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Rolling the Dice in Macau
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It has been almost a decade now since China regained control of Macau, but the city’s present and future crops up in news coverage much less than Hong Kong, another reclaimed colony. We’re delighted, then, to be able to run this piece about Macau from someone who has been spending time there, meditating on not only whether or not Macau is democratizing but also how Macau’s relationship to the mainland and the world is changing its economy and society. For those interested in background information on Macau, see the reading list that follows the piece.

By Dustin Wright

Sitting in a hip dessert shop recently, I asked three University of Macau undergraduates, all Macau natives, what they thought about Macau’s new Chief Executive-elect, Fernando Chui. He is only the second person to hold the post since the Portuguese handover in 1999.

“I don’t really think about it,” one told me. “Young people here don’t really think about who is in the government.” The two others nodded in agreement. “Connections are the most important thing to succeed in Macau. Anyone here who is rich was born rich.”

Such apathy can be understood, given that Chui’s appointment as the new head of Macau was decided by a 300-member "election committee" comprised of the city’s elite, many of whom have strong ties to PRC officials. Chui, the former Secretary of Social Affairs and Culture and holder of college degrees from the United States, including a PhD in Public Health from the University of Oklahoma, will be officially sworn in this December. The victory of his unopposed election was a foregone conclusion, emphasized by the fact that The Macau Daily lead with a headline declaring Chui’s victory before the vote actually took place. An online poll at the English language MacauNews.com showed that 44 percent of respondents felt that Chui’s top priority should be combating public corruption, while only 2.3 percent stressed the importance for political reforms. This strong displeasure towards corruption was likely exacerbated by a recent high-profile case involving a former official in Macau, now serving 28 years in prison.

However, not everyone is apathetic toward the election process. On election day, pro-democracy legislators unveiled banners and staged a protest in front of the iconic façade of St. Paul’s ruins, calling for universal suffrage by 2019. The rally hinted at the fact that political (and economic) disparities are just as Macanese as Portuguese egg tarts.

As with the changing of the guard in the Chief Executive’s office, the gaming sector might also be in a state of transition. For nearly four decades, the casino industry has been heavily influenced by one man, the philoprogenitive Stanley Ho, whose failing health has raised speculation as to who will make up (and benefit from) Macau’s next generation of corporatists.

All of this begs the question: What is the Macau that Chui will soon be running?

Macau Special Administrative Region (SAR) is a city of variations, scattered with amalgamations, and permeated with assimilations. Since the sixteenth century, Macau’s seemingly effortless blending of cultures has impressed and marveled those who visited and inhabited this Portuguese outpost on the Pearl River Delta. "Culturally," writes Austin Coates, "there has never been anything like Macao, where so much of China and so much of Europe are enshrined in one small place."[1] Wang Zeng Yang, President of the Cultural Institute of Macau, remarked that this is a city "where different cultures are treated not as mere rituals, but instead, as truly symbiotic, as totally complimentary," and that "even tourists in Taiwan advise their friends if they wish to know Europe but do not want to take long trips, to visit Macau, to know how it feels to be in a European city."[2] At a very cosmopolitan and Iberian dinnertime of 10:00 p.m., you might find yourself dining on stewed bacalhau (Portuguese salted fish) and African chicken. At the same restaurant the previous night, it was mapo tofu, steamed Chinese broccoli drowned in oyster sauce, and eggplant sautéed in oil and chilies, washed down with milk tea.
Just as identity and cuisine are in constant motion in Macau, so is the movement of capital. Since the handover of Macau back to Chinese rule a decade ago, and the relaxation of monopolistic gaming licenses in 2002, foreign casino operators have set up shop at a dizzying pace. Macau peninsula—along with the islands of Taipa and Coloane—makes up only 29 square kilometers and often goes unnoticed when compared to the larger Hong Kong SAR. However, in terms of generating wealth, size doesn’t matter: Las Vegas is 7.5 times bigger than Macau, yet more money is generated in the SAR than Sin City.

Climbing up the hill to Guia Fortress, one of the many historical sites that pepper the peninsula, one can see much of Macau spread out below. Looking south, the Sands Macao Hotel, which is responsible for fully two thirds of Las Vegas Sands Corp.’s profit, fights for elbow room with a bevy of Chinese and foreign-owned casinos. Large condominium complexes are still being built within sight, though at a slower pace than this time last year. Fisherman’s Wharf, a Disneylandesque amusement park built in the images of famous landmarks and cities, including a mock Coliseum, sits atop 111,500 square meters of concrete along the waterfront. Even Isidoro Francisco Guimarães, governor of Macau from 1851 to 1863 and the first to introduce licensed gambling, could hardly have imagined the garishness of the city today.

To the west, towards the central business district of Macau, one can see the immense and lotus-shaped Grand Lisboa rising from a sea of comparatively diminutive casinos, along with banks, shopping malls, pastel-colored cathedrals, and apartment blocks. Nearby, a towering needle, complete with a rotating restaurant and bar, confirms Macau’s ascension as a tourist haven. Wynn Macau is visible, a casino as much as a high-end shopping bonanza for tourists, most of whom come from mainland China. An American expat working in Macau told me about his experience watching a man, who was half-naked and sweating profusely, struggle to fit into a shirt while standing in the middle of Wynn’s Giorgio Armani store. I asked why the store personnel would allow such behavior, to which the expat, shocked by my ignorance, replied without pause, “Because he had money.” (When Henry Kissinger came to Macau a few months ago to speak at Macao Polytechnic University, his old friend, Steve Wynn, made sure to come to listen and, perhaps, comped the former Secretary of State’s room at the Wynn Macau.)

On a clear day you can catch a glimpse of a smattering of islands to the east, the largest of which is Lantau, part of Hong Kong SAR, while to the north is the city of Zhuhai, gateway to Guangdong Province and mainland China, visible from much of Macau. Travelling between the SARs and the mainland ensures one’s passport is stamped with the frequency of a pre-EU jaunt through Europe.

It’s a small city, yes, but the numbers are big. Macau’s population is roughly 560,000, nearly identical to that of Las Vegas. With such a small land area, Macau is one of the mostly densely populated places on earth. Government figures indicate that 23 million people visited Macau in 2008 and helped the city generate nearly $22 billion in GDP. With so many visitors spending so much money, Macau is a city that truly never sleeps.

The massive expansion of Macau’s gaming industry dovetailed with the global real estate gorge of the last decade, giving way to a bevy of expensive condominium projects, followed by the subsequent drop in market prices late last year. In Senado Square, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a lodestone for tourists, the young professionals who bought many of those condos barked into Blackberries and loosened their European-brand ties, while tourist families vie for space to take their portraits in front of the picturesque St. Dominic’s Church. Macau’s overall standard of living is quite high, with a quality-of-life index comparable to Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

However, even with the huge influx of capital (or because of it), economic inequality is prevalent. Not far away from Senado Square, in an area known as Fátima Parish, lies a rusted and mosquito-infested slum, where elderly women can be seen washing dishes at a communal spigot. It isn’t a unique example of poverty in greater China, but it’s proximity to the corporatist wealth of the casinos makes the disparity all the more egregious. Inoperable cars sit on blocks as they are slowly parted out, while above, a messy labyrinth of wires indicates that much of electricity that people can access in this area is pirated. It is a squatter community of mostly mainland Chinese immigrants, some of whom entered Macau illegally but were later granted legal status. Until 1979, Chinese mainlanders could enter Macau
without restriction, though it was illegal for them to do so under PRC law. Portuguese administrators tacitly endorsed the immigration of Chinese mainlanders, eager to have a ready supply of cheap labor that could be easily repatriated once their labor had been exploited.

The size of the slum has been halved since 1991, mostly through government campaigns to tear down the shacks and build high-rise housing and commercial buildings, evicting many of the squatters once their labor had been utilized to build the more expensive new real estate. Today, these towers loom over the shacks of corrugated tin that remain. Even though the slum is physically smaller and stronger immigration laws have made it more difficult for mainlanders to come to Macau, squatters are just as essential for today’s labor demands as they were twenty years ago. Sociologist D.Y. Yuan, a longtime researcher of Macau’s immigrant community, writes that, “Squatters have continuously provided a cheap source of labor, helping Macau to remain competitive in the international trade market.”[3] Last year’s census indicates that there was an increase of 8.2 percent in the number of “non-resident workers,” making up a population of over 92,000, many of whom have less than a junior high school education. Most of these workers are not salaried staff in the casinos (jobs which can require expensive training) but are instead employed in construction and more vulnerable to the global recession. When the economic crisis hit last fall, many ambitious building projects were shuttered and thousands in the construction industry lost their jobs. For those lucky enough to have kept their jobs in the casinos, gaming is still profitable, even though the number of tourists has decreased (due in part to travel restrictions by Beijing and the curtailing of gambling by PRC officials). Direct gaming tax revenue doubled from 2006 to 2008 to nearly $5
billion and many of the Macau government’s 20,000 employees can expect a pay raise this year. For the slums in Fátima Parish, things will likely remain the same.

It remains to be seen whether Chief Executive-elect Chui will be able to oversee the level of prosperity heralded during the last decade, or indeed whether Macau can remain a global gambling Mecca. For some, surely, things could be worse. Down the street from my apartment, I recently happened upon the opening party for a new hotel. On the street where I stood, looking rather pathetic with my mouth agape, throngs of people queued for admittance, while glittery VIP couples seemed to prance in slow motion as they made their way to the front of the line. Up above us, the silhouettes of a dozen voluptuous women—paid performers—gyrated in the windows of the new hotel. A powerful sound system blasted Depeche Mode’s “Personal Jesus” throughout the neighborhood, inviting all of Macau to find “someone to hear your prayers, someone who cares.”

This fall, Dustin Wright will begin his doctoral studies in the Department of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

**Recommended readings on Macau:**

Lucky for us, Hong Kong University Press just republished many of Austin Coates’ informative and immensely enjoyable books on Macau: *City of Broken Promises*(fiction), *A Macao Narrative*, and *Macao and the British: 1637-1842 Prelude to Hong Kong*.

Cathryn H. Clayton, Assistant Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii and a prominent scholar on Macau, has written the forthcoming *Sovereignty at the Edge: Macau and the Question of Chineseness* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

*Atlantic* correspondent James Fallows’ take on Macau.


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