



# ponto final

句號報



HOME POLITICS SOCIETY ECONOMICS SPORT CULTURE GREATER CHINA INTERNATIONAL LUSOPHONY ASIA SEARCH

REPORTAGE INTERVIEW PROFILE OPINION PARAGRAPH SUPPLEMENTS IN TOWN MORE



Commencement • Interview • “Pessanha verses have a cadence that asks to be sung”

19 March, 2026  
12 0

INTERVIEW

## “Pessanha verses have a cadence that asks to be sung”

By Eloi Carvalho

Centennial poetry digested by algorithms. One hundred years after the death of Camilo Pessanha in Macau, an unpublished musical project returns his poems to the city that saw them born. Sunk Ships Sing Clepsydra is a 30-track album that tracks the entirety of Clepsydra, the 1920s symbolist collection, with lyrics sung in Portuguese with patua inflection. Project author Ian Watts explains to the FINAL POINT how the poetry of the “poet from two homelands” found an unexpected echo in Shidaiqu, the Shanghai jazz of the 1930s, and why Patua, a dying language, is the right voice for this testimony.

The poet who spent his life rewriting the same verses found, a century later, who rewrote them in machine-generated music. The life and work of Camilo Pessanha has always been linked to music, but now it goes beyond, in a connection that he himself would never have thought would happen. “The idea was born of a recognition, not an invention” says Ian Watts, a writer and translator with Portuguese roots in Hawaii and California, who knows Pessanha's work deeply. It was in the late nineties that he crossed with the manuscripts of the legendary poet in the National Library of Lisbon. Among them, a replica of the Black Notebook. He saw the amendments, the sketches, the verses that Pessanha continued to rewrite long after he had given them as finished.

The project he now presents, called Sunk Ships Sing Clepsydra, is a 30-track album that transforms the entire Clepsydra into music. The songs are sung in a Portuguese that transfers naturally to the patua, the romantic creole that involved the symbolic daily life of Pessanha in Macau. The “genre” chosen is the Shidaiqu, a sound mix that flourished in Shanghai in the 1930s, where traditional Chinese melodies were fused with harmony and instrumentation from the newly popularized American jazz. The music collection, available for free on the Sunk Ships website and Spotify, is built on a deliberate production concept. A Macanese band in Shanghai. The singer, Mica, is Macanese and the recording has a warm, immersive, that leads the listener to feel inside a room, with the reverberation doing the work that the rhythm section would do in another context. However, this band is entirely fictional, a product of imagination and technology. The album was produced using artificial intelligence (AI) music generation tools, which allowed a single person to accomplish something that would otherwise have required a period ensemble, a studio, and considerable means. Ian Watts describes the process as a collaboration where AI came in as an instrumentalist and he as an editor, constantly resisting the machine's trend towards polished “and bono”, in search of something that sounded like music memory.



How did the idea come about to take the entire “Clepsydra” from Pessanha and play it now, one hundred years after the poet's death?

I've known Pessanha's work for a long time. In the late nineties I consulted his manuscripts in the National Library of Lisbon — and among them was a replica of the Black Notebook. I saw the amendments, the erasures, the verses that he continued to rewrite long after he had written them. What stayed me was not only the literary quality, but the strangeness of his situation: a man completely absorbed by Chinese culture, writing in Portuguese about this dissolution, in a city that was both Portuguese and was not. When I started thinking about musicalizing Clepsydra, the connection to the Shidaiqu of Shanghai was not an idea — was a recognition. The two traditions occupy the same emotional space. It arose from a kind of coincidence between time and text. I was reading Clepsydra and realized that the poems already had music inside them — not metaphorically, but structurally. The verses of Pessanha have a cadence that asks to be sung, and the Shidaiqu of the 30s has exactly the quality that poems need: that mixture of elegance and impending collapse. The Macau of Pessanha and the Shanghai of Zhou Xuan are sister cities in this sense — two colonial outposts where modernity arrived poisoned with melancholy. The centenary of death was a pretext, not a reason.

We know that the book was published without Pessanha knowing, half inside out. Musicalizing the 30 poems in the original order was a way to give coherence to a book published without the participation of the poet?

That's part of the answer, but the Black Notebook complicates it in an interesting way. Pessanha was no stranger to the process — was a compulsive reviewer. The problem was distance and illness, not disinterest. The manuscripts show a man who continued to work on the poems after they were published, moving verses, testing whether the feeling was in the right place. Musicalizing the book in its order was, in this sense, less a compensation for its absence and more a gesture analogous to what he himself did: take the texts and find out what becomes of them when he handles them again.

After delving into the work, in your opinion, what does the Shanghai Shidaiqu have in common with the symbolist and decadent poetry of Pessanha?

Both work with dissolution. The classic Shidaiqu — the songs of Zhou Xuan, Li Xianglan — is not cheerful music with oriental instrumentation. It is music about things that slip: the love that has passed, the city that will change, the self that is lost. The symbolism of Pessanha is not literature on ideas — is literature on sensations that are already falling apart as they are felt. The two genres exist at the moment when something has already been, but it is not yet completely over. It is in this interval that the album lives.

Patua is almost a character on this album. For those who do not know, what does this language bring to poems? Is there any word or expression that has become especially powerful, that in Portuguese would not have the same weight?

It is important to say that it is not pure patua, as heard in Doel Papiacam di Macau or read in Ade. And that was a deliberate decision, not a limitation. What I saw in Macau — and that anyone who has spent time with the Macanese community recognizes — is that the language does not work in watertight compartments. People slip between Portuguese, patua and Cantonese in the same conversation, sometimes within the same sentence, without this being marked as change. It's the natural way to talk about someone who has grown up between several languages and doesn't have to choose. That's what I tried to replicate in the lyrics. Some poems are closer to Portuguese, others more in patua, and within each song there are times when the singer slides from one record to the other. The singer is Macanese, is in Shanghai in the thirties, is polyglot — and what she does with the verses of Pessanha is what anyone in this situation would do: uses the language that serves the moment, and does not explain. What the patua brings, what when it enters, it is not local color or ornament. Brings fragility. It's a different way that time and comparison work in the sentence. Already in patua marks a complete action more definitively than the already Portuguese — when she sings will already bloom the orchard of the maceiras, the already weighs differently. And tancu, the comparison particle, does not have the formal weight of the literary like of Pessanha — “tancu a light goes out” says the same thing, but without architecture, as if it were simply true and not a poetic construction. The decision not to fix everything on patua was also a decision of honesty: this is how the language survived, mixed, adapted, to slip into and out of Portuguese. To put it in pure amber would be to falsify it. And there was something that interested me in this idea: that the patua can continue to be reimagined, to appear in new contexts, to be heard in ways that its original speakers did not program. Even if the band is imaginary and Shanghai is 1933 the tongue is doing something real, it's not being preserved. It's being used.

“Clepsydra” is a book about time running away, about dissolution, about how we are losing ourselves. How does that translate into music without being obvious?

Not through conventional dynamics — is not an album that goes on growing to a climax and then resolves. It is more about texture and density: the first themes have a certain space around the voices, a deceiving lightness. In the middle, this space begins to close. The final themes are heavier, slower, as if time itself was becoming viscous. There is no declared emotional peak — there is a point where the music simply stops trying to escape. The last poem ends with a — do not breathe — statement and the album treats that literally.



How did you get technology not to steal the soul from the project? How far has AI helped and where have you come in?

He stole a few times, and I had to throw away what I had stolen. AI tends toward the polished, toward the beautiful, toward what sounds like music. What I wanted was what sounds like music memory — the difference between a photograph and a faded photograph that someone kept in a box. The work was mainly one of resistance: resisting the clean versions, resisting the well-tuned voices, resisting the arrangements that sounded like contemporary production pretending to be old. AI came in as an instrumentalist. I came in as editor, and as the person who had been with the Pessanha manuscripts and knew what he did not want.

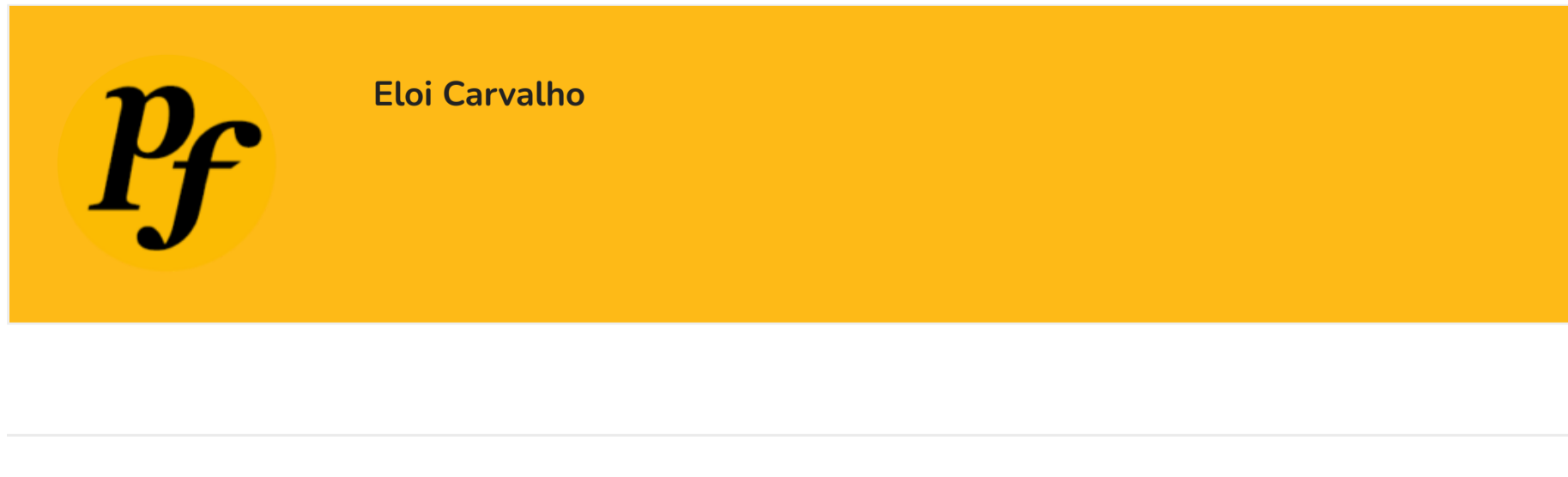
The patua is disappearing, few people speak it. By doing 30 songs in this language, do you feel that this project is also a way to keep her alive?

I don't think of it as preservation — that word implies a standing tongue, fixed, guarded against decay. What interested me was different: to show that the patua can be reimagined. That may appear in a context that its native speakers never anticipated — Portuguese symbolist poetry sung in Shanghai jazz — and continue to sound like itself. Not a file, but a language that still has the ability to move. What I heard in Macau was a living language precisely because it was fluid, because its speakers did not treat it as a relic. This album tries to honor this: the patua comes and goes, mixes with the Portuguese, does what he always did. The band is imaginary and Shanghai is 1933, but the language is really working. But there is something honest about using a language that is disappearing to play a poet who has spent his life writing about things that die. If the album makes someone try to know what the patua is, then or listen to a recording of the last people who speak it naturally. Not a file. It's a testimony.

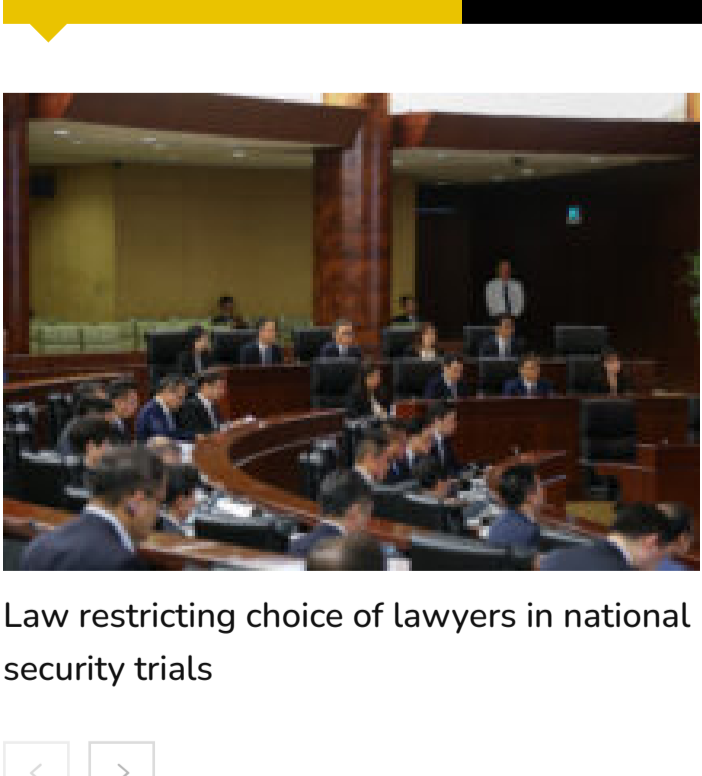
Can you imagine Pessanha, in his Macau, listening to the album? Listening to his own poems sung in Creole, with jazz from Shanghai.

I think I'd be baffled for the first thirty seconds. But Pessanha was a man who realized, probably later than he should have, that Macau had changed him in ways that he could not undo — and that this was not necessarily a loss. In the manuscripts one sees someone who continued to work the poems, to look for the right place for each feeling. Hearing his own verses sung in a language he knew but never treated as a literary language, with a song from a nearby town that he might never have visited — I think he would recognize something. That the poems were never entirely his own. That belonged to the place.

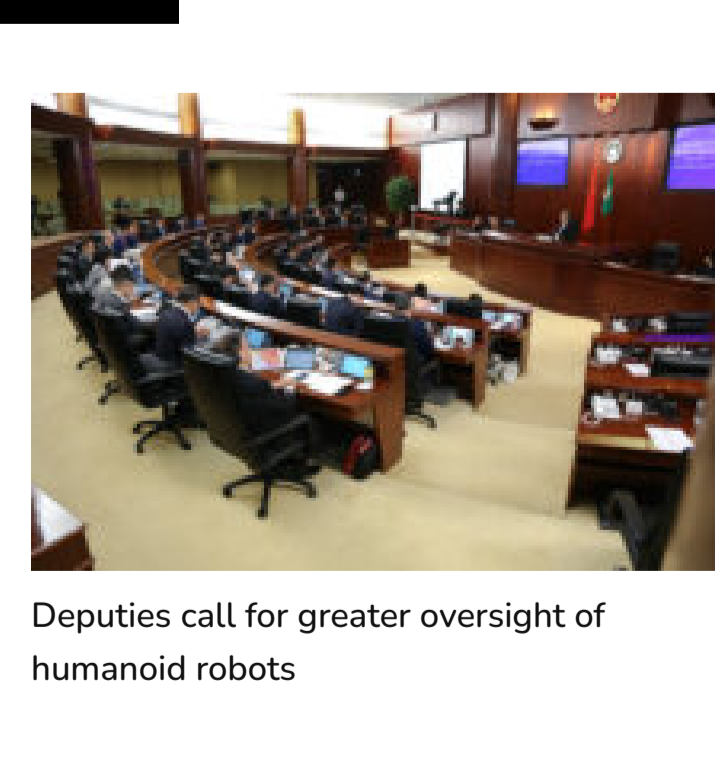
f x p e in e a o



RELATED ARTICLES MORE BY AUTHOR



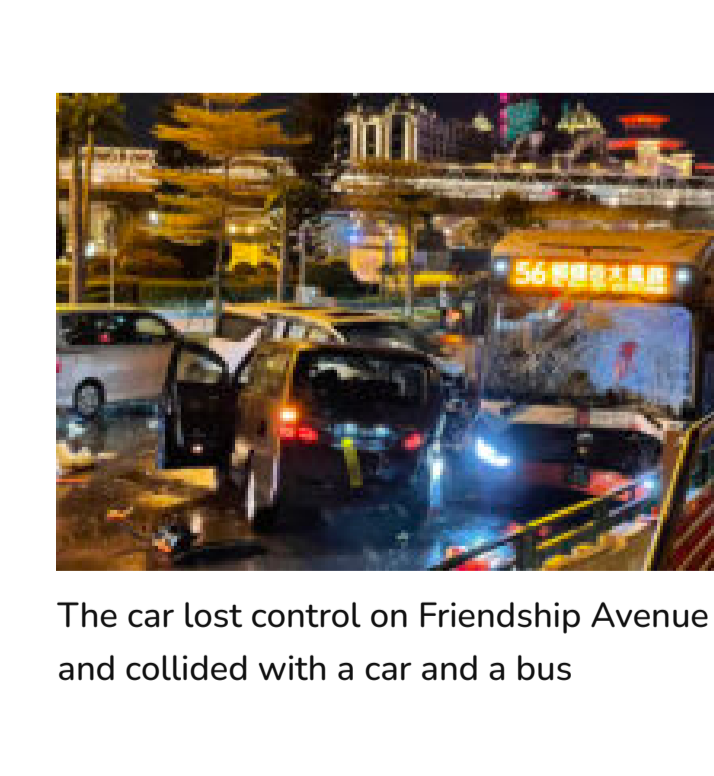
Law restricting choice of lawyers in national security trials



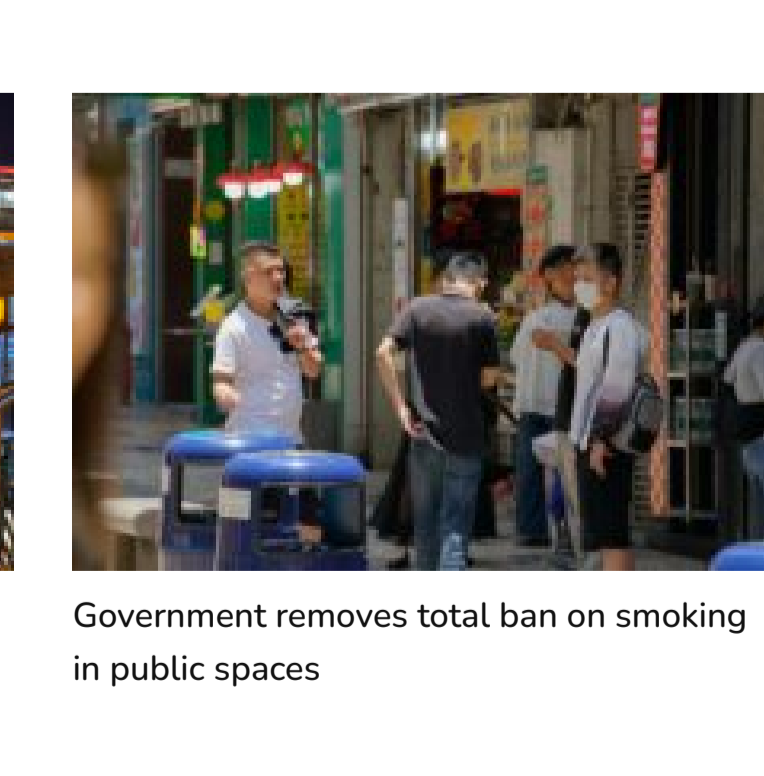
Deputies call for greater oversight of humanoid robots



There were 91 suicides in 2025. The MSAR

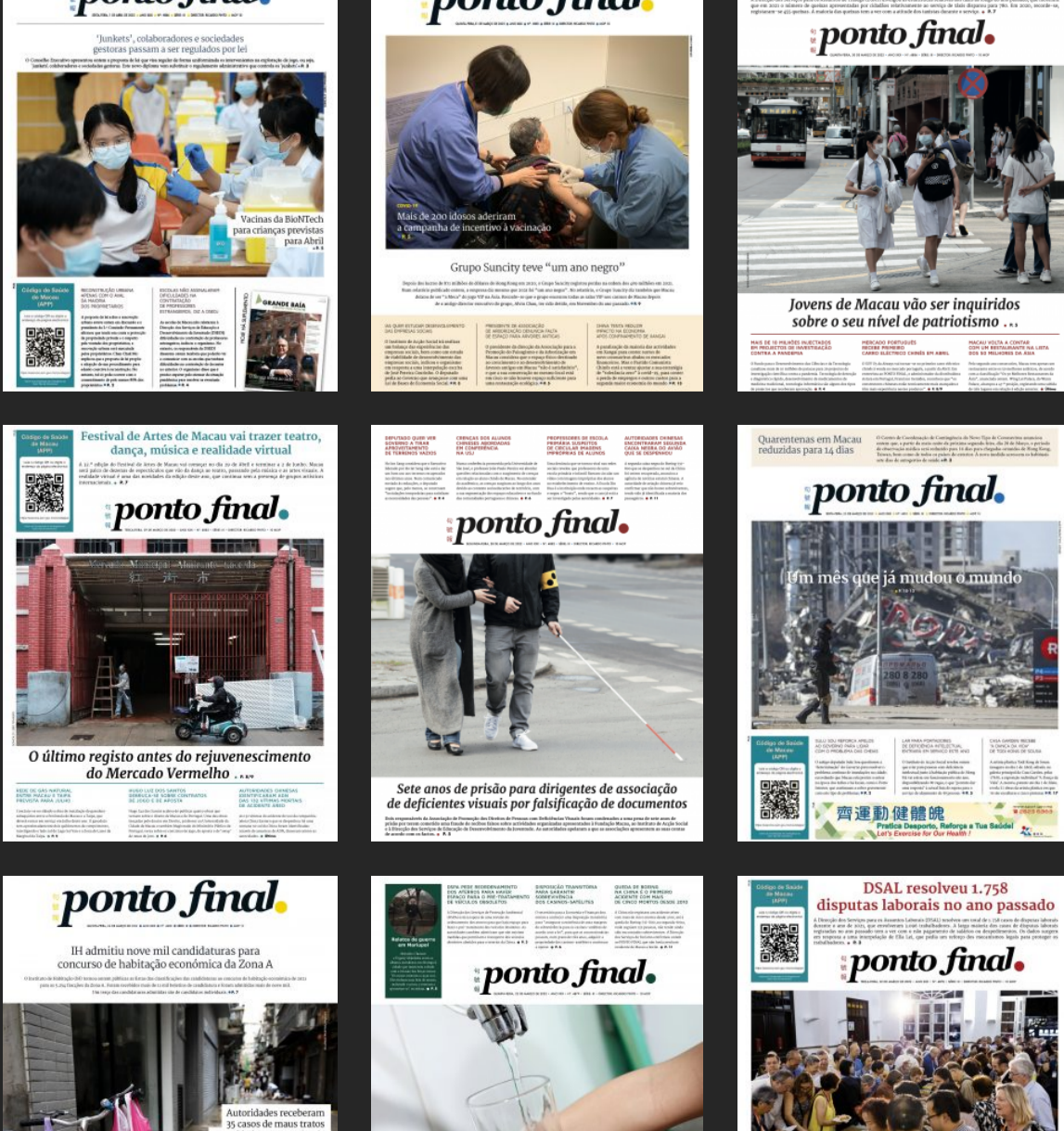


The car lost control on Flandership Avenue and crashed with a fire and a bus



Government removes total ban on smoking in public spaces

1 2



CONTACTS  
Travessa do Bispo, 1st floor, 6th floor, Macau  
+853 2833 9566, +853 2833 8983  
+853 2833 9563  
pontofinalmacau@gmail.com

CONTACTS ADVERTISING  
Flavia Chari  
+853 2833 9566, +853 2833 8983  
+853 2833 9563  
adv.pontofinal@gmail.com



DAILY JOURNAL  
Every day in your mailbox.  
Your e-mail address SUBSCRIBE

Send us a message  
Name  
E-mail  
Subject  
Mensagem  
ENVIAR