

# Book Review: *Chopsticks and Gambling,* by Desmond Lam, Ph.D.

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This is a great concise introduction to Chinese views of gambling, including the history of Chinese attitudes towards gambling, Chinese values and their relationship to gambling, how and why Chinese gamble, and the social impact of gambling in Chinese societies. Desmond Lam, Professor of Marketing at the University of Macau, is an expert who has published broadly on the gaming industry. While the book's last chapter is specifically on the history and effects of gaming in Macau, the book speaks about Chinese cultural tendencies in general—using data from China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Macau and elsewhere. The book offers a well-written introduction, but is also full of research references throughout, making it an excellent book for any academic interested in the field, as well as the novice who wants to learn more about how Chinese gambling attitudes and behaviors are unique.

The book begins with a brief history of theories on gambling, ranging from Freud's psychoanalytic approach to more recent cognitive-based views, including the emotional pleasure and economic factors as to why people gamble.

In his chapter on the history of Gambling in Chinese Societies, Lam brings out relevant facts from the last 3600 years of Chinese history, including cockfighting and hound racing, to games played from *liubo* and *bosai* to *wumu*, which eventually evolved into six-sided dice. More recent *Zuanhe pai*, a domino game, and *guanpu*, a coin-tossing game, have been replaced with baccarat and slot machines. Chinese certainly like table games more than slot machines, as is evidenced by that fact that in Las Vegas there are 35 slot machines for each table (35:1 ratio) while in Macau the ratio is 3:1 and slots make up only 4.4% of total gross revenue for Macau Casinos (p. 25). Gambling – particularly problem gambling – is viewed negatively in Chinese culture, although at the same time data show Chinese seem to gamble more than westerners. While some Chinese rulers saw gambling halls as a good source of revenue, others opposed it. After World War II, the new Chinese government essentially banned gambling and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) further curtailed it, although mahjong continued to be played socially. More recently, some forms of gambling have become accepted. The Chinese lottery, made up of welfare lottery and sports lottery, is run by the state and has grown from USD\$4.6 million in 1987 to USD\$35 billion in 2011. Hong Kong also has a popular and huge lottery, and the liberalization of gaming licenses in Macau in 2002 allowed Macau to eclipse Las Vegas in revenue.

Lam's chapter on Chinese value systems is helpful for understanding how Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and Christian attitudes affect attitudes towards gambling. Lam points out that Daoists and Buddhists tend to gamble more than Christians, and argues that

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contemporary values are deeply rooted in Confucian values, exemplified in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, with special attention to power relationships, one's position within social structures, and harmony. Lam later highlights how these values impact how Chinese tend to gamble.

Chapter 4 on Chinese People's Aptitude for Gambling is the longest chapter at 62 pages, and provides a number of empirical examples to help understand sociologically why Chinese gamble as much as they do. Lam provides an in depth discussion of how baccarat is played, with careful analysis of particular behaviors of Chinese players, including vocalizations of shouts, ways cards are held, aggressive betting behaviors, and the apparent importance of the sociality of the game-playing. Lam concludes, among other things, that Chinese gamblers tend to have an illusion of control of the game, and a high degree of belief in luck and superstition. Lam also provides some sociological analysis of Chinese attitudes towards gambling through a discussion and a complete list of 70 gambling-related Chinese films, and the top 25 Hong Kong Box office hits which were gambling related. These films also depict gamblers as almost always playing table games, not slots, and also as having high illusion of control, using supernatural powers, luck, *feung shui*, and superstition. Lam also analyzes Chinese superstitious attitudes towards the sounds of certain words or numbers, including examples of people choosing hotel room numbers, and even phone numbers based on such beliefs. He claims that Chinese consider luck, feung shui and fate to be as important if not more important than knowledge even in matters of business (p. 89). His conclusions are that Chinese beliefs in luck, fate, and feung shui play a large role in Chinese gambling behaviors, and that the social aspect is also highly valued (as exemplified by Chinese general attraction to table games where one interacts with others rather than solitary slots).

In discussing the social impact of gambling in Chinese societies, Lam admits that gambling has brought great economic benefit, especially to Macau. But he reminds us again of the history of Chinese rulers banning gambling repeatedly because of its detrimental effects on society. In particular, Lam discusses problem gambling and its prevalence in Chinese culture, citing statistics that in Montreal, Chinese were 3 times more likely than other ethnicities to be problem gamblers (p.121). He cites media coverage of gambling problems as evidence that gambling problems are looked at negatively at 'bad' rather than as a disorder. This is likely in part because so many of the publicized cases involved officials embezzling money for gambling. He concludes his social impact discussion with some account of responsible gaming initiatives instituted at Macau casinos. In the final chapter, on Macau, Lam presents a very brief history of gambling and of the explosive recent growth of casinos and gambling revenue in Macau.

Lam's book fills a very important gap in the literature. But here are always limitations to any book. One of the main difficulties of this work is that it takes on an impossible task—of attempting to provide a summary view of the behaviors and attitudes of a people group (Chinese) spanning centuries and countries, from Singapore to Hong Kong to Montreal.

Second – and this is a limitation of the field, not this book – some of the literature and studies in this field are limited, at best. So while this book does a good job citing research into Chinese gaming, the field of research itself is at a very young age and many of the articles in the field are quite limited in scope.

Third, given Professor Lam's knowledge of Macau's gaming, it is a shame that the final chapter on Macau was not longer – at 6 pages, it is the shortest in the book! Hopefully, Lam will provide us with a full-length book on Gaming in Macau in the near future.

Despite these shortcomings, Professor Lam has done an admirable job. Up until now there has been no extended researched introduction to Chinese attitudes towards gaming that provides the historical and values background, the empirical research, and the impact focus which this book provides. It is extremely readable, engaging, and full of interesting data, connections, and conclusions. In this small book, Professor Lam has

provided a valuable resource of information that helps one understand better not only Chinese gambling practices and attitudes, but the Chinese mindset in general. I plan to recommend it to friends and colleagues, as well as assign it to students who go on my travel course to Hong Kong, Macau, and China. We can hope that there will be more and more quality work done in this field of study.

Understanding the cultural and sociological differences of gambling practices and attitudes can help scholars in all fields of study, from sociology, theology and psychology to management, hospitality or business ethics. Looking at cultural differences in light of gambling is also a very interesting way to try to understand the cultural differences between cultures, which hopefully can lead to greater appreciation of others in general.