco* stamp episode. Bhabha argues that colonial power often seeks to create a reformed, recognizable “Other”—a subject that is “almost the same, but not quite”—to discipline and control [1]. However, this mimicry strategy is inherently fraught with contradictions and uncertainties. In the case of the *Porta do Cerco* stamp, the

Portuguese-Macao administration's choice of a blue-and-white palette, emblematic of Portugal's "Azulejo" tile tradition, carried a strong Portuguese cultural and artistic resonance. Notably, the stamp's design made little attempt to incorporate local visual elements (e.g., Chinese blue-and-white porcelain aesthetics) to create a culturally hybrid "Macao character." Instead, it directly applied the metropole's visual aesthetic to depict Macao's border landmark, reflecting the colonizer's intent to unilaterally define and represent Macao within its own cultural framework. This approach aligns with Bhabha's concept of mimicry: the colonizer "mimics" or re-presents the colonial landscape according to its own aesthetic standards, aiming to craft a controlled Macao identity symbol. Yet, this ostensibly unilateral cultural imposition sowed the seeds of ambivalence, as the blue-and-white palette held radically divergent meanings in Portuguese and Chinese cultural contexts (and, as noted earlier, in the specific political milieu of 1950), rendering the colonizer's intended signification profoundly unstable.

Upon entering Macao's social circulation, this ambivalence precipitated a "slippage, excess, difference" in the mimicry strategy. Whether interpreted through cultural taboos (funerary colors) or political sensitivities (Nationalist Party colors), the local Chinese community's reactions—expressed through informal channels or perceived by the colonial government—directly challenged the colonizer's intent. This gaze and reinterpretation by the "Other" transformed the stamp, originally intended as a symbol of power, into an object of anxiety and potential resistance, illustrating how mimicry can shift from "sameness" to a "threat" to colonial authority.

The stamp's swift withdrawal and redesign, coupled with official silence, reflect the colonial power's response to the failure of its mimicry strategy and the questioning of its symbolic control. This episode exposes the non-monolithic nature of colonial authority, revealing the inherent uncertainties in its visual political operations and their reliance on a precarious "partial representation." The incident engendered what Bhabha terms a "third space," where the colonizer's intentions and the local community's reactions interweave, collide, and negotiate. In this space, the stamp's meaning is no longer unilaterally determined but emerges from a dynamic interplay of power relations. Ultimately, the *Porta do Cerco* stamp—encompassing both its blue-and-white "failed" version and its reddish-brown replacement—carries far more complex and contradictory historical significations than the colonizers initially envisioned. It serves as a concrete footnote to colonial cultural hybridity, documenting both the colonizer's visual political aspirations (and their limitations) and the local society's cultural responses and latent influence (even if unrecorded in official documents). This profoundly underscores the dynamic and unstable processes of identity, power, and cultural meaning-making in colonial contexts.

Following the *Porta do Cerco* stamp controversy, the Portuguese-Macao administration issued a second *Macao Scenery* series in 1951, reusing seven designs from the 1948 series. This may be interpreted as a strategic retreat to safer visual symbols after navigating politically sensitive terrain, while also meeting ongoing postal demands.

7. Conclusions

This study employs semiotics and postcolonial theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the 1948 *Macao Scenery* and 1950 *Porta do Cerco* stamps, elucidating their visual politics and cultural significance within the Portuguese colonial context of

Macao. The analysis demonstrates that stamps transcend their postal utility, serving as pivotal visual mediums for colonial governments to construct power and identity, while bearing complex political, historical, and cultural meanings.

The examination of the *Macao Scenery* stamps reveals how the Portuguese colonial authorities leveraged European aesthetics and selective urban landscapes to craft an image of colonial rule as “civilized” and “modernized,” thereby seeking to legitimize their governance. However, this visual strategy systematically excluded Chinese cultural elements, embodying Edward Said’s Orientalist discourse, which constructs the colony as a “civilized” space while marginalizing local culture, underscoring the colonizers’ disregard for indigenous heritage.

In contrast, the 1950 *Porta do Cerco* stamp, by engaging with issues of border sovereignty and cultural sensitivity, provoked a robust response from the local Chinese community. The withdrawal of its blue-and-white version not only exposed cultural blind spots in colonial visual politics but also highlighted the local community’s reinterpretation and resistance to the colonizer’s symbols. This episode corroborates the dynamic processes of cultural negotiation and hybridity articulated in postcolonial theory.

Through comparative analysis with stamps from Portuguese African colonies, this study further clarifies the distinctiveness of Macao’s visual culture. Unlike the African colonies’ emphasis on “Othering” and the “civilizing mission,” Macao’s stamps exhibit greater cultural fusion and hybridity, reflecting its unique historical context and the profound influence of Sino-Portuguese interactions. This divergence underscores the flexibility of Portuguese colonial visual politics, tailored to the geopolitical and imperial positioning of each colony.

The study highlights the critical role of stamps as microcosmic mediums in mediating colonial ideology and cultural negotiation. Stamps not only convey the dominant narratives of colonial power but also provide a cultural arena for local communities to respond and resist. Future research could adopt a cross-colonial and cross-cultural perspective to explore how stamps continue to shape local identities in the postcolonial era or utilize digital humanities approaches to analyze their global circulation and reception. This article offers new perspectives for visual politics and colonial cultural studies, illuminating the diversity of Portuguese colonial strategies and their intricate interplay with local contexts.

Conflicts of Interest

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