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Betting on Macau

Casino Capitalism and China's Consumer Revolution, by Tim Simpson

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Tim Simpson, *Betting on Macau: Casino Capitalism and China's Consumer*

Revolution, 2023. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 363 pp. 39 b&w photos. ISBN 978-1-5179-0031-1 (paperback), 978-1-5179-0030-4 (hardback).

Macau was founded by the Portuguese in 1557 and was the West's gateway to China before becoming a colonial backwater in the nineteenth century. It became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in 1999, something that, according to Tim Simpson, augured 'the embryonic stirring of a world-historical geopolitical realignment [with] the gradual geographical translocation of the axis of global capitalism from the once-dominant West to East Asia' (pp. 4–5).

Simpson did not want to write a 'history of Macau' (p. 310, endnote 29)—although we do get fascinating insights into how the territory came about and developed—so his book is, instead, intended primarily for understanding *contemporary* Macau (a kind of Foucauldian history of the present). Using sources as diverse as Foucault, Guattari, Mumford, Braudel, Keynes, and Strange, Simpson even adds some unexpected names like Dostoyevsky and Ian Fleming. For anyone seeking to understand Macau, and the Greater Bay Area (GBA), or indeed the recent changes that have affected China's post-1978 reforms, and what these may mean for capitalism, his book offers rich insights based on profound scholarship and a deep understanding of the territory's regional (and global) embeddedness.

Macau is tiny (118sq. km.) but, thanks to gambling, has the world's second-highest GDP, unemployment is below two percent, and life expectancy is eighty-two (compared to Mainland China's seventy-four) (pp. 15–16). Macau is also the only legal site of casino gambling in China. Legalised by the Portuguese in Macau in the mid-nineteenth century, Stanley Ho modernised the industry in 1962, introducing Western games like baccarat, but by 1999 the casino business was seen as 'dismal' (p. 11). Enter Sheldon Adelson, a Las Vegas tycoon whose Sands Casino was the first in the world to cater specifically to Chinese (p. 14). Within two years Macau's gambling revenue surpassed that of Las Vegas, making it the world's most lucrative casino market (with revenues seven times that of Las Vegas by 2011) (p. 14). Adelson's supremacy was sealed by his second project: the Venetian, the world's sixth largest building when it was built in 2007. It employs 10,000 people and has 3,000 hotel rooms, 350 shops, a vast convention centre, a 15,000-seat auditorium, and an indoor canal network (with singing gondoliers), as well as (at the time) the world's largest casino (p. 43).

Simpson's reading of the Venetian eschews the more usual postmodern critiques involving simulacra and simulation, and instead he sees it as represent-

ing China's urbanisation (much like Las Vegas did America's suburbanisation) (p. 17). Understanding the Venetian requires seeing Venice not as 'an empty referent [...] but as an instructive historical reference for Macau's role today in China's revolutionary capitalist transition' (p. 47). By focussing on style and not substance, we risk overlooking 'Macau's unique role in China's reform era and its ongoing importance to the evolution of global capitalism' (p. 16). Simpson sees China's change from post-1978 consumer manufacturing for foreign consumption to a new model of domestic consumption (p. 17), with the former having seen rapid urbanisation, as people moved to cities with factories; the new model, however, will see city-dwellers spending their money in China on consumer goods and leisure services (p. 18).

To outline how this is being achieved, Simpson divides his book into three parts: 1) Macau's historic role as gateway to China for Western global capitalism; 2) the territory's new pedagogical role as an 'experimental laboratory of consumption' (p. 20) within Casino Capitalism (an unusually literal interpretation of Susan Strange's concept); and 3) Macau's unique function in Chinese capitalism for engineering post-Mao subjects for the next phase of the reform-era economy.

Each part explores a specific apparatus, at descending levels of scale, beginning with the Greater Bay Area (GBA), the sprawling megacity that is home to 85 million and one of the engines of China's economic miracle. Simpson sees it engendering 'new types of Chinese workers and shoppers' (p. 34).

Simpson moves down the scale to integrated resorts in Part Two. These contain casinos, shopping arcades, and private VIP rooms for high rollers who generate most of Macau's staggering wealth. Simpson likens the integrated resort to the Communist-era *danwei* (work units designed to produce collectivist workers for the socialist economy), saying they produce 'an individualist consumer for the market-socialist regime' (p. 34).

Macau tourists gamble far more heavily than their Las Vegas counterparts, where gambling accounts for about 30 percent of revenue—in Macau it's 90 percent (p. 21)—so, in Part Three he examines the LIVE baccarat machine, an individual gaming console designed to appeal to the Chinese gambler. Simpson calls it 'a formative activity in which those economic dispositions, calculative techniques, and market behaviors are put to work, developed, and refined' (p. 23). He claims that this 'engineers a novel post-Mao citizen on the edge of capitalism's final planetary frontier in the PRC' (p. 253) and that this 'machine assembles the immaterial, affective, and cybernetic components of subjectivity. In this way, the gaming machine develops player skills in economic speculation and calculation that are necessary for navigating a market economy' (p. 257).

In other words, it's a Foucauldian biopolitical apparatus helping to form a new leisure-oriented capitalist class in China. This is one of the more important arguments in the book, but it does seem a little flawed. Why would China be encouraging its citizens to gamble (even if they were learning strategic capitalist skills in the process)? In fact, as Simpson says in the Epilogue, China introduced antigambling legislation in 2021 to try and stem the RMB 1 trillion that flows out of the mainland in cross-border gambling activities (p. 302). That being said, the rest of the book's arguments about Macau's (and the wider GBA's) potential for acting as a crucible for the next phase of global capitalism are fascinating; and for anyone seeking to understand the GBA itself, then Chapter Three is an excellent primer.

This is a really enjoyable book, one that manages to see beyond the knee-jerk reading of Macau's kitschy casinos to propose some genuinely interesting theories about China's future development and the impact this may have on capitalism in the twenty-first century.

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