Macanese Cultural Study is one that focuses on the Portuguese community residing in Shanghai since the late-1800s and its subsequent displacement in the mid-1900s.

The initial research for this project was sparked by conversations with my own relatives, and the realization of my lack of knowledge about my family heritage. My father, Michael Ronald Bernal-Silva, originally Miguel Reinaldo Bernal da Silva, was born in Macau, a former Portuguese colony. Macao is a peninsula off the coast of Mainland China; it lies on the Western side of the Pearl Delta with the Guangdong province to the north and the South China Sea to the south. I always knew my father was an immigrant, but I never thought too much about it until not until recently, when I took a class on War and Migration. I began learning about the devastating trials and tribulations many immigrants encounter, in either refugee or internment camps, and their uprooted displacement. As I read more on immigration, and watched films elucidating the shocking reality of war, relocation, and resettlement, I began to think of my own family. I began to wonder about their immigration, their life back in Macao, and my father's unique path. I became fascinated with the American must have been. What truly incited and propelled my curiosity through was the 2010 Census form. That insidious little box that one needs to check in order to encapsulate one's most likely vast heritage made me stop and wonder, “What do I check? Am I Caucasian, because I look white? Am I Portuguese, because what's my name implies? Or am I Chinese, because my father's family emigrated from China? With these seemingly simple questions swirling through my mind, I set off to find the answer.

To begin this study, and in order to best understand the Bernal-Silva history, one must understand three main points.

First, one must be aware of the history of Portuguese migration to China in the 16th century. During the 1400's and into the early 1500's, Portugal experienced a surge in wealth and power due to China in the 16th century. During the 1400's and into the early 1500's, Portugal experienced a surge in wealth and power due to China's luxuriant trade. As historian Stella Dong explains, "China was the most decadent cities in the world, and many would refer to it as the "Paradise of the Orient," but not everyone in Shanghai experienced its luxury." As historian Stella Dong explains, "Shanghai's prison, no city in the Orient, or the world for that matter, could compare with it. At the peak of its spectacular career, the swamp ridden metropolis surely ranked as the most pleasure-seeking city in the world." The small Portuguese community from Macao lived in a narrow corridor that lay between the opulence of the foreign victors and the squalor and misery of the conquered and impoverished Chinese. As historian Stella Dong explains, "Shanghai, due to the stipulates of the Treaty of Nanking, the British, the French, and other foreign nationals liked to employ the Macanese who were loyal and hardworking, took pride in their work and had a facility for language. The Macanese or Portuguese did not have their own concessions because China did not concede anything to them. They were not in the war against China. They just hung on the coat tails of the foreign victors and earned a living in a supporting role as translators, interpreters, brokers, officials, managers. Few in the Macanese community owned property and most lived from hand to mouth. Socially, they stuck to their own. The Macanese in Shanghai were frugal and giving perhaps because friendship was a way to survive and giving was easy when everyone had so little; besides, giving made one feel useful. Mrs. Meyer's description is incredibly important to understand when studying Shanghai's concessions and the Portuguese community that resided there. There was clear opulence and luxury in Shanghai's culture, but those characteristics are merely surface definitions of Shanghai's culture in the early mid-1900s. Their 'extravagance' simply is one element in the complex dynamics that Wong speaks to in her book. In studying the Macanese culture and reading Aurora's description, it is clear to me that there is more to say about their frivolity as a cultural element rather than a gluttonous sin. Secondly, it is important to understand the history of Macao, a Portuguese settlement off the coast of Mainland China. Macao has been a Portuguese port since the mid-1500s, and although it was not always owned by Portugal, it has always been ruled by the Portuguese government – that is, until 1999, when it was returned to China. For this reason, Macao is prominently Portuguese and Chinese. In fact, much of the culture today is a mixture between the two ethnicities. Macao, fortunately, belonged to Portugal during the numerous wars that China underwent in the 20th century. During wartimes, Macao acted as a refuge camp for the Portuguese, saving them from internment camps and unkept displacement. Thus, the culture is not a self-defining description of this particular community. Rather, it seems impossible to categorize this group of people into one definite and traditional nationality. As I said before, the word Macanese does not truly define this community; rather it is the most inclusive definition possible. Many members of the community do recognize themselves as part of this transcendent kinship, but as the century progressed, the community lost a dominant nationality. Today, much of the community can also be categorized as Portuguese, Eurasian, Filho Macaos, Sino-Portuguese. Most members have acculturated to their current disposition and are now also American, Canadian, Brazilian, etc. The definition of Macanese is a broad label, and not a true definition of their ethnicity and nationality. As I began to study the community, what I found most unique was their idea of national identity. They are a community whose identity lies within kinship and familial relationships, and not a clearly defined nation. For this reason, I believe they are an imagined community, a people that are socially constructed, rather than geographically bound. The community also seems to be one that has fallen between the cracks of history and suffers from a major lack of documentation. As historian Stella Dong again as Aurora Meyer explains, "much was done with a handshake; the Portuguese traded without documentation." Although, in the last ten years the Macanese population has begun a program not only to further Macanese historical studies, but also to create a stronger national identity. This movement for a stronger Macanese nationalism does include the history of the Portuguese people living in China from the 19th-20th centuries, but unfortunately, the most focused effort has been more focused on the Macanese living in Macao today. The Macanese culture and history that this paper will outline is one of a generation of immigrants that is dysfunctional, and the community are approximately 70 years old. One historian, Antonio M. Pacheco Jorge da Silva, who was recently commissioned by Macao to study the Portuguese Community in Hong Kong, provided a great collection of family names, major community events, and historical outlines. Unfortunately, Jorge da Silva's work was merely a baseline account and collection of the community. So, despite a few great resources, the information on the Portuguese community in Shanghai during the first half of the 1900s is relatively non-existent. As a result, while I conducted my research I found little documentation on the community, and much of my information comes from participant observation, interviews and surveys, Facebook groups, online genealogy sites, and numerous emails. With this basic cultural and historical context, I then set out to find a purpose for my research. I .Muddled through endless interviews, various family parties, and numerous
the qualities of the Chinese were not easy to find. My father used to say, you earn your money by paying out that you are a good worker and never depending on anyone to support you. Pride in your work, despite not making money, was the hallmark and key high and say “I earned my wages through hard and honest work.”

This mentality is what I believe saved the lives of the Macanese community in the impending wars and relocations is rooted in the idea that the Macanese people were not a part of this great history; I am its aftermath. I am a second generation Macanese-American, but I feel no tie to Macao, its history, or its people. Though this is not to say the Macanese culture did not have its good points, and strengths, in the view of the Macanese culture, which I believe is to give many a glimpse of the characteristics I hope to elucidate throughout this paper.

Since my grandfather carried the Bernal-Silva name, but uniformed foreign workers were stationed on the island in those times, and amahs were in many cases welcomed into the families, I will refer to her throughout the rest of the paper, will have found a greater appreciation and understanding of my own close-knit family. Through my Macanese grandparent, I have viewed the Macanese with a great deal of family, a profound sensitivity, and the courage to persevere through anything. All are Macanese characteristics that I hope to elucidate throughout this paper.

Girlie was born on December 21, 1929 in Shanghai, China to Cesar Augusto Danenberg and Zelinda Emilia Gomes, themselves both born in Shanghai at the turn of the century. The Danenbergs joined the Portuguese concession in the early 1900s.

In China the Danenbergs, although middle class, lived “excruciatingly”. Girlie claims her family lived a luxuriously life in Shanghai. In each international community had its own club where children could play together, teenagers could have dances, and adults could throw parties or simply get together to play cards. The Danenberg’s relationship was so tight that kept the community so close, even through their displacements in the early 1900s.

In Shanghai the early times were very tight. My grandmother recalls, people would just show up at the door and were welcomed with open arms. The Macanese women, and their homes, were always ready to host guests. It is said that in a Macanese kitchen, there always Macanese food made and ready to be served, which I can attest to Cesar Augusto Danenberg and Zelinda Emilia Gomes, themselves both born in Shanghai at the turn of the century. The Danenbergs joined the Portuguese concession in the early 1900s.

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grandmother can remember when she was seventeen, she was working at the Hong Kong Bank as a legal secretary, and in no time I was the best secretary. The worst of it though, was that she did anything to make me fail, she would show me nothing; I had to do all the work myself.

We thank God for bringing us through this nicely. We boarded many rough storms from our relatives who traveled by train. These families with young children, being crammed into hard wooden seats, alongside their packed belongings were placed on top of those; and, those standing were shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the hungry passengers sitting the mainland. Food & water had to be brought on your own – that was the rule if you were there. Everywhere you had to accommodate another in this.

Although my grandmother had landed in Hong Kong safely, she was separated from my grandfather. Alvaro was unreliable to move to Hong Kong because he did not have the proper paper work, so instead he was forced to move to Macao, only a two-hour boat ride from Hong Kong. Macao acted as a safe haven for many refugees from the newly powerful Chinese Communist Party. According to Historian Steven Shapp, author of Macao, China, “refugees fleeing Communist China were allowed to move to U.S. Privy Counsel Guyard was not choosing to live permanently in Macao and others living there while arranging to move in to Hong Kong.” Soon after Alvaro landed in Macao, Giuley quickly followed. “When I left Shanghai with my family and Alvaro, we decided that I would not have to go to Macao to get married.” She gave birth to her eldest, my father, Miguel, on June 9, 1951 at St. Januarius Hospital. They stayed a little over a year in Macao, a surprisingly pleasant year according to my grandmother.

During this period, the peninsula’s refugee buildings were split up into units in order to house the Portuguese fleeing from the threat of communism. Since my grandmother knew the person in charge of sectioning off the housing units, they received one of the bigger units for just the three of them. “Everyone was so jealous, those poor people crammed into small spaces, with up to six to eight people, it was a nightmare,” Describing the stress of the displacement of her family, Giuley described her experience as “fun.” It ‘was like a social club where everyone knew each other and during the evenings we would wait for Chinese food carriers to come; it was just like a picnic.” Although Giuley felt that the experience was almost enjoyable, not everyone held the same sentiments. Since Giuley’s father lived in Hong Kong she had the ability to look after him from Hong Kong so he could receive proper healthcare and other needs. Also, she was not psychologically traumatized by the refugee camp entrapment or uncertainty; she was merely buying time until Alvaro could move to Hong Kong. A common reasoning of the Nationalist’s was that they were not completely separated from the rest of her family and saw them frequently when she traveled to and from Hong Kong.

After a year in Macao and through the help of Catholic nuns, my grandfather received a painting job for American soldiers in Hong Kong. This job allowed him to travel and to live in the city. Once he applied for work at the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, where he eventually would receive a job. While living in Hong Kong, Giuley took Alvaro out, the seeking the children’s center of the room in full view of everyone, not even a drape! And all the while we were being shot at by the refugees in Macao, and eventually their small community was allowed to immigrate to America. As Aura Meyer explained to me, “they were allowed to migrate because the Shanghai Macanese were uprooted from Shanghai and relocated to Macao after the Communist took over in 1949.”

Also, to ensure safe passage, the American Catholic Relief Center loaned my grandfather’s overcoats more than once during their migration from China to America, I can only imagine what it must have been like for my grandmother, who was constantly sick in a cramped room, taking care of her small children. They made several stops on their voyage – first Japan, then Hawaii – before finally landing in San Francisco, where they went through immigration at Angel Island. My grandfather remembers this visit to Angel Island:

“The Employment Agencies in San Francisco were giving full steam in recruiting people for jobs. They thought us as real potential workers who could be of service to them…to send prospective employees to various companies. It was amazing everyone was hired almost on the spot.”

Then after two weeks in San Francisco, they continued their journey to New Jersey.

We left San Francisco to go to New Jersey to meet up with my sister Gloria (Gong) who had not seen her tio due to the fact that she married an American sailor in 1974 who then was working in New Jersey for the naval base near to our house. I guess life works in mysterious ways. . . we couldn’t afford to go back to California, que sera, sera. “On the train we had a room with a sink and a toilet in the center of the room in the middle of the corridor… a real dream! And all we had were a couple of hook beds and the boys (Miki and Rick) made the trip sitting to keep the seat, those angels.” Despite the low life and dirty facilities, my grandmother recounted:

“Upon arrival at Penn Station, we were shocked and disappointed as we, literally expected to see the real paved with gold.” Although I found this statement incredibly amusing, it is hard to discount its irony. They expected a better life than the one they had in China – a life free of war, persecution, and racism due to the fact that they were not pure Chinese, but in America, what they found was a life that was filled by neighborhood racism, social isolation, and constant racism because many believed they were ‘Chinks.’

Once in New Jersey, they had a hard time finding a house. “Who would rent to a Chinese woman with six kids?” After being turned down by many homes by the reason of racism, they finally found a house of their own, which my grandmother still lives in today; even though they had a roof over their heads, life in America was far from easy. Both Giuley and Al worked long hours on top of taking care and raising six children, all the while constantly dealing with ignorance and racism. Throughout my interviews, my grandmother recounted many instances of racism, but two stories of prejudice that particularly stood out to me were:

If you were seen as a legal secretary, and I had a nasty supervisor, she did anything to make me fail, she would show me nothing; I had to do all the work myself. I got it though.

The first story included one of her neighbors in East Orange, who refused to acknowledge the fact that she was not Chinese; which in itself was not out of the ordinary, but it was my grandmother’s response to the ignorance that I found interesting.

This nasty lady used to call me Chinese, you know better! I would explain to her we are not Chinese and you know what she said, ‘I am still going to call you Chinese’ can you believe it. That’s ignorance!”

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I would have liked them, instead though I would just play a long mess with them a little, you have to find amusement somehow don’t you?

As anthropologist, Jon D. Holtzman, in his work with the Sudanese tribe the Nuer and his book Nuer Journey, Nuer Lives, explains, the relationship between immigrants and already established residents is difficult. The residents naturally struggle with a new group of people settling around them and “often draw on pre-existing stereotypes, images of Africa, and conceptualizations of “the refugee.” Although I understand the natural fear of the unknown, I believe in this particular case, the stories of racism were not simply based in stereotypes but rooted in ignorance and the media stereotype of the Asian people.

Racism was a grave reality for my grandmother, and not only specific to the work place. People say “chinky eyes” and just assumed “dirty dumb immigrant”, whether it was provoked or not. In the Macanese case they all seemed to be well-educated people, whose lives were simply controlled by politics and war. I can honestly say, and I hope those who read her accounts will agree, my grandmother is an outstanding woman who made the best of what life handed her. Her life and home lies with her family, a characteristic that I believe was instilled in her by her heritage and culture. The Macanese culture described in this paper is the reason that I am here today. And without their sense of survival their displacement and resettlement I would have been a drastically different human being than I am today: Although their life in America at first was difficult, they survived and they repaid every debt they owed, “what I most proud of was we survived with little help, we did it on our own, no welfare system!” Even though they had second hand everything, from furniture to clothes and the fact that my grandma knows how to cook chicken every way possible, (merely fancying up the cheapest protein she could find), they were and are a proud people. My grandparents are what I like to call “an exception to the rule.” They were extremely lucky to make it out of China and into the United States; they were very lucky that they found church-based organizations to aid and support them through their transition, but outside of that luck they had their hand everything, from furniture to clothes and the fact that my grandma always says, “it goes to show if you have the ability, whatever you will be forever grateful to America, for as my grandmother always says, “it goes to show if you have the ability, whatever nationality you are, one can advance, God Bless America.”

So, after all this research, what box do I check? I thought long and hard about this, and I choose to check ‘Other’. I am not Caucasian, I am not Portuguese, and I am not Chinese, I am American. My name, Caroline Zelinda Bernal-Silva, is English, Dutch, and Portuguese - all three passed down through the generations, but what are they indicative of? Nationality wise, my name means nothing, but obviously, in sentimental terms it means everything. So despite the argument that, “America is a melting pot that melts all other cultures into white,” I believe that America is a melting pot that melts all cultures uniquely into Americanism. America might have a lot of political flaws in terms of immigration policies and placement, but in the end, it is a unique country where exceptions, like my grandmother, are possible. ‘American Dream’, for many, is just a dream, but the very possibility of actually achieving that dream, and transcending class lines is infinitely more real than many other nations can claim. I have no real physical or cultural ties to any other nation, so despite the fact that I understand and sometimes even practice other cultures, I am without a doubt American and until that is a box I can check, I am an ‘Other’.

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