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Book Review

Simpson, Tim. (2023). *Betting on Macau: Casino Capitalism and China's Consumer Revolution*. University of Minnesota Press. 388 pp. ISBN 9781517900304

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I first visited Macau in 2010, somewhat unsure where my doctoral research on Singapore's casino development was heading. By then, Macau had undergone a decade of urban transformation brought about by the liberalization of the casino industry as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC). What I witnessed can only be described as a bewildering sense of history-in-the-making, as if the dramatic language Marx used to describe the Industrial Revolution had sprung to life in another form. This surely was a frontier of capitalism. Macau hijacked my research and, indeed, career: a short trip became a three-month-long stint of fieldwork, and ten years later, I am still studying casinos.

Reading Timothy Simpson's book *Betting on Macau* brings me back to this initial moment of bewilderment. Having lived in Macau for two decades, Simpson, an associate professor of communication at the University of Macau, no doubt experienced this far more deeply and intimately than I did. Yet, this is not a book about Macau's post-handover transformation. His objective is to convince us of Macau's world-historic significance in the long history of capitalism. A tiny archipelago ignored for much of

its history, constantly overshadowed by its neighbour Hong Kong, Macau's story is far larger than it is.

Simpson's thesis is that Macau stands at the centre of the next stage of global capitalism, one that is led by the PRC. Over nine chapters, he develops this thesis by showing the *function* of Macau and its casino industry in this transformation. There is a scalar sequence in his analysis—at the territorial scale, he examines the central role Macau plays in the geo-economic reconfiguration of the Greater Bay Area. He contends that Macau's ambiguous sovereignty under colonial Portuguese rule and its non-signatory status under the Bretton Woods Agreement allowed it to flourish in the shadows of the global economic order. If this argument is well-established, he goes further by positing that, after the collapse of the Agreement, and as the first Special Economic Zones emerged in the PRC, it is precisely these qualities of Macau that turned it into an experimental ground for market-reform policies in a larger socialist context. He underpins these experiments in moments of crises (triad violence, the Asian financial crisis, and the outbreak of SARS) that saw Macau soar to become one of the wealthiest cities in the world.

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I find the discussion on the enabling role of the junket operators—informal networks of middlemen responsible for moving money across borders and circumventing capital controls—to be especially valuable as it captures the specificity of Macau’s casino industry in driving this territorial and geoeconomic transformation.

At the architectural and corporeal scales (Chapters 5, 7, 8), Simpson turns his attention to the Integrated Resorts—massive casino-resort complexes created by linking up several (already large) properties with enclosed walkways—and their interiorized environments. Rather than delving into the politics of representation like many critical analyses of casino architecture before him, Simpson continues his functional and materialist analysis by treating the Integrated Resort as “a spatial machine that produces postsocialist consumer subjects” (p. 167). There is, he argues, a civilizing effect in tourist spaces and practices that recalls the role of the Crystal Palace in 19th century London in cultivating consumers for an industrial society. Indeed, if Chinese youths were once sent to labour in rural areas in Communist China, a reverse direction is taking place here. The objective is not to engender a collectivist subjectivity amongst Chinese citizens, but to fashion the *homo-economicus* of neoliberal ideology.

How does the Integrated Resort produce a new kind of calculating market-oriented subject? First, it does so by introducing stratification based on the consumers’ market worth as gamblers—from VIPs to “premium mass” to mass / grinders. Second, the Integrated Resort provides a full suite of products and facilities to the discerning consumer: from child care to clothing, cosmetic dental surgery, hair salons, spas, and even a Mayo clinic. As such, it is not just gambling, but the entirety of quotidian life that is commodified. Furthermore, there is, within this cluster of facilities, a regime of self-improvement, which connects with the state’s agenda of producing “quality citizens” (*suzhi*) who are responsabilized in taking care of themselves. Finally, the

interiorization of consumption (and life in general) tames the inherent political risks of urbanization. Recalling Weber’s aphorism that “city air makes you free,” such enclosures deny urbanity and help to explain the peaceful transition of Macau from Portuguese to Chinese rule (in contrast to the more belligerent street politics of the Hong Kong SAR). Taken as a whole, Simpson argues that the Integrated Resort “constitutes a model environment whose imperceptible influence explicitly promotes and inculcates a form of normative moral education concerning the proper uses of urban space” (p. 181).

At the corporeal scale, Simpson channels theories of new materialism to look at how specific objects around the gambling table shape consumer subjectivity. In a detailed discussion spanning game psychology and casino finance, he attempts to show how an atmosphere of volatility envelopes the activity of play and the very economic foundations of the Macau SAR. Baccarat is the most popular game amongst Chinese gamblers, especially in the VIP salons. Yet, as a game of pure chance and when millions are wagered, animalistic passions rather than calculative faculties are stoked, as evidenced by outbursts of violence around the gambling table, as well as certain practices such as “card-squeezing,” where players slowly peel open their cards while shouting for the desired numbers to appear. Indeed, given how central baccarat is to the casino industry, the volatility of the table aggregates into dramatic swings in the public coffers of the Macau SAR. From this interpretation, Simpson proceeds to show how new game mechanics have been introduced to transform a game of pure chance into one that cultivates calculative decision-making and risk-taking. His analysis focuses on the LIVE Baccarat machine designed to draw Chinese gamblers away from table games. Two specific examples are given: First, unlike a simple game of baccarat, gamblers on this machine can participate in a side jackpot with every wager. This makes the game

more investment-like. Second, the maximum bet a player may wager is determined collectively (amongst other players) rather than individually, thus introducing an element of player competition and sociality. Such game mechanics, Simpson argues, replace the volatility of VIP baccarat with steady and predictable profits characteristic of slot machines and change the psychology of play. Both the Integrated Resort and the LIVE Baccarat machine thus actively cultivate the desired subjectivity of consumers in post-reform China.

In laying out the substantive arguments, the depth and scope of Simpson's book should be obvious. If one asks: What can we learn about China's "consumer revolution" (echoing the subtitle of the book) from the vantage point of Macau? Simpson's arguments would be this: First, at the territorial and urban scale, we can see a logic of enclavization wherein new and old techniques of governance are assembled within prescribed boundaries to spur market reform. Second, from the interior spaces and the casino floor, we can see how the mental life and physical comportment of the Chinese consumer of the 21st century is produced. Simpson is not alone in making his first argument. What he adds to the discussion are the layers of historical legacies, political ambiguities, and spatial forms that make Macau's spectacular transformation possible. While these specificities, particularly those related to the casino industry, help us appreciate the theoretical significance of Macau as a concrete amalgam of market-socialist experimentation, I hesitate to embrace the claim that Macau functions as the "*very inspiration* for the spatial logic of China's reform economy" (p. 99, emphasis added).

I find the second substantive argument innovative. His analysis of the VIP rooms and the LIVE Baccarat machine magnifies the logic of capitalism at work in the smallest of spaces and most innocuous of games. Much like those before him who saw socioeconomic structures in cockfighting, slot machines, and public lotteries,

Simpson's empirical work here is refreshing, even if parts of the theorization are speculative. The casino is surely one of the most enduring institutions of urban modernity, alongside factories, libraries, markets, hotels, and shopping malls, and we can learn much by studying it as a pedagogical site where certain social norms and mentalities are produced. There are moments in the analysis when I entertained a Bakhtinian interpretation—are these games and spaces molding the norms of a new consumerist subjectivity, or are they allowing the *inverse* of what is socially acceptable to be released? Nevertheless, taking the "casino" in "casino capitalism" seriously is important—it should be an actual site of analysis and theorization rather than a mere metaphor for how late capitalism works (see also Cassidy, 2009).

A point of disagreement stems from my own research on casino development. If the Integrated Resort represents the enclosure and commodification of life, how is it analytically and typologically different from other forms, like shopping malls, theme parks, and gated communities? How is it an "ideal type" (p. 161), and not just one of many variations of the same type? I suspect Simpson is aware of this categorical slipperiness when he says that the Integrated Resort "*complements* other elements of an emergent urban landscape of consumption" (p. 178, emphasis added). Simpson places much emphasis on the first foreign-owned casino, *Sands Macau*, as an architectural machine that drove Macau's ascendance to the world stage of global capitalism. While the success of this property undoubtedly opened the gates to capital investment, I am disinclined to pedestalize this building. Simpson wishes to see in the building and the professional discourses on casino design some emergent technique / rationality in the shaping of human subjectivity. Yet, as I have shown (Lee, 2019, pp. 178–212), casino designers and architects have, since the 1980s, strategically adopted a mantle of scientificity to step into a lucrative industry that is

increasingly dominated by corporations and regulated by state bodies. Remove this mantle and one would realize that many claims of “architectural reasons to gamble” are hyperbolic and flawed. The long-running debate about whether casino floor design should be legible or labyrinthine (initiated by a casino consultant and a professor of English in the late 1990s) is as un-rigorous as the observation by the architect of the *Sands Macau* that gambling is like a sport for the Chinese, which inspired his “stadium” design. The same can be said about the industry’s recent attempt to explain feng shui in scientific parlance.

Is the *Sands Macau* (and the other Integrated Resorts after it) a building where we can see the contours of the “Chinese gambler”? From the perspective of professional competition and corporatization, one would see instead the rigidity of the design of Las Vegas-based casinos, burdened by trademarked “principles” and inflated claims, and how clumsy they are as a “political machine” when targeting and moulding the so-called “Chinese gambler.” I would be less dismissive of the *Hotel Lisboa*, the flagship casino hotel built in 1970 during Stanley Ho’s monopoly in Macau. Despite being eclipsed by larger and newer casinos, this building is a rich archive of spatial techniques that can be unpacked to locate the Chinese gambler of pre- and post-market reform.

This might appear to be a disagreement limited to the Integrated Resort. Yet, it points to the need to understand the larger theoretical ambition of the book, which is to locate Macau in the four-century-long history of capitalist development as laid out by historian Fernand Braudel and his successor Giovanni Arrighi. Simpson adopts Braudel’s conceptualization of capitalism as the highest realm of economic activity where financial speculation predominates, and weaves Macau’s history into the historical arc of capitalism that stretches from Venice to England to the United States, and finally China as the new global hegemon. But his objective is not merely to insert Macau into a pre-given framework of world-

system theorization. Rather, he pulls specific objects from this history that encapsulate the speculative ethos of capitalism and juxtaposes them with their contemporary equivalents in Macau. This method is consistently applied across all chapters, urging us to see a cyclical pattern linking “armillary spheres to ashtrays, Portuguese carracks to integrated casino resorts, translucent porcelain to plastic dead chips, junket loans to baccarat machines” (p. 295). Simpson tested this method in an earlier paper where he traced its inspiration to “Walter Benjamin’s dialectical analysis of the obsolete commodities of mass culture” (Simpson, 2008, p. 1053).

Having clarified the book’s theoretical ambition and method, it should be clear where the disagreement arises. Because Simpson’s horizons are pegged to moments of world history unfolding in the *longue durée*, there is a tendency to skip over histories and geographies either closer to home or deemed insignificant in the development of capitalism. For Simpson, Braudel’s and Arrighi’s works function like a time machine with limited stops. While this provides a massive canvas of possibilities, it also narrows Simpson’s historical sources, and some liberties have been taken when interpreting / using them. I suggested earlier that the corporatization of the casino industry and its influence on architectural form in the United States can speak more directly to what has been built in Macau. This “near history” will also help one recognize the side-jackpot in the LIVE Baccarat machine as an evolution of the “wide-area progressives” that emerged in the 1980s, when digitization gripped the gaming technology industry in the United States (Lee, 2019, pp. 164–165; Turdean, 2011). Should this side-jackpot be read as a technology that nurtures the calculative faculty of gamblers in balancing risk and gain, or as something that preys on the gambler’s irrational impulse with the promise of winning a massive life-changing prize *as a bonus*? Such disagreements are ultimately borne out of different optical fields generated by near and far histories.

Writing a world history of capitalism (with Macau in it) is of course not Simpson's task, but this history is not something that can be detached without destroying the tenor and substance of the book. With this backdrop of deep time and space, Simpson is able to evoke that sense of bewilderment I experienced in my initial encounter with Macau. This is history-in-the-making! Such a readerly affect is not unimportant—if we understand the politico-aesthetic project of Walter Benjamin's dialectical images, the experience of being jolted out of the orthodoxies of the present is central to critical historiography. Simpson has certainly elevated the theoretical significance of Macau as a frontier of capitalist development more than any other scholar, urging us to look beyond its hackneyed characterization as peculiar and secondary. For scholars in the social sciences, the book demonstrates how gambling in its elemental, spatial, historical, and cultural forms is an effective vehicle for cutting through disciplinary silos and forcing us to contemplate the Big Picture in all its variations and fragments. For the field of gambling studies, the book is an important step away from its narrow professional interests and dysfunctional affair with the psy-sciences.

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