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# Colonial intelligence and diplomatic relations between empires, or how to survive in a vast Indo-Persian world

**Jaime Ricardo Gouveia**
Universidade de Coimbra-CHSC, FLUC
jaime.gouveia@uc.pt
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2435-7384



Jorge Manuel da Costa Silva Flores is one of the leading names for anyone who wants to study Portuguese Asia in the early modern period, not only because of his long academic career, but especially because of the international impact of his scientific work.

Professor Jorge Flores has a high level of academic experience. He holds a Degree in History from the University of Lisbon and a MA and a PhD from the New University of Lisbon. Prior to his current position at the University of Lisbon, he held Assistant and Lecturer Professorships at the University of Macau, the Lusíada University (Lisbon), and the University of Aveiro. He has been Associate Professor (with tenure) of Portuguese & Brazilian Studies and History at Brown University (Providence, RI) before moving to the European University Institute, in Florence, where he was Vasco da Gama Professor on European Colonial and Post-Colonial Systems, and Professor of Early Modern Global History.

Currently he is senior Researcher at the Interuniversity Centre for the History of Science and Technology (CIUHCT), University of Lisbon. Over the course of his career, Professor Flores has been a visiting scholar at several international scientific institutions, such as the International Open University of Asia; École Pratique des Hautes Études – IVe Section, Sorbonne; Leiden University; École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales; the University of Oxford (Torch International Fellow); and the University of Konstanz (Dr. K. H. Eberle Research Fellow).

The originality and high quality of Professor Flores's work is also explained by his involvement in competitively funded research projects. These include the project 'Microhistory and Global History' (with Maxine Berg and John-Paul Ghobrial), funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and, more recently, the coordination of the project 'The Hidden Layer: In-Between Lives and Archives of the Early Modern Portuguese Empire', funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).

His career has also been marked by his participation in the most prestigious international scientific societies and by his extensive involvement as a guest speaker at international conferences and seminars. On 6 December 2024, the University of Coimbra and the Center for the History of Society and Culture hosted Professor Jorge Flores for a well-attended lecture entitled: "Paper Ships: Maritime Asia as an Archive (1500-1800)". Taking a social history approach to the archive, the history of material culture, and the human history of maritime Asia, he reflected on how the Indian and Pacific Oceans operated as paper oceans, ships as archives or floating libraries, and ships as historical sources or sites of document production.

In this lecture, Professor Flores discussed how maritime routes, seen as axes of the circulation of paper, can help to clarify the imperial dynamics that he has been studying for many years. Here are some examples of his outstanding works in the historiographical field: *Os Portugueses e o Mar de Ceilão: Trato, Diplomacia e Guerra, 1498-1543* (Cosmos, 1998); *Os Olhos do rei. Desenhos e descrições portuguesas da ilha de Ceilão (1624–1638)* (Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 2001); *A Taprobana e a Ponte de Rama. Estudos sobre os Portugueses em Ceilão e na Índia do Sul* (Instituto Português do Oriente, 2004). More recently, he published *Nas margens do Hindustão. O Estado da Índia e a expansão mogol, ca. 1570-1640* (Coimbra University Press, 2015); *The Mughal Padshah: A Jesuit Treatise on Emperor Jahangir's Court and Household* (Brill, 2016; Manohar, 2024); and *Unwanted Neighbours: The Mughals, the Portuguese, and Their Frontier Zones* (Oxford University Press, 2018). He has also co-edited several volumes and written several articles of recognised importance (for more, see: (https://ciuhct.org/membros/jorge-flores).

This interview seeks to explore some of the main arguments that Professor Jorge Flores has developed in the recent past, with a special focus on his latest book, *Empire of Contingency: How Portugal Entered the Indo-Persian World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024).

**Jaime Gouveia** – ***A book always reflects the time in which it was written, as well as certain ways of thinking and writing history. What impelled you to write it? Can you indicate the most important purposes of your enquiry?***

**Jorge Flores** – Curiously, the idea for this book started germinating in my mind a very long time ago, when I moved from Macau back to Lisbon in 1994. To have lived five years in this small Chinese city, by then under Portuguese administration, gave me an acute sense of how must have been like to rule a port city that integrated the *Estado da Índia* but was encircled by a continental giant, namely Ming-Qing China. So, my initial question was: how does a "disadvantaged" foreign community manage to safeguard its political autonomy, if not its actual survival, in such conditions? The problem, *mutatis mutandis*, also applied to the city of Goa – the capital of Portuguese Asia – vis-à-vis Mughal India. Founded in Delhi in 1526, the Mughal Empire rapidly expanded in several directions and eventually engulfed most of the Portuguese possessions in India. The book that influenced me most in the early stages of this project was C. A. Bayly's *Empire of Information: Intelligence and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (1996). Of course, Bayly's book concerns a different empire, a later epoch, and a markedly distinct context. It deals with the British conquest of India, whereas *Empire of Contingency* is about the Portuguese survival in India. But what Bayly offers with regard to indigenous surveillance, communicational structures, and interpenetration of the local stratum with the colonial apparatus was key to my project. As time went by, I refined my argument and the sub-questions to be tackled multiplied. I fostered several other historiographical conversations, many of them somewhat neglected by specialists of South Asia and/or historians of empire. This work was planned and written over a long period of time and thus reflects several developments of history as an academic discipline. Ultimately, I sought to write an early modern book, one that any early modernist – regardless of the cultural zones they work on – could read and, hopefully, engaged with. To some extent, the themes are more significant than the geographies.

**JG** – ***There you express the idea that Portuguese India was always tiny, and that its survival in relation to the great Muslim and Persian-based societies that ruled the subcontinent was due to the invention of possible and improvised strategies. Could you tell us more about the key questions and issues behind this statement?***

**JF** – The *Estado da Índia*, we know it well, faced several challenges posed by different Asian polities, societies, and economies stretching from the Red Sea to the Sea of Japan, but also by significant European competitors that

came into this vast world from the late sixteenth century onwards. In *Empire of Contingency*, I focus specifically on Portuguese India vis-à-vis the Persianate sphere between the 1570s and the end of the seventeenth century. (By Persianate we do not mean Iran, but rather the cultural nexus that encompasses several regions and diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities under the umbrella of Persian between the Middle Ages and the nineteenth century.) My book argues that the *Estado da Índia* anchored its continued Indo-Persian experience in particular forms of political information and communication and goes one to examine those forms. Goa could (and did) on occasion wage economic warfare in the maritime fringes of the Mughal Empire, yet open military confrontation was obviously out of the question. And so was the implementation of a sort of geopolitical monitor fully mastered by the Portuguese to watch the Hindustan and the Deccan. The solution was to adapt and fit in. Better said, to gather political news mostly through indigenous actors and networks, to rely on local interpreters-translators and scribes-clerks. The Portuguese eventually accessed some filaments of a rich and complex amalgamation of people and materials (oral and written) in constant movement on the Indian Peninsula. Many more filaments of this "Persianate cloud" were either unreachable or misunderstood. And not everything boiled down to collect intelligence. Goa had also to perform politically in front of, and communicate consistently with, the Persianate states of India. For instance, a Portuguese viceroy, or someone on his behalf, had to know how to handle a highly ritualized Mughal *farman* (imperial decree) and respond to it. When I say respond, I mean to do it in the Persian language and in Persianate manner.

**JG** – ***Can you elaborate on this question of colonial intelligence? Was there something historically specific about the Portuguese espionage that determined the survival of the* Estado da India *in a vast Indo-Persian world shaped by the influence and power of the Mughal Empire? If so, what? And why?***

**JF** – It is impossible to know whether Goa's grasp of the politico-military landscape of the Indo-Persian world throughout the period under consideration prevented the elimination of the *Estado da Índia*. Did good intelligence translate into the right decisions and ultimate success? This is a somewhat deterministic view and my book, as its title indicates, is about contingency. There was no such thing as a Mughal master plan to eradicate the Portuguese from the subcontinent, as there was no such thing as a flawless Portuguese espionage system geared towards the Mughals. Survival was more than to avoid straightfor-

ward annihilation. It meant pursuing consistently certain strategic objectives, such as the exploration of internal cracks in Mughal India (dynastic transitions, political struggles, regional rebellions, ethnic dissentions) and the use of the sultanates of the Western Deccan as buffer states between the *Mogor* and the *Estado*. It likewise required that the right persons cultivated effective ties with successive rulers and elite members in the Indo-Persian courts so that the enemy's decisions could (at least occasionally) be molded. On a more incorporeal level, to safeguard the *Estado*'s political autonomy by contravening the symbolic power of Mughal words and gestures was of the essence. None of the above point towards the existence of a Portuguese "grand strategy".

**JG** – ***Was that intelligence apparatus a true system or something more fluid and improvised? Who could be entrusted with that kind of missions? Do we know who the spies were?***

**JF** – Yes, it was a fluid apparatus, dependent on the ties and networks nurtured by a viceroy and other figures in a particular moment in time. The "intelligencers" (*inteligentes*) therefore changed periodically, although some have known long "careers" as informants and advisors. Ultimately, there was no permanent and cumulative structure, things had to be done and redone cyclically. The profile of those who spied for Goa in Persianate India was extremely varied. We find diplomatic envoys and Jesuit missionaries whose identities are well known, side by side with shadowy Portuguese (and other Europeans) who criss-crossed "borders" and lived between cities, allegiances, and religions. To these characters one may add Jews and Armenians – representatives of early modern "circulation societies" (Sebouh Aslanian) –, baniyas (*baneanes*), and Brahmans. The low tier of the Portuguese intelligence system corresponds to a host of mostly Muslim and Hindu messengers (*patamares*). These men and (some) women are frequently nameless in the imperial record, but they were of critical importance and often had agency. The hot spots for the collection of news were the court, the bazar, and the port. The information on Mughal India and the Deccan sultanates that reached Goa was not necessarily extracted. Some news was rather the outcome of conversations that took place in these locations or on the road. The book insists on the importance of movement and conversation with regard to the collection of intelligence. The reconstruction of these structures by the historian entails a very close and creative reading of the extant sources, since spies are invisible by definition and their patrons – viceroys of the *Estado* and captains of fortresses, for the most part – were careful enough not to disclose their identities or fully reveal their actions.

**JG** – ***Recruiting local collaborators and making them agents of the empire involved negotiation, but also raised the problem of loyalties and trans-loyalties. How did the*** **Estado da India** ***manage this?***

**JF** – Surprisingly, the Portuguese documentation reveals little concern with the loyalty of these imperial agents. Conversion, or the sharing of the same belief system, was one way to secure allegiance. It occurred with native professionals of writing – scribes, clerks, and secretaries – who likewise acted as spies. They were mainly Brahmans from Goa converted to Christianity and identifiable by their Portuguese names. The recruitment of interpreters-translators of Goa belonging to the same family and across generations was another way. This is the story of those that served as línguas do *Estado* during the seventeenth century – Hindu Brahmans who never converted but held long and stable careers in the service of the Portuguese. Freelance spies were of course put to the test, sometimes in ingenious ways. My book opens with one such story: the tale of Manuel de Azevedo, who fled Goa to the neighboring sultanate of Bijapur, converted to Islam (although we do not know his Muslim name) and apparently had access to the sultan's inner circle. Azevedo worked for Viceroy Luís de Ataíde (g. 1568-1571) as a spy in a delicate moment of Portuguese Goa, specifically when the city was under siege by Bijapur (1570). Ataíde tasked Azevedo with several missions designed to assert his trustworthiness. One such mission was to poison the water supply of the capital of Bijapur, which he apparently did. But there is another striking phenomenon worth being noted. Some people could perform tasks for both sides with benefits for all parties involved. I came across several individuals who served two masters: Hari Vaisya, from Surat, Apaji, from Bijapur, and Diogo Saraiva in Ahmadnagar – all at the time of Viceroy count of Linhares (g. 1629-1635) – are cases in point. The lines were more blurred than one is ready to admit.

**JG** – ***As you have consistently shown, the Portuguese*** **Estado da Índia,** ***based in Goa, dealt with its neighbours, especially the Mughal Empire, but also the nearby Deccan Sultanates. This meant that imperial powers with different linguistic and cultural spheres could communicate in the political arena. Why has pre-modern political information and communication been so absent from the study of European empires? Do you think that the Portuguese Empire was different from other empires in this respect?***

**JF** – The historiographical trajectories of empire are complex and would take us far. To go straight to your question: yes, our knowledge of the information, documentary, and communication regimes of early modern Europe-

an empires is still poor. Studies on these particular fields have thrived in the last decades for early modern Europe, but scholars of empire do not venture much beyond a sustained interest on cross-cultural diplomacy along the lines of the new diplomatic history. Besides, some of the extant works on imperial informational orders are problematic since they tend to convey a teleological tale: a European empire – in Asia or elsewhere – becomes gradually more proficient in using local information and transforming the imperial archive into a tool of subjugation. The Foucauldian power-knowledge association remains unquestioned, for the efficiency of the colonial machine, eventually resulting in colonial control, is taken for granted. My book stresses the flaws of such linear views, at least for the Portuguese case. It focuses on gaps, disruption, lapses of imperial memory, and even imperial ignorance. We certainly need more research on the informational, archival, and communicational systems of the Dutch, English, and French before we can really compare and reach better conclusions. Interestingly, the pathbreaking studies are coming from other imperial arenas, like the Ottoman, the Russian, and the Chinese.

**JG – *You have argued that the* Estado da India *fitted into a Persian mould, being a porous surface, somewhat permeable to a hostile political and cultural order. In other words, Portuguese India blended in to its surroundings, morphed into some sort of Persianate entity. Does this not clash with existing visions of what an empire is?***

**JF** – It indeed clashes with visions that tend to essentialize empires, portraying them (sometimes unconsciously) as monolithic units. Older works on European empires in Asia insisted on the "medieval state – modern company" divide in order to explore the differences between the *Estado da Índia* and the English East India Company (EIC) or the Dutch *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC). Fortunately, we are now far from such formula, but excessive distinctions between imperial formations still prevail. For instance, the study of comparisons and "contaminations" across European empires is favored, yet other coeval empires are commonly excluded from this exercise on the basis of clear-cut divisions with regard to belief (Islam-Christianity) and geography (Asia-Europe), if not civilization ("the West and the Rest," still … ). The same holds true of the binary classifications that systematically oppose the colonizer and the colonized, no matter space, time, and circumstance. Do historians interested in, say, European representations of land and people in imperial settings read Valerie Kivelson's *Cartographies of Tsardom: The Land and Its Meanings in Seventeenth-Century Russia* (2006) or Laura Hostetler's *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Ear-*

*ly Modern China* (2005)? These and other works surely constitute a source of inspiration and a springboard for broader conversations. For instance, I sustain that for the Mughal Empire, and from certain angles, Goa must have resembled more of a Deccan state than a European trading company. Let me explain myself. Similarly to the sultanates of Bijapur or Ahmadnagar, the *Estado da Índia* controlled actual territory – Goa and the cities of the "Northern province" (Chaul, Bassein, Daman, and Diu) – and exerted political authority in it, whereas the EIC or the VOC counted on factories located in cities under Mughal rule, Surat being a good case in point. One of the cases I examine in chapter 9 ("(Un)Staging the Farman"), namely the complex reception in Goa of a decree issued by Emperor Shahjahan in 1630, has no parallel in the VOC or the EIC. And yet, it could be compared, sources permitting, to the reception of a Mughal decree in the 'Adil Shahi or Nizam Shahi courts.

**JG** – ***Was the system devised by the* Estado da India *to deal with continental problems pivotal to relations with other parts of the empire? To what extent are the new approaches that you are proposing likely to change the way we understand the Portuguese empire?***

**JF** – This is a very interesting question. The predominantly maritime nature of Portuguese Asia made its historians pay little attention to the continental factor for too long. And yet, land is critical to our understanding of particular areas and periods of the *Estado da Índia*. Think of the Zambezi River valley, the Northern province, the island of Ceylon, and rural Goa, not to mention the utopian schemes put forward by several *arbitristas* and projectors to conquer vast Asian territories and rule over them. Still, my book deals with a specific set of continental problems, which are geopolitical and epistemological at the same time. A maritime empire born in the southern tip of Europe, with privileged views of the Atlantic Ocean, eventually finds itself controlling a series of port-cities in Western India. When looking inland from these mostly fortressed posts – the *arbitrista* Francisco Rodrigues Silveira calls them "cages" –, the newcomers saw several potentially hostile states. First and foremost, the Mughal Empire, a colossal power that forced the Portuguese to think it terms of war horses instead of warships and military manpower instead of pepper shipments. In order to understand the Mughals, the Portuguese ought to wear long-distance (continental) glasses and try to learn what was going on in cities like Delhi, Lahore, or Bukhara (where very few of them actually set foot). As I suggest in my answer to your first question, the enormous challenges Goa had to face in this regard are comparable to those put to Macau by the Chinese Empire. Much of what I write in *Empire*

*of Contingency* can also trigger a dialogue with historians of the Iberian presence in North Africa in the same period. But the hypotheses I explore in the book will not be of use to address the central role played by territory in Brazil or Angola since the mid-eighteenth century. The situations at stake are quite dissimilar.

**JG –** ***Your research revealed to be very sensitive to the new history of diplomacy, the social history of archives, scribal cultures and communities, global microhistory, and a renewed emphasis on textual hermeneutics. How do you see the future development of the field of imperial studies? What is still to be done?***

**JF –** Yes, *Empire of Contingency* engages decisively with those fields, but also with others, like translation, correspondence, and political ethnography. The current research regarding early modern European empires goes in many different directions and talks to several historiographical traditions. But there is clearly a strong focus on a set of subjects, such as gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, identities and identification, enslavement and enslaved people, labor and inequality, or the voices of the voiceless. A reflection about what is still to be done is very much tied to one's observation post. From where I stand, I see numerous lacunae. Some are specific to the Portuguese Empire, while others refer to broader geographies and issues. A couple of thoughts will suffice: (1) The label "imperial studies" can be problematic, for it might directs us to Eurocentric narratives and the neglect of Asian, African, and American histories; (2) We will profit immensely from addressing themes in comparative and connected modes across early modern empires. This is also a way to avoid the Portuguese empire's "splendid isolation".

**JG –** ***Can you share your plans for the near future? What can those interested in the history of Portugal in Asia expect from you?***

**JF –** If I were given two lives, and decided to spend both as an historian, myriad projects would eventually materialize. Having only one (and already advanced) life, it is perhaps wise to be realistic and focus on reasonable goals. I am working on two main projects at the moment. One is a visual history of political discord in the early modern Iberian world written together with Giuseppe Marcocci (Oxford). The other is a critical biography of the mestizo polymath Manuel Godinho de Erédia, an intriguing yet insufficiently studied figure who was born in Malacca c. 1563 and died around sixty years later in Goa. Both projects have to do with the history of Portugal in Asia, but they also go much beyond the spatial and historiographical limits of the *Estado*

*da Índia*. The political dissent book nurtures comparisons and connections across the vast Iberian overseas domains of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, from Mexico City, Puebla, Lima, and Manila to Bahia, Luanda, Goa, and Malacca. The Erédia book, for its part, represents my first venture into biography studies and will take the reader back and forth both in space (between Asia and Europe) and time (between Antiquity and the late Renaissance).

**JG** – ***Thank you very much for your kind willingness to share the results of your research with our readers.***

**JF** – Thank you, and the University of Coimbra's Center for the History of Society and Culture, for your interest in my recent work and the kind invitation to give one of the prestigious "The Worlds of History" talks.