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Post-Colonial Macau: hope and despair in a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure

Michael O'Regan

- 1 Located at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, west of Hong Kong, and bordered to the north by Guangdong province, Macau became a Special Administrative Region [SAR] of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in December 1999 when sovereignty passed from Portugal to China. Under the "one country, two systems" model established by the 1987 Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration, Macau has a Constitution known as the Basic Law which states that with the exception of foreign and defense affairs, it retains a high degree of autonomy until 2049 when it should fall under full Chinese control. Prior to the handover, manufacturing was the predominant industry in Macau, with factory production of toys, shoes, artificial flowers, firecrackers, matches, joss-sticks and textiles contributing 37.8% to Macau's Gross National Product (GNP) and 45% of jobs in 1988 (Sit *et al.*, 1991). The end of the World Trade Organization quotas under the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (1974-2005) led Hong Kong industrialists who had established textile and garment manufacturing bases in Macau to withdraw to lower-cost territories, leading to the sector's decline.
- 2 As much of the manufacturing exports and jobs were quota dependent, the sector declined as Macau's quota allowance for textiles and garments were eliminated. Its contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) fell to less than 1% and only employed 3.4% of the workforce by 2011 (Mieiro *et al.*, 2012). While the unemployment rate was 1.5% in 1989, it reached a record high of 7.1% in the second quarter of 2000. The colonial authorities' efforts to develop external economic links were unsuccessful, with the newly formed SAR entering the postcolonial arena with distinct structural disadvantages in comparison to its sister SAR, Hong Kong, with its deep sea ports and larger population. With less than 10 per cent of Macau's employed population attaining tertiary qualifications in 1999, and at 28.2 square km², with no arable land, pastures, forest, or woodland, Macau was in crisis. However, by 2003, Macau achieved a

substantial budget surplus and substantial GDP growth; which accelerated to 27.5% by 2010. While Macau GDP per capita was US\$13,000 in 2000, it had risen to US\$73,376 by 2016. Tourism arrivals had increased from 7.44 million in 1999 (1.63 million from the mainland) to 39.4 Million in 2019 (28 million mainland visitors). By 2020, Macau's GDP will reach approximately US\$143,000 per person, according to the IMF. That would make it the location with the highest GDP per person on a purchasing power parity basis in the world. With zero government debt, healthy fiscal reserves and a low unemployment rate (1.9 per cent in 2018), it was a "miraculous" turnaround for a small Portuguese colony.

- 3 This "miracle" occurred after Edmund Ho, the first Chief Executive (CE) of the MSAR secured Beijing's backing for "neoliberal casino-restructuring measures" (Liu, 2008) during December 2000. While the colonial authorities had legalized gambling in 1847 when small and unregistered casinos were prevalent, the industry had not fully developed because of outbound travel restrictions from mainland China. Gambling accounted for less than 26% of Macau's GDP in 1999 (Ho, 2005), with gross gaming revenue worth US\$1.6 billion. Macau authorities expanded the number of gaming licenses in 2002 by granting three concessions and three sub-concessionaires through a Gambling Tender Commission (Simpson, 2018). This enabled Sociedade de Jogos de Macau (SJM), a subsidiary of STDM, Galaxy Casino, S.A. (Galaxy), Wynn Resorts, Sands China Ltd, MGM Grand Paradise, S.A., and Melco Crown Jogos to enter the Macau casino market which had been monopolized by STDM since 1962. The Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) signed in on 17 October 2003 led Beijing to introduce the "Individual Visit scheme" (IVS), which currently allows residents of 49 mainland cities to apply for a tourist visa to visit Macau in an individual capacity.
- 4 To explore the lived experiences and quality of life in a "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure", in-depth, semi-structured interviews with local residents (N = 22) were carried out between October 2014 and May 2015. The residents were born, raised and lived in Macao and held Macao residency. The lead author hired and trained two final year tourism and hotel management students to conduct interviews with the residents in Cantonese. These were then translated into English, checked and confirmed via a reverse-translation of three interviews. Interviewers were instructed not to create any interpretations during the interviews. To gather more in-depth data, interviewees were encouraged to speak about their life in Macau. All interviews were digitally (audio) recorded with the interviewees' permission. The transcripts identified a theme around a "magical" economy after informants asked about their rights, about the powerful business and political elites and about the perceived abnormal material, social, and spatial conditions present in Macau. Following Comaroff and Comaroff's (1999; 2003) challenge to researchers to investigate on an "awkward scale," which is neither unambiguously "local" nor obviously "global" - but on a scale in between, the theme was developed by the authors into an anthropological inquiry about the interwoven relationship between Macau's history, colonization, and its self-proclaimed image as a world centre of tourism and leisure. Rather than a thematic analysis of those interviewed, the paper utilizes Comaroff and Comaroff's post-colonial paradigm of the "occult economy," which is both described and defined as the "*allure of accruing wealth from nothing*" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 313). Its characteristics often transgress the conventional, the rational, and the moral, with Comaroff and Comaroff defining such "economies," as the "*the conjuring of wealth by resort to inherently mysterious*

techniques, whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms” (p. 297).

- 5 This paper will describe the breakdown in the rational relationship between means and end as Macau transformed from a colonial territory to a globalizing world centre of tourism and leisure. The paper moves beyond discourses that understand tourism and tourism development in Asia as mediated “authenticity” acting as a catalyst for further economic development or a means to affirm legitimacy (Burns, 2008). We argue that the occult economy paradigm offers an interpretative framework by putting the spotlight on the rich and the powerful rather than those in poverty and the powerless (Nader, 1972), so as to grasp how tourism, as a highly ambiguous term, has been framed by those in positions of power as solely underpinning its success. This approach requires studying “*the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless*” (Nader, 1972, p. 289) by asking “common sense” questions in reverse about why government, businesses, decision makers, and creators of creators of socio-economic politics failed to gamble on more conventional markets when seeking to meet the needs of its citizens, and why the introduction of the category of “World Centre of Tourism and Leisure” as a barometer of “economic growth” and social stability obscures nefarious transactions, rumors, speculation, arcane rituals and irrational desires, and thwarted chances for improving quality of life. As a strategy to add richness and color to this research and to enable the reader to draw their own conclusions from participants’ words, verbatim quotations from informants are utilized.

I. Colonial Legacies

- 6 Like many colonial cities and territories with trade-oriented histories which take on the consuming logic of market forces, illicit accumulation can overwhelm the civil surfaces of post-colonial countries and fuel a “*vibrant, immoral economy pulsing beneath the sluggish rhythm*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 285). Comaroff and Comaroff (2000, p. 310), describe these economies based on “*modes of speculation based on less than rational connections between means and ends.*” Such economies, they argue, can draw in whole populations allured by accruing “*wealth without production, value without effort*” (pp. 313-314). The concept came to be used to describe Nigeria’s oil fueled rise and fall in the seventies (Apter, 2005), Haiti (James, 2012), Ireland (Coen and Maguire, 2012) and Mexico’s in the 1980s (Cahn, 2008).
- 7 From allowing entrepreneurial Chinese immigrants to survive at the margins of a discriminatory racial-capitalist order (Louw, 2019) to corpses in the freezer of a casino in South Africa being linking to wealth creation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 20002b), casinos have long been linked to illicit accumulation. To explain why Macau should seek recourse in expanding casinos concessions and illicit accumulation as a “magic bullet” reflects a specific set of historical colonial experiences. Under the Portuguese administration and partly because of the legacy of Portuguese colonial rule itself, there was an ambiguous mix of “*possibility and powerlessness, of desire and despair*” (Gluckman, 1963, pp. 3-4) during the colonial handover period, when it was plagued by arson, murders, fire bombings and shootouts between rival gangs. While Macau wasn’t subject to outright poverty or material deprivation, many worried about the deteriorating social order (Hing, 2005). The authorities in many ways had effectively lost control

(Chou, 2013), with limited autonomy vis-a-vis the Beijing-backed traditional associations born out of the Cultural Revolution and the powerful STDM group. Macau also suffered an economic recession in the wake of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crises, with real GDP declining for four consecutive years up to 1999, which in turn led to increased joblessness and a housing market crash. Because of the regional financial crisis and limited re-investment by the STDM group, there was a 9.1% decrease in government revenue produced by the direct tax on gambling in 1999. It meant those who experienced the transition in 1999, did so during a period of instability, with young people who often have the greatest expectations, denied the expected wealth distribution (Liu, 2009). Rather than confronting uncertainty and investing on conventional markets to potentially prosper from new purpose, creativity and vitality, the new government rejected the slow growth that often comes as part of parcel of a post-colonial economy (Grier, 1999). Instead, it outwardly embraced free enterprise, flexible accumulation, and financial speculation to accumulate wealth. Rather than a capture by “Capitalist Sorcery” (Pignarre and Stengers, 2011), the decision to expand casino concessions and depend on mainland gamblers to generate resources reflected the residues of colonial rule (Godinho, 2014).

- 8 Historically, the authorities in Macau refilled their depleted coffers by appealing to techniques that defy explanation in conventional terms. Unconventional ways to become wealthier often arose during transitional and opportunistic periods. A Tokugawa shogun policy in 1640 ended Japanese trade and the loss of Malacca to the Dutch in 1641 ended the Macau-Goa (India) trade. The end of the Iberian dual monarchy in 1668 stopped the Macau-Manila trade and Hong Kong’s rise as an important trading port after the Qing government ceded it in 1842 to the British led Macau to be sidelined. During these turbulent times, the authorities facilitated gambling, prostitution, mercenaries, arms trafficking, human trafficking as well as opium and “indentured servant” coolie trade (Pinheiro, 2002). When Hong Kong prohibited gambling in 1870, as Canton did in 1911 (Ho, 2005), Macau facilitated it, and attracted new businesses and gamblers. Foreign opium, first introduced by the Portuguese from Goa at the beginning of the 18th century was prohibited in China during 1796, leading Macau to become a transshipment place home for opium smugglers, with traders and locals participating and profiting (Garrett, 2010; Puga, 2013). After British involvement in the coolie trade from China ended in 1854, trade shifted to Macau (Meagher, 2008). It was only eliminated in 1873 after pressure from the British and the Qing government (Pinheiro, 2002). Even after the communist revolution in China in 1949, Macau maintained its status as a hub for illicit trade, as it allegedly served as a conduit for smuggling gold, petrol, metals and automobiles into China as well as weapons during the Korean War in an effort to circumvent UN mandates (Dicks, 1984).
- 9 While often not directly involved, the colonial authorities after 1846 nurtured these activities by opening up to rapid, immaterial flows of goods and people and immaterial flows of services and information and taxing them so as to produce “*immense wealth and power without regular work-against all odds, at supernatural speed, and with striking ingenuity*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 284). These lightly regulated activities served the interests of local authorities, foreign merchants, triads and local elites, but excluded the vast majority of ethnic Chinese citizens from economic, social and political integration (Cheng, 1999; Clayton, 2010). The choice to pursue market liberalization through casinos concessions was sanctioned by domestic elites and a Beijing-backed

establishment. Because Macau found itself in an “ambivalent” economic situation with the fading out of the old colonial administration and, the new SAR government remade itself as a free port, a separate tariff zone without foreign exchange controls, and a “mecca” for mainland gamblers. While the decision dealt with the deformities consistent with a postcolonial economy, such as the difficulties of establishing normal market principles, and seeking transnational investment in the slipstream of a local property crash and a regional financial crisis (Zheng and Wan, 2014), Macau became a space of “neo-liberal” exception (Ong, 2006) within the now expanded “one country, two systems” PRC. The magical allure of “making money from nothing” attracted transient gamblers, migrant workers, property tycoons, businessmen, sex workers, corrupt officials, investors, criminals and junket operators¹. Creating and displaying sudden affluence, meant many, like, the casino operator “Broken Tooth” (Hing, 2005; Simpson, 2019), and Macau Junket Boss Alvin Chau of Suncity became objects of fame and admiration. Circulating unevenly, and often with no clear relationship to production, work, law or effort these material and immaterial flows were constituted for and by local elites, non-state actors and a developing transient multinational population. They were the foundation for prosperity which has fueled new highways, a light rail system, university buildings, benefit schemes and massive casino resort complexes. By promising to put wealth into the hands of resident’s through casinos for mainland and Hong Kong visitors, the government advocated the benefits of massive, unearned wealth from casino gambling, an activity banned in the mainland since 1949.

- 10 From a culture supposedly devoted to work-and-place rooted in local community, strong familial-ethnic bonds and “conservative values of hard work and dependability” (Sit et al 1991,p. 85), an epochal shift took place in “*the constitutive relationship of production to consumption, and hence of labor to capital*” (Comaroff and Comarof, 2000, p. 293). The government’s inability to control rapid inflows and outflows through a deregulated economy remade, reclaimed, reproduced, engineered, and commoditized Macau’s landscape, social fabric, leisure, employment conditions, universities, corporate structure and everyday life (Blackburn Cohen, 2019; Hall *et al.*, 2017; Hao, 2005), turning its young people and migrants into an army of casino workers, which undermines traditional values, and quality of life.

II. Governance and Civil Society in a Tourism Destination

- 11 While governments around the world have often tried to benefit from the proceeds of gambling (Leiper, 1989), Macau has incorporated it into its material and fiscal heart. Direct and indirect reliance on casino-related activities through gambling levies and taxes are nearly the only means of filling its coffers, with 2018 seeing US\$38 billion of gross casino revenue. While only six 25-year licenses were issued, a 2012 Fitch sovereign assessment estimated Macau derived 87.7% of its GDP from gambling (and related activities, such as hotels); and relies on this sector for 85% of its fiscal revenue. The tourism satellite account survey in 2010 found that gambling is largely dependent on mainland visitors who account for about 70% of all visitors. Some 97.3% of the gaming industry’s takings came from visitors and 84% of what tourists spent in Macau is spent on gambling (Bland, 2015). The gaming industry accounted for 75.8% of the jobs in the city in 2015 according to Macau’s Statistics and Census Service (DSEC).

- 12 Civil society is weak, with no serious attempts to reflect on the casino-dependent economy (Liu, 2008). The 1,720 civil associations that existed in 1999, while representing diversity of interests, and including pro-Beijing interest groups, were brought into the workings of government after the handover. Edmund Ho, a key player in local business circles and the leader in the local pro-China groups before the handover, became the first CE (Choi, 2008). The number of associations increased to over 5,000 by 2011 (Zheng and Wan, 2014), with most groups, including the Macau Federation of Trade Unions, the General Union of Neighborhood Associations of Macau, the Macau Women's General Association, the General Association of Chinese Students of Macau and the Macau General Volunteers Association taking funding through the government-controlled Macao Foundation, whose money comes from a levy of 1.6% on the gross gaming revenues. The foundation serves as a locus of distribution with the US\$284.5 million distributed in 2018 ensuring the co-opting of civil society (Chou, 2012). Media coverage related to gambling itself, and its downsides are rarely mentioned, with self-censorship prevalent due to fear of losing advertising from the SAR departments and the casino industry (Su, 2017).
- 13 The opacity of bureaucratic practices in Macau (James, 2012; Press, 2007) is an impediment to fostering civil society and thereby good governance. From secretive land deals for casino resorts, government procurement issues, use of tax incentives, the allocation and grants to key individuals and associations, the ability of residents to question their government or political system is significantly restricted due to the election/appointment system, and a political system based on ties between businessmen, Legislative Assembly (LA) members and government officials. Consensus is usually coordinated between the government, local elites and Beijing. The Government is headed by secretariats, the former being appointed by the Central People's Government in Beijing through a 300-member Election Committee made up of casino bosses like MGM's Pansy Ho and Galaxy's Francis Lui, as well as business leaders, trade unions and other groups appointed by the Central Government. The Legislative Assembly (LA) is a 33-member body comprising 14 directly elected members, 12 indirectly elected members representing functional constituencies and 7 members appointed by the Chief Executive (CE). Macau's Basic Law does not provide for universal suffrage or direct election of either the legislature or the CE.

III. Anxiety, Suspicion and Insecurity in a Tourism Destination

- 14 Casinos, while providing opportunities, have heightened uncertainties, suspicion, disaffection and anxiety about identity in Macau, with informants feeling left out of the promises for a better life and worried about the future. John, 40, worries about the mainland authorities, and whether they will continue to support gambling, "*What I can only predict is that Macau will maintain its advantages in next five years, but after that, I actually have no ideas. We have to await decisions from the central government*". Jennifer, 32, similarly argued that if the "*Mainland China put more effort on fighting corruption here, it will reduce mainland tourist . . . and the foreign companies will leave Macau*". Jane, 32, like others, hopes that "*there will be some other industries to help balance this situation*".
- 15 The dependence on gambling has undermined the values of productivity and rational accumulation and increased anxiety about the production and reproduction of wealth

in a society that combines the “*odd fusion of the modern and the postmodern, of hope and hopelessness, of utility and futility, of promise and its perversions*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 283). There is a “*pervasive sense of false value, of surplus accumulated without proper production*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 281), with condemnation, jealousy and envy of “*those who enrich themselves in nontraditional ways*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 316) even while pursuing new, magical means for otherwise unattainable ends themselves.

- 16 Occult economies, then, “*offer up vast, almost instantaneous riches to those who master its spectral technologies – and, simultaneously, to threaten the very existence of those who do not*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 298). These feelings flourish in a territory, dependent on gambling, where “*the possibility of rapid achievement, of amassing a fortune by largely invisible methods, is always palpably present*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999, p. 293). Despite numerous surveys led by government bodies, statistics and reports, there is a paucity of information about Macau’s most influential actors and decisions. From rumored AI and digital technology which tracks gamblers most drawn to risk, the pawn shops which help Chinese mainlanders smuggle assets across the border (Varese *et al.*, 2019), the true shareholders behind some casino groups, to the junket operators backed by Asian organized crime syndicates (Lo and Kwok, 2017), there is a mysterious, and unseen invisible world behind the World Centre of Tourism and Leisure (McKenzie *et al.*, 2019) that creates and reinforces real wealth for the few (West and Sanders, 2003). Residents who feel disempowered and disadvantaged fight back through gossip, superstition, paranoia, conspiracies, rumors and jealousy, so as to make sense of and act upon the world (Zhu, 2019).
- 17 Stories and rumors are primarily related to uncertainty, scarcity, and risk in a society where invisible powers sometimes produce visible outcomes. Stories abound about businessmen “disappearing” from China through Macau with millions of dollars, neighbors running illegal inns for gamblers, underground banks, foreign spies and the unlawful detention of gamblers (for repayment of loans). Stories about the “Gods of Gambling” like Sheldon Adelson (Sands) and Lui Che Woo (Galaxy Entertainment), who own casinos, are daily conversations. Many are seen to possess extraordinary powers by way of nefarious links to officials and organized crime (Lo, 2005). As none of the main casino players live in Macau, and casino stock is traded in Hong Kong and the US, casino tycoons have insinuated themselves into the slipstream of the global economy, thereby often evading knowledge of its costs, as well as escaping most sanctions or control. Whilst often standing accused of various nefarious acts, it is often their staff under threat, while, they have escaped any serious criminal prosecution (Lintner, 2016; McKenzie *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, those who help mainland gamblers sidestep strict currency-export controls, or those who run brothels in casinos (Fraser, 2019) remain a part of everyday life (Pomfret, 2014; Wang and Eadington, 2008; Wang and Zabielskis, 2010).
- 18 In everyday gossip, issues related to unequal distribution of resources such as wealth, employment and infrastructure, and of social resources like health services, education, transport and housing are strongly present. For every story about the residents or gamblers who became millionaires (or lost it all) either through gambling or casino reward programs, there are other stories about inequalities, injustices, corruption and violence brought about through gambling. Integrated casino resorts that foster social and spatial inequalities are constructed rapidly; even “magically overnight” while

public infrastructure has failed to keep pace or break ground. Macau's mass-transit (LRT) system, various public-housing projects and the opening of a second public hospital, among other initiatives, have been repeatedly delayed or multiplied in cost. Rather than act as a provider of infrastructure services, the government has prioritized spaces for gamblers. The 20-kilometer light-rail transit system, first proposed by the SAR government in 2003 was partially completed in 2019, but will primarily serve the Cotai Strip casinos and bypass low-income residential areas. Jennifer, 32 notes that the "LRT is convenient for the tourist, but not designed for resident use".

- 19 With a population of 632,418 people in 2018 (from 430,000 in 1999), and a labor force that is less than 400,000 strong, the labor market and conventional terms of employment have been destroyed, with "skilled laborers" such as ship builders replaced by less skilled, immature workers to ensure more maladaptive workers for the tourism sector. There is no universal freedom of association, collective bargaining rights, no protection against the blacklisting and sacking of strikers and no standard minimum wage. As 40% of secondary students repeating at least one school year (OCED, 2011), local teenagers drop their studies by the lure of the generous starting-pay packages in the casinos. This means there are considerable shortages of qualified teachers, nurses, engineers and doctors. While workers may feel in control, given the low unemployment rate and quota system for locals, most, given the lack of a diverse economy, merely move from one casino group to another. John, 40, argues that it doesn't matter which casino you work for as "the gaming companies share the similar principles and values of management," and has as a consequence lost some of his health and youth. He notes that "Smoking and working at night are really harmful to me, and I might have lost ten-years of longevity because of this job". Such workers are defined as "ghost labor" by Comaroff and Comaroff (2002a), given casinos businesses siphon of their workers essence, and even appropriate their children's future work choices. Many informants work shifts in the 24-hour casinos. Jane, 22, noted "We work the 6am morning shift. It means that we need to get up around 3am or 4am in the morning and get ready for work". Even though she is a dealer, a relatively high paid casino position, most training is related to table games like Baccarat. John, 40, notes that "I have to accept nearly whatever behavior guests perform even though the words and behaviors are too rude and insane." This suggests that the casino dealer positions, albeit well paid and reserved for locals, are very stressful (Chau, 2019).
- 20 The approximately 188,480 immigrant "non-resident workers" (2018) in Macau, on which the casino sector is heavily dependent, are in a far more precarious position and denied basic forms of protection, such as transferring to other job categories, holidays, or compensation for work accidents. If they lose their jobs, they must leave the city within two days if employed less than a year. As the LA voted to reject a trade union bill for the seventh time in 2019, the rich and powerful have freedom to further their own interests, and possibly leading to an increase in inequality (Carvalho, 2018) The allure of accruing wealth from nothing, inequality, and the lack of conventional speculative markets like the stock market, has led citizens to get caught up in the speculative currents. The absences of a comprehensive, internally consistent ideology have enabled local elites to nurture a competitive ethos on a population seeking palatable payback. The lack of a standard government-approved unified curriculum, few quality third level institutions, and Macau's position as a SAR means many citizen worries about "losing out" or being "squeezed out" of home ownership, financial stability, career advancement and even marriage. This has led some citizens to speculate in zodiac

banknotes², car parking ownership, or strive for an occupation that can economically exploit the transient population of non-residents, gamblers and workers (employment agencies, pharmacies offering safe product to mainlanders, pawn shops which circumvent currency controls, and realtors who offer short term accommodation to non-resident workers). As citizens' confidence about once-legible processes, like home ownership and the distribution of wealth fractures, people feel that playing by the rules will destroy them. For Billy, 22 *“the price of every commodity sold here is ridiculously high, but most local residents, including me has gradually grown numb about it because you have to accept the reality whether you like it or not”*. For most informants who participated in this study, housing and medical costs were a major issue. Jane, 32, argued that *“the prices of the houses and the commodity price have risen a lot, like crazy, really crazy! So even if you are paid US\$2,500 to US\$3,750, you still cannot afford it”*. John, 40, noted the *“ridiculously high housing prices”*. Mary, 23, argues that *“although the government offers many monetary benefits to citizens, the soft benefits and compensation are not enough. The quality of medical treatment in Macau is so terrible that people must go to Hong Kong and China for treatment when they get ill. And even though you just have a cold, you have spent too much time waiting for treatment in the public hospitals”*. Chris, 59, claims that *“it is very difficult to consult a doctor as it takes a very long time, even to booking a date [to see a doctor]”*.

IV. Divine Aid and Cycles of Instability

- 21 After breakneck development exhausted social resources that *“previously served to shape popular consent”* (Liu, 2008, p. 23), problems and contradictions have emerged in Macau. After a series of social demonstrations in 2006, 2007 and 2014 by construction workers, local civil servants and others took place, the credibility and integrity of the government became undermined (Lao and Siu, 2013; Liu, 2008). Over 20,000 people rallied in May, 2014 against a bill that would exempt the CE from criminal liability during their term. However, despite political/economic adjustments, any resident dissent or any sign of resistance in Macau is met by censorship and “divine” blessings to the resident population, by way of new subsidies, grants, scholarships and casinos to spend leisure time. Two 2007 demonstrations led the Government to announce that holders of a Macau Resident Identity Card would receive nearly US\$1,000 each year as part of a “wealth distribution scheme.” This has increased to US\$1,250. Protected by job quota systems, social housing and annual payments, subsidies are given for electricity and water, while annual subventions are paid to underpaid workers, teachers, students, retired civil servants and senior citizens. Casinos usually provide employees two additional months of salary each year to superimpose “trust and confidence” in employees and their families for a future that may not exist. Sheila, 60, for example, felt *“I never thought of immigrating to other countries because the government granted annual subsidies for the residents”*. For Tracy, 24, however, *“the government just sends us money, but it cannot fully solve the problems [transport, medical costs, and housing]”*.
- 22 While being small amounts, such “divine aid” makes tangible the idea that the new prosperity is being shared. Autonomy in cultural expression, job quotas, grants, subsidies and government redistribution techniques, cannot compensate for institutional constraints and public discontent. It robs “the public” of its *“vitality and, reciprocally, vulgarizes the political – with it, nationhood as well – reducing it to a chimera, which creates the need for yet more magic”* (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 328). The

executive branch (and casinos) seeks to “hide” net negative societal impacts behind cultural and social assets generated by casinos (events, art galleries, free concerts, parenting seminars for employees and discounts for residents), and stave off discontent, minimize demonstrations, workplace disruption or anyone disrupting acts of excessive consumption (Buhi, 2019; Strauss, 2015). It is extremely difficult to get permission for any type of public demonstration. From spending public money through the Macao Foundation on a month long Macau shopping festival to banning Hong Kong lawmakers, activists and academics from entering Macau, the political system has become undermined with decisions increasingly centered on safeguarding the operations of the gambling market and transnational corporations. The government has resorted to “*mass-mediated ritual both to produce state power and national unity and to persuade citizens of their reality*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 327). This has led to lavish fireworks displays (costing US\$3 million in 2018), multiple festivals (food, film, light), which merely draw attention to its fragility and “*the ineluctable differences on which the body politic is built, to the divergence of interests that it must embrace*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 328).

V. Tourism and the Hyperreal

- 23 For authorities and Beijing, the occult economy is hidden by the veneer of tourist led prosperity, iconic architecture, and tourism promotions. Tourism is routinely uttered, as if calling upon this concept hides the hyperreal constellation of casino attractions and hyper-consumption that changes vast personal financial gambling losses as “tourist” consumption (Hom, 2015). Casinos disguise a problematic human activity which relies on the promise of instant enrichment through alternative means, such as magic, skills, intuition and ancestral inheritance (Hamilakis, 2016). While criticized as degenerate for its nonproductive nature in many parts of the world (Reith, 2007), the courting of irrational forces of chance and the focus on delivering in the “here and now” leaves Macau liable to pressures and incentives from Beijing, speculators, political blocs and non-state transnational actors. Comaroff and Comaroff (2000, p. 295) describe gambling as a “pariah” practice situated at liminal places of “*leisure and/or the haunts of those (aristocrats, profligates, “chancers”) above and beyond honest toil*” and the “*epitome of immoral accumulation*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 295). While dependent on gambling and the wealth it produces, official discourse rarely mentions gambling, least it provides an ugly reminder to the mainland government of the obscure transactions Macau’s economy is built on. At least to outsiders, the occult economy is consigned to the periphery by concealing it within the conflated “World Centre of Tourism and Leisure” category. After a 2008 report by the National Development and Reform Commission, Beijing sought to position Macau as a World Centre of Tourism and Leisure (the phrase at that time was “*Macau as a Global Centre of Tourism and Recreation*”). The 12th National Five-Year Plan of 2011 announced support for this positioning/aspiration, and in 2015, the Macau SAR Government submitted a specific proposal for the 13th National Five-Year Plan. In October 2015, the CE established the Commission for the Construction of the World Centre of Tourism and Leisure. This illusion of Macau as a new World Centre of Tourism and Leisure seeks to obscure gambling, and other speculative activities, with the 2017 master plan not mentioning casinos or gambling as an activity in the territory (MGTO, 2017).

- 24 Tourism has become something of a pyramid scheme as “*the more it is indulged, the more it is required*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000, p. 328). Despite having identified a carrying capacity between 32.62 million and 33.7 million in 2014 (IFT, 2015), the Macau Government Tourism Office (MGTO, 2017) is planning for 40 million visitors in 2025 – a number that it almost reached in 2019 (see below). The illusion of the “World Centre of Tourism and Leisure” concept means carrying capacity is also a political construct, and a fictitious number, with the forecasts of other actors, both visible and invisible, having the power to produce and define the nature of tourism, and keep the hegemonic project alive. Today, residents try to live their lives in an economy that works on probability and confidence and conceals the rapid accumulation of wealth by the few (Coen and Maguire, 2012), but at the expense of thwarted aspiration and control and estrangement by unseen forces. Rather than tourism numbers, Macau remains fixated on forecasts and numbers that’s have acquired a mystical significance: monthly gambling revenue figures. The World Centre of Tourism and Leisure category also obscures other illicit numbers, such as the number of unlicensed workers from the unemployed populations of Guangdong and Fujian provinces, to the numbers of women working in brothels. Unable to exercising stable control over space, time, or flows, there were 39.4 million tourist arrivals in 2019. The uncontrolled flows of capital, risk and people seeking instant returns have damaged Macau’s civil sphere, body politic, economic health and social integrity. For Tracy, 24 “*Macau is not a place for living. This city only has casino, hotels and tourists*”.
- 25 The “*blind democracy of chance in gambling divorced reward from effort or merit*” (Reith, 2007, p. 34) has undermined meritocracy in schools, universities, workplace and the body politic and created new risks, such as a “shadow state” (Reno, 2000) behind the facade of state sovereignty and the chance of Beijing intervention. Although statistically, having one of the highest per capita incomes in the world, people see life as a lottery as they seek job promotions, (subsidized) housing, kinder garden places, school-university places, transport and access to government subsidies. Jane, 32, for example, felt promotion in the casino was difficult as “*there already many colleagues who had tried many times to fight for a promotion, they’ve attended the paper test and interview many times. But they failed as much as they tried . . . because their social networks are not wide enough.*”
- 26 Gone is any official speak of egalitarian futures or Macau’s future post-2049. There are no answers as to whether borders will be fully opened to the mainland, whether the currency (MOP) will be dissolved or whether the SAR will be amalgamated into a broader Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area. There are only scant plans or preliminary discussions by Macau authorities to tackle women’s equality, labor organizing, a standard minimum wage for all, LGBT rights, monopolies, social justice, health care, social security, migrant and immigrant rights, and freedom of the press. Venus, 24, notes that “*discrimination against same-sex couples really exists in Macau. Because I used to study in a girls’ school, I know some same-sex couples are under high social pressures because of Chinese traditional ethics. They feel really embarrassed and self-abased when facing their families and friends.*” As Macau eroded its control over money supply and its capacity to regulate and control financial flows, property markets, communications, currencies, persons, information, wealth and labor, it became a zone of occult instability, leading to a fusion of disenfranchisement and limitation.

- 27 As the population is subsumed “into the cultural and ideological functions of the market” (Liu, 2008, p. 118), the lack of transparency, accountability and stability means some Macau residents search for “quick-profit” with no long term purpose, passion or plan, which have resulted in dramatic price rises in healthcare services, and housing. Locals see any increased wealth amongst non-resident workers as illegitimate (Zhu, 2019). The “*fear of invasion by aliens clothed in humdrum bodily form*” (281) means local workers are always looking for non-resident mainland workers pretending to be local in jobs reserved for them; and have increasingly sought raids to force “*underground evil into public visibility, of reversing the arcane alienation that creates phantom [zombie] workers*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002, p. 789). As Comaroff and Comaroff (2000, p. 326) note, occult economies lead residents to demand:
- “to stop the inflow of immigrants and others who divert the commonweal away from autochthons; to incarcerate criminals . . . and other nefarious characters who spoil the world for upright, hardworking people.”
- 28 Informants often blamed migrant workers from “alien-nations” like Philippines who leave their homes, families and communities for crime, taking jobs, faking their background and stalling their career advancement. These ethnic divisions are largely based on classificatory systems governing ethnic diversity that were instituted under Portuguese rule (Clayton, 2019) and have both helped shape “positive discrimination” in favor of Macau residents and concerns about foreigners in social media and informally (Zhu, 2019). A 2018 law, for example, charges non-residents giving birth in Macau hospitals childbirth fees three times higher than what residents pay (Clayton, 2019). For many informants, foreign workers threaten to “*siphon off the remaining, rapidly diminishing prosperity of the indigenous population*” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002a, p. 789). For Sean, 23, “*there are more foreign labors living in my area which might raise up the crime rate*”, while Sally, 21, noted that “*people from Nepal, Philippines and more of other Southeast Asian countries might lead to a rise in the crime rate.*” Chris, 59, felt crime was high with “*too many foreign prostitutes*” and “*and corrupt police, who wouldn’t arrest them.*” Venus, 24 notes that “*I have to say that I feel I can’t accept the behaviors and values of some Mainland Chinese, although I am also from Chinese ancestry.*”
- 29 Macau’s future is based on confidence, predictions and probability in an economy, which can be destroyed by a signature in Beijing or merely talking about it in a negative way (e.g. leading stock values to drop). Casinos reach into everyone’s homes in Macau, and are corporeally present, but simultaneously opaque and mysterious. Macau currently has no strong cultural and political identity or institutions able to resist a move away from deliberate courting and promotion of irrational forces of chance. Casinos are the primary attraction, tempting and seducing as “*they beckon from that far-away which we call the future*” (Bauman, 2013, p. 78). If any part of the transient population of investors, workers, gamblers and elites lose confidence and trust in this magical world, in which they have speculated their wealth, identities and futures, Macau’s economic prosperity and social stability may decay. With 30% the labor population non-residents, 25% of the population, including professionals, judges, politicians, and senior civil servants with Portuguese passports (Chou, 2011), and up to 40% of Macau high-school graduates going abroad for college (O’ Keefe, 2013), citizens are not confident, even though authorities reinforce the idea that Macau’s faith in tourism will somehow overcome a multitude of shortcomings.

- 30 External stories about billions rumored to be channeled through Macau each year (Congressional-Executive Commission on China Annual Report, 2013) and prostitution (United States Department of State, 2018) cause anguish, and tension. It reminds citizens how little the economy has diversified and how vulnerable it is to rumors, external actors and shocks. The same global flows that created GDP growth are susceptible to changes in visa and/or cash transfer policies by the mainland; credit availability and adverse global macroeconomic conditions. An outbreak of avian flu or an pandemic, such as such as the latest novel coronavirus, 2019-nCoV from Wuhan, a rise in Federal Reserve interest rates, cyber-attacks, natural catastrophes, a drawback of central bank stimulus and global liquidity, and changes to IVS may end the speculative boom and lead to consolidation. Increasing disquiet over underground banks, money laundering and the embezzlement of public funds and political failure to introduce diversification means Beijing can turn off the tap as easily as it turned it on (Chou, 2011).
- 31 Given the uncertainty around a possible limit on tourism by Beijing, and restrictions on casino concession extensions; casino groups, who are neither accountable or in direct way responsible towards Macau, have begun to shift their attention to surrounding jurisdictions. As *“old margins become new frontiers, places where mobile, globally-competitive capital finds minimally regulated zones”* (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012, p. 121), the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia and Vietnam have become new gambling destinations.

Concluding Remarks

- 32 Macau, always in the vortex of regional economic, political and social changes welcomed the handover from Portugal to China in 1999. While never a democracy, the “one-country, two-system” policy conferred a high degree of autonomy to the city for policymakers to introduce forestalled rational economic adjustments, to remain a crossroad. However, Macau, instead, became a new minimally regulated frontier through liberalization and deregulation; offering foreign casino operations and murky capital a home and gateway. Coinciding with a global liquidity glut unleashed by the world’s leading central banks and the opening up of China, Macau prospered on both inbound and outbound abnormal capital flows. As the government seems unable or unwilling to assert itself or let normal patterns of the economy reassert themselves, history may repeat itself unless Beijing seeks a decolonizing process that ruptures the cycles of instability. Just as Macau benefited from the instant returns from opium, coolie, gold and weapons trade to avoid becoming a failed economy, its current destiny needs to be crafted by actors who don’t sap it of the vitality, creativity and real confidence needed to break the spell for a broader emancipation. There is little reason to believe that the SAR will reduce its dependence on gambling itself. With a weak political society and co-opted civil society, it can be argued that Macau facilitates a global trade without “producing” anything tangible, and merely serves as a frontier for further short-term financial speculation in East and Southeast Asia.

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NOTES

1. Macau's junket operators work with the casinos to lure VIP gamblers, organizing transport and accommodation, as well as offering credit and collecting debts.
2. Special Banknotes are printed by the Macau Monetary Authority (AMCM) but only available to residents, for investment purposes.

ABSTRACTS

The expansion of casino concessions and subsequent growth of employment and gross domestic product (GDP) per Capita in Macau after the 1999 handover from Portugal created an illusion of prosperity in a post-colonial territory of less than 30 sq. km. A Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is the only place in China where adults can legally gamble in casinos. This paper, using interviews with local residents, argues that the imagined category of "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure" coined by local authorities' masks an illicit occult economy. The paper argues that the miraculous swiftness of GDP per capital, employment and budget surplus growth, was a result of a new post-colonial elite looking backwards into its colonial past. The paper argues that while the "World Centre of Tourism and Leisure" is a political construct and key hegemonic project to keep citizens in a hyper-real world of simulacra and control, it is at the cost of everyday gossip, caution, self-censorship and demoralization.

INDEX

Keywords: tourism, occult economy, Macau, gambling, post-colonial, casino economy

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