

**TALKING PORTUGUESE;**  
**CHINA AND EAST TIMOR**

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**AETA**  
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# TALKING PORTUGUESE: CHINA AND EAST TIMOR

The Portuguese in Asia. If this phrase connotes anything at all to Australians, it may bring to mind heroic and ludicrous images of *navegadores* of Franciscan friars in tropical heat. Or perhaps a seaborne dragon on an archaic sixteenth-century map, snarling in uncharted waters as a Man-o-War leans into the trade winds near Socotra, enroute to battle the Turks off Diu. Or maybe the epic stanzas of Luis Vaz de Camoes,' *Os Lusiasdas* commemorated in blue and white *azulejo* tiles in some neglected Goan museum.

Or maybe that is just me. Certainly, the Australian media seem to think that East Timor is engaged in a bizarre, backward allegiance to Portuguese—a dying language of indifferent colonists, a kind of Latin with a triple bypass, sweating out its last days under palm trees – which is ritually denounced as if the adoption of Portuguese alone was sufficient to demonstrate the folly of East Timor's first government. The same dry realism dismisses Portuguese as some sort of economic death sentence. Yet this rationalist approach appears to have missed significant developments in the region. Why, if the media pundits are right, are Macau's Portuguese language schools currently full to the brim with several thousand Chinese students?

There are two different language debates: one a debate *in* East Timor, which is important and interesting to follow, and another *about* East Timor in Australian commentary, which has become rather one-eyed and predictable. The reality is that the Portuguese language was chosen in Timor-Leste, along with the lingua franca Tetum, as co-official language for symbolic and political reasons.

For the East Timorese resistance, Portuguese was always far more important as a signifier of difference from Indonesia than as a means of communication. That it is now a *contested* signifier of difference is indisputable. Younger nationalists have not embraced it, despite the persistence of Portuguese acronyms in practically all youth organizations; itself evidence of the language's symbolic role in the Timorese resistance. For older nationalists, before the spread of Tetum in the 1980's, Portuguese was a unifying language that brought the educated elites from various language groups together, and marked off the nation as distinct not only from Indonesia, but also Dutch-colonised and Protestant west Timor. It also facilitated the critical fraternal relationship with the independence movements of Portugal's African colonies. Importantly, Portuguese was not 'imposed' by the Fretilin government, but supported by older nationalists across the political spectrum in the lead up to independence.

After independence, the 'Indonesian generation', aged between twenty-five and forty and educated in Bahasa, had legitimate concerns about their potential exclusion from government jobs. As time goes by, however, these issues have become more complex than 'younger versus older' people. The 'Indonesian Generation' have their own

equivalent of “Gen Y” behind them- a much larger group of under fifteens, many of whom could easily turn out to be competent Portuguese speakers, depending on the ongoing language policy environment. Jose Ramos-Horta’s signal of a pragmatic turn in allowing Indonesian in the public service is welcome for the middle generation. Such a change would not require constitutional amendment, but merely treating Indonesian’s existing status as a ‘working language’ more seriously. The bottom line to the language debate in East Timor is that most agree on advancing the status of Tetum , and many people will continue to learn English as a second language, regardless of other linguistic affiliations.

All in all, the language debate *about* East Timor has become fairly stale redoubt of Australia media commentary, and a slightly suspicious obsession in Australia where monolingualism is the norm, and people are not generally as adept as the Timorese at learning languages. My own survey research on attitudes to national identity among East Timorese tertiary students, conducted earlier this year, suggests that while the official status of Portuguese remains controversial, it carries nothing like the weight it did in an earlier 2002 survey. This may partly be due to tertiary students being a younger demographic five years on; already wedded to Bahasa than their forbears in 2002. Others factors may include the impact of five years of government language policy and, perhaps of younger Timorese relaxing, to some degree, as they have seen the policy applied more pragmatically (and gradually) than originally feared. 2008 will be a significant and challenging year, as the new East Timorese government extends the use of Portuguese beyond primary school, further into pre-secondary education.

Of course realists would argue, rightly, that economics will ultimately sort out these language debates. Which brings us back to Macau. Why have enrolments in Portuguese language schools grown exponentially since the handover to China in 1999, and trebled since 2002?

The answer lies in China’s long-term diplomatic strategy with the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Nations) – the Lusophone equivalent of the British Commonwealth, established in 1996. In 2003, Beijing signed an agreement directly with the CPLP to increase trade, investment and economic cooperation with Portugal and six of its underdeveloped but resource-rich former colonies: Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau and East Timor. With the exception of Sao Tome and Principe (which has diplomatic relations with Taiwan), CPLP member countries are now considered central to China’s long term resource security strategy. For example, China is now the largest recipient of Angolan oil, and Brazil’s second largest trading partner.

China is taking a long-term view and focusing on direct CPLP engagement, as well as bilateral agreements with member countries. For example, under the three-year action plan negotiated in 2003, China has provided large preferential zero per cent loans to CPLP countries, cancelled considerable debt, and tripled aid to East Timor. In Dili, the Chinese are building both the new Foreign Affairs ministry building and Presidential Palace as gifts to the East Timorese people. The BBC reports that the Chinese bilateral

program in Angola is already responsible for the most major infrastructural works, with promise of further billions in credit, loans and infrastructure programs. Portuguese language is therefore considered a strategic investment in promoting good relations with CPLP, allowing China to develop its influence in several key regions at once: South America, Africa and Asia. Chinese cooperation also comes with fewer conditions than MF assistance, most notably, a policy of non-interference with the regimes in question. There is big money at stake, and a long-term strategy.

China is using the former Portuguese outpost of Macau as a base for this new relationship with the CPLP. Macau recently hosted the Lusofonia games, and is training thousands of students in the niche market of Portuguese. The recent popularity of the Portuguese language colleges has even prompted the public school system to offer Portuguese language classes, which have reported enrolments of 5,000. Macau also hosts biennial Ministerial forums with the CPLP countries, augmenting the triennial Head of State meetings held in Beijing. While these developments have been largely ignored in Australia, they have been the force on considerable commentary in the United States. *The Yale Global Review* and *The New York Times* have both reported on China's initiatives in Africa in recent years.

As the commentator Jose Murilo Junior noted, the CPLP countries, along with associate members like Equatorial Guinea, are so resource rich, they could conceivably form their own cartel if the CPLP was better organised. But the organisation's lack of resources makes it more likely to be a long-term strategic partner to big players. Things are not all going in the major powers' direction, however. In a surprising statement of independence, Angola – a major supplier to both superpowers- recently joined OPEC, much to the displeasure of both China and the United States,

The wider significance for Australia is that the CPLP countries may prove a key battleground in a new 'cold war' over resource security. There are already clear tensions between China and the United States over Angola. If these tensions extend to Timor, which has also benefited from Beijing's largesse, Australia could yet find itself on the frontline of resource battles between United States and China. Many would agree that this context is already implicit in Australian approaches to oil and gas in the Timor Sea and, moreover, that a 'proxy war' between the two powers was to some degree played out in the crisis of 2006; though internal political factors were far too substantial to draw that conclusion easily.

The other clear implication is the Lusophone connection may prove a benefit to East Timor's economy. While Portuguese is hardly likely to become 'the language of opportunity' in the region, it is clear that there will be more opportunities than previously predicted for Portuguese-speaking Timorese.

For its part the CPLP is in the final stages of establishing an office in Dili, at the invitation of the Timorese Government, as it did after Guinea Bissau's post-coup crisis in 2005. The CPLP maintains a low-key presence, running an electoral observer mission and distributing a regular CPLP news bulletin in *Semanario*, one of Timor's

newspapers. A joint CPLP peacekeeping force is in active planning for the future, building on already established joint command military exercises. The CPLP is distinct from the more important bilateral program with Portugal- but in many ways, given the fraternal connections with independence movements in other former colonies, the CPLP badge could prove more ‘user-friendly’ than the former colonial power over time.

Meanwhile, the private Portuguese foundation, *Fundacao Oriente* operates both as a cultural program, and as a conduit for funnelling Portuguese investments into Timor; including such notable examples as the Hotel Timor and Timor Telecom. The *Fundacao* once received a percentage of Macau’s gambling revenues in the late colonial era for cultural work, but traded these off to China in return for an ongoing presence in Macau promoting Portuguese investments in the region. Interestingly *Fundacao Oriente* is co-founder of the Portuguese primary and secondary school in Macau, which it runs in partnership with the Portuguese Ministry of Education, and also Portuguese Institute of the Orient, an adult language school run in conjunction with the *Instituto Camoes* - language teaching offshoot of the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Australia is one of the few OECD countries not to have an *Instituto Camoes* program, which funds Portuguese language lectures in foreign universities, including New Zealand. While the program formerly existed in Sydney and Melbourne, recent tensions over Timor appear to have scotched the program.

These regional and wider global developments place Jose Ramos Horta’s recent call for East Timor to join the Commonwealth in a very interesting light. Such a move is not unprecedented – Mozambique joined in 1995 at the instigation of South Africa and Zimbabwe, who wished to thank the Portuguese-speaking country for its role as a haven for their on independence movements during the Apartheid era. Indeed, the formation of the CPLP appears to have been a response to the development.

Of all the East Timorese political elite, Ramos-Horta is often perceived to be closest to the United States and Australia, and is also rumoured to have been instrumental in the CPLP’s marginalisation in the 2006 crisis. Mysterious to some, too, was the non-appointment of Cape Verde’s Antonio Mascarenhas Monteiro as head of the UN mission in Timor, despite a formal announcement of his accession in 2006- though a less conspiratorial view would note that UN practice has been for some time to bring in mission heads from the same region. And defying easy characterisation, Ramos-Horta has set up a special desk in the President’s office for relations with Portugal and CPLP.

While East Timor’s relations with the CPLP countries and – through Portugal – to the EU are not as important as those with Australia and Indonesia, these links have allowed East Timor to offset the influence of its great neighbours to some extent. The burgeoning relationship between China and the CPLP casts these historic and fraternal links in an interesting light. Could Timor become part of a new global frontline of resource tensions between the United States and China? Perhaps. It is certainly true that splits in the Timorese political elite offer entrée to a range of competing external parties. None of which bodes well for the political stability.

Nonetheless, it does suggest that the 'language debate' needs to be updated in line with some regional realities. China is courting the CPLP countries, and is investing heavily in Portuguese language to do so. This agenda is being driven far more strongly by China than the former colonial power itself.

There are clear, economic opportunities for East Timor in all this. The language debate is perhaps more complex than generally understood.

NOTE: Some of this material draws on the author's interviews with the CPLP ; *Fundacao Oriente* and *Instituto Camoes* in September 2007.

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