

# GAMBLING IN CHINA RECONSIDERED: FANTAN IN SOUTH CHINA DURING THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

---

**Xavier Paulès**

CECMC, EHESS (Paris)

E-mail [lingnan99@hotmail.com](mailto:lingnan99@hotmail.com)

*Fantan 番攤 is a Chinese gambling game based on a draw from a random number of hidden coins or tokens, requiring the player to guess a number out of one, two, three or four. It currently survives only in Macao, but during the Late Qing and Republican periods, fantan was one of the most popular games in South China. Through the investigation of a wide range of sources, this article challenges the bias of standard accounts of gambling, which emphasize its corrupting influence and depict players as powerless victims cheated by the unscrupulous operators of gambling houses.*

*The reality was less negative. Cheating by proprietors was by no means common and fantan was considered a socially acceptable leisure activity. For many people, it was part of daily life, and tanguan 攤館, the establishments where it was played, were popular venues both enjoyable and secure. They generated a specific kind of conviviality derived from complex interactions among participants. By underestimating the role of fantan (and gambling more generally), one risks overlooking a socially significant activity, something that influenced the way not only heavy gamblers but also ordinary people perceived their own lives and destinies.*

Another very objectionable feature in Chinese life is the passion that everyone seems to have for gambling. (...) High and low, rich and poor, seem to have the gambling spirit in their very blood, and, like the craving in the opium smoker, that must be satisfied at all hazards, so the cards and the dice must be fingered to ally the passion that is burning within their hearts.<sup>1</sup>

As the above extract demonstrates, one of the most common clichés concerning the Chinese is that they are a people of gamblers.<sup>2</sup> It is consequently surprising that so little

---

I have profited from the advice and comments of Christian Henriot. The two anonymous referees also provided very helpful comments. Financial support from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science and the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation is gratefully acknowledged.

1 Macgowan 1907, pp. 326–27.

2 Riis 1971, p. 78: “The average Chinaman, the police will tell you, would rather gamble than eat any day.” Doolittle 1865, vol. 2, p. 283: “The Chinese are noted gamblers, and have invented a great many methods of playing for amusement or for money.” Thomson 1899, p. 42: “Gambling is a phase of oriental vice to which the Chinese are peculiarly addicted.” See also: Huc 1854, vol. 2, pp. 379–85; Matsumoto 1947, p. 154.

scholarly research has been done on the subject of gambling in modern China. With the exception of a handful of more substantial accounts of gambling in China which have detailed the great variety of gambling games and their long history,<sup>3</sup> scholars have generally pursued the topic along two quite distinct lines.

One of these lines is exemplified by several fine pieces of scholarship (especially in Taiwan) devoted to gambling operators, with special reference to their relations with the authorities. These studies have stressed the political importance of gambling as a source of tax revenue in Late Qing and Republican China.<sup>4</sup> Another line of investigation, followed by scholars from mainland China, has been to explore gambling as a source of social disorder. Pre-communist society is described as being plagued by gambling, an indication, among other things, of its allegedly decadent nature. The main substance of such accounts is dramatic anecdotes gleaned from different times and places illustrating the ravages of different gambling games.<sup>5</sup> Gambling is also stigmatized for being connected with so-called superstitious practices, the rule of warlords, secret societies, and banditry. The purpose of this line of work is clearly both to justify and to celebrate the suppression of gambling achieved by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the early 1950s. Overall, the perspective which prevails in current research is still colored by the prejudiced negative view of gambling among Late Qing and Republican political and intellectual elites, who saw it as a threat to public morals, or at least a waste of time.<sup>6</sup>

But, due to the prevalence of such a bias, a crucial aspect of the influence of gambling on society may be lost. Stories of family breakup due to one family member's passion for gambling are widely used to document the detrimental social impact of gambling, but if on the one hand gambling may break human ties in such a dramatic way, on the other it may also contribute, through the social contacts it generates, to bonds of friendship between fellow gamblers. If one considers the time devoted to gambling (at least implicitly) in a purely negative light as time not devoted to work, family life or "legitimate" entertainment, this may also lead us to overlook the importance it may have in the lives of its devotees. Moreover, prejudice against the common people who engaged in *fantan* and considering them as passive victims may detract from understanding what gaming actually meant to them. And, as we shall see, it sometimes meant a lot.

Undertaking the task of reevaluating the impact of gambling in this direction is realistic only for the Late Qing and Republican periods, a time of relative abundance and variety of sources. It also requires singling out one gambling game. *Fantan* 番攤 is specially relevant as this ill-famed gambling game (as yet remarkably absent from scholarly literature) was reputedly the most popular in a region which itself enjoyed the controversial reputation of being a particular hotbed of gambling: South China.

Traditional sources, almost exclusively produced by members of the elite classes, are strongly tainted with an anti-gambling stance. Typical of this posture are local gazetteers, administrative publications circulated during anti-gambling campaigns, and the social

3 Ge 1995; Guo and Xiao 1996; Luo and Xu 1994; Sun 2005.

4 He 1995; He 1996; He 2002; Hu 2006; Zhang 2003.

5 Zhao 2001, pp. 165–74; Zhang 2005, pp. 555–59; Liu and Wang 1992, pp. 51–124.

6 See the relevant chapter, "The Official and Orthodox Perceptions of Gambling" in Ho 2005, pp. 156–66.

surveys conducted by the Canton municipality. To counter this bias, the current study makes use of a wide array of other sources. First, more than one hundred news items collected in particular from the daily *Yuehuabao* 越華報 shed light on the place of *fantan* in everyday life, while some editorials in the same journal provide an interesting glimpse of the overall attitude towards gambling. Also of notable interest are travelogues and fieldwork reports by Chinese and Japanese anthropologists. The local correspondent of a national anti-opium publication, *Judu yuekan* 拒毒月刊, turns out to have been very familiar with daily life in *fantan* houses. He is so informative and accurate about them that we cannot imagine he was not himself an experienced gambler. Items gathered from various well-known *wenshiziliao* 文史資料 series, despite their bias, also provide useful information. This is particularly true of a long account by one Wei Gong 衛恭, who had personal acquaintance with *fantan* as many members of his family (including himself) were gamblers and one of his uncles ran a *fantan* house where he worked for some time. Finally, these sources are supplemented by interviews with former Canton residents<sup>7</sup> and the author's own fieldwork in the Macao casinos where *fantan* is still played.

## FANTAN IN TIME AND SPACE

Like many gambling games in other cultures, *fantan* originally derived from divination practices. The process of the draw (explained below) has obvious similarities to milfoil divination.<sup>8</sup> According to most scholars, the origins of *fantan* are to be found in the Han dynasty.<sup>9</sup> A history of *fantan* before the mid-Qing period is almost impossible to write, due to the scarcity of the sources, but scholars have collected a handful of texts which testify to the long history of the game under different names: *yanqian* 掩錢 (literally meaning “covering coins”, an obvious reference to the first stage in the process of the draw), *tanxi* 攤戲, *tanqian* 攤錢, *yiqian* 意錢.<sup>10</sup>

There is some controversy concerning the origin of the term *fantan*. According to some sources, its origin is related to the district of Panyu 番禺.<sup>11</sup> But the most convincing hypothesis is probably the simplest: the term originates (as was the case for its former appellation *yanqian*) from the way of playing *fantan*: “repeatedly (番) spreading out (攤)”. Therefore, the term *fan* 番 does not denote a foreign origin.

Although *fantan* had become by far the most standard way of referring to the game in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were other designations such as *bao*

7 The names of some respondents are not given here because they requested anonymity.

8 Smith 1991, p. 19: “Milfoil divination, traditionally believed to have been invented by Wu Xian in the Shang period, involved the manipulation of milfoil stalks (and perhaps bamboo) rather than reading cracks. (...) By the second century B.C., and probably earlier, this process had become more or less standardized. It involved the random division of 49 milfoil stalks into two groups, and then the reduction of each group *by the successive removal of four stalks at a time until only four stalks or less remained*” (italics mine). See also pp. 109–110.

9 Yang 1990, p. 100; Luo and Xu 1994, p. 100.

10 Guo and Xiao 1996, p. 225; Luo and Xu 1994, pp. 100–102; Sun 2005, pp. 44–45.

11 Guo and Xiao 1996, p. 225; Yang 1990, p. 100.

寶.<sup>12</sup> Slightly different versions seem to have existed in some places.<sup>13</sup> In addition, *fantan* was sometimes referred to by certain rather obscure circumlocutions rendering it difficult to identify with certainty. In particular, *fantan* was very often associated with the *pixiu* 貔貅, a mythical beast supposedly able to absorb and retain wealth.<sup>14</sup> This point deserves further elaboration. *Fantan* was played in specifically and permanently dedicated places named *tan-guan* 攤館, an obvious abbreviation of *fantan guan* 番攤館, a term which also sometimes occurs.<sup>15</sup> *Tanguan* runners placed themselves under the protection of the *pixiu*. In the hope it would bring them good fortune, they posted sentences like “*pixiu zuo zhen* 貔貅坐鎮” on the walls of their establishments.<sup>16</sup> This is the reason why the popular expression “beating the *pixiu*” (*da pixiu* 打貔貅) that one finds very often in the daily press means to play *fantan* (the gambler was supposed to beat *pixiu* to extract money from the *fantan* house).<sup>17</sup> “Being bitten (or “swallowed”) by the *pixiu*” (*bei pixiu shi* 為貔貅噬, or *bei pixiu tunqu* 被貔貅吞去) means that one had unsuccessfully played *fantan* and lost all one’s money.<sup>18</sup> Another metaphorical way to refer to playing *fantan* was “to assault the square city” (*gongda sifang cheng* 攻打四方城, sometimes *sifang xu* 四方墟), a humorous reference to the shape of the slab on which the bets were laid.<sup>19</sup>

*Fantan* could be played by a single gambler as well as by dozens of gamblers. It was played on a very large table (see Figure 1). In front of the croupier there was a small pile of tokens (*tanpi* 攤皮), such as cash (old copper coins with a hole in the middle) or porcelain buttons, hidden beneath a brass cover, so that it was impossible for the gamblers to count them. In the middle of the table was a square slab of zinc. Each side of the square represented a number: 1, 2, 3 and 4. Gamblers chose one (or several) of the sides to place their stakes. When all the stakes had been laid down, the croupier uncovered the heap and slowly began to draw out four coins at a time with a bamboo stick. Ultimately, the heap was depleted until either *one, two, three* or *four* remained. If a player had guessed correctly, then he was a winner. The casino derived profit only from a percentage deducted from the gross earnings. During the first half of the twentieth century this percentage was 10 percent.<sup>20</sup> This was larger than the 7 percent two different sources mention as being *de rigueur* for the nineteenth century,<sup>21</sup> and larger also than the 5 percent deducted in present-day Macao casinos.

12 *Jinyandu zhuankan*, no. 1 (September 1937), pp. 17 and 45.

13 Chen 1990, pp. 84–85. In Singapore, *fantan* was said to be often played with dice instead of cash: *Circumnavigator* 1912, p. 43.

14 *Pixiu* was considered an auspicious creature for the gambling profession more widely. The specific and seemingly exclusive association of *pixiu* with *fantan* seems to be a feature of South China.

15 *Chao’an xianshanghui rikan*, 22 December 1933; Guangzhoushi Shizhengting 1927, p. 9; *Yuehuabao*, 30 December 1932, 16 April 1935.

16 Interview with Mai Zhaoshen, 15 and 18 July 2008; Wei 1963, p. 76.

17 *Huazi ribao*, 2 September 1936; *Yuehuabao*, 9 June 1931, 16 June 1931, 5 December 1931, 12 June 1932, 12 February 1933, 6 June 1933.

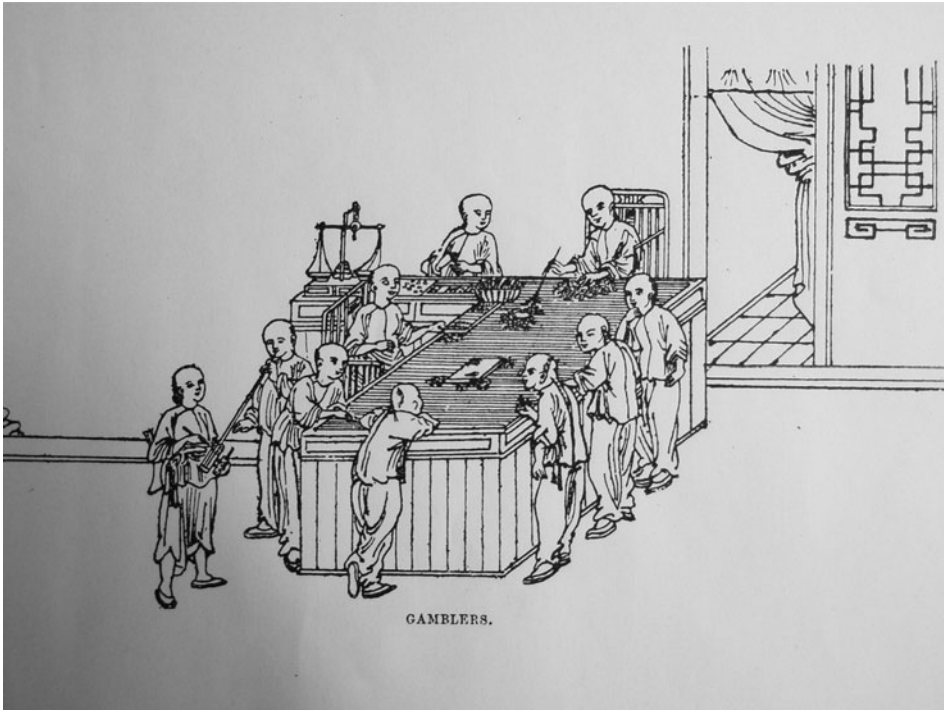
18 *Yuehuabao*, 9 July 1930, 3 June 1931, 9 June 1931, 12 June 1932, 14 June 1932, 27 May 1933.

19 *Wuxian manhua*, vol. 3, no. 5, p. 5; *Yuehuabao*, 7 March 1930, 9 July 1930, 17 February 1931, 3 June 1931, 10 March 1932.

20 *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 23; Lilius 1930 p. 28; Wei 1963, p. 73.

21 Gray 1878, p. 388; Wei 1963, p. 73; Thomson 1899, p. 43 (Thomson mentions the case of *fantan* in Hong Kong).

**Figure 1.** A *fantan* house (Gray, John Henry, *China, a History of the Laws, Manners, and Customs of the People*, London: Macmillan, 1878, p. 386)



If the basic principle of *fantan* – guessing a number out of four – was extremely simple, by using combinations of betting, the gamblers could enlarge the options at their disposal and also make the game less risky. There were five ways of betting:

- *fan* 番 (or *gufan* 孤番): the gambler bets on one number only. If the result of the draw corresponds to his guess, he can collect profits equivalent to three times his bet, but, as mentioned above, a charge of 10 percent for the house is deducted from the gross winnings. For example, if he bets four yuan, he will recover his stake plus  $3 \times 4 \text{ yuan} = 12$  (less 10% = 10.8 yuan). This way of betting was not a favorite of experienced gamblers.<sup>22</sup>
- *jiao* 角: the player places stakes on two consecutive numbers (one and two, two and three, etc.). The name *jiao* is derived from the fact that the stake is placed on the corner between the numbers upon which one places one's bets. When one plays *jiao*, the odds are even. If either one of the two numbers wins, twice the amount of the stake is handed to the player (less of course the 10 percent to the house).
- *nian* 捻: the gambler makes one number the winner and one neutral. Should the neutral number come up, the stake returns to the gambler. When

<sup>22</sup> *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 26.

a neutral number comes up, it is called *zouzhu* 走注 or *zoutouwei* 走頭尾. The winning number pays only two to one, less the usual 10 percent to the house.

- *zheng* 正 (or *zhengtou* 正頭): the gambler backs one number (for which the odds are even) and makes the two adjacent numbers neutral, losing only if the opposite number should be the winner.
- *shesanhong* 射三紅: the gambler selects three numbers, which pay only three to one. Only if the fourth number comes out does he lose. *Shesanhong* was a favorite among heavy gamblers.<sup>23</sup>

The precise geographical extent of *fantan* is a complex issue that would require a study in itself. Although the scarcity of references to it should incline us to remain cautious, the few texts which do mention *fantan* before the Qing period suggest that it was present all over China. For example, during the Tang dynasty, the poem “Kuizhou ge 夔州歌” by the illustrious Du Fu 杜甫 referred to the presence of *tanqian* 攤錢 in the province of Sichuan. The subsequent history of the game is mostly obscure, but a growing number of later sources attest that *fantan* had acquired a distinctively “southern” character by the Late Qing period. It was undoubtedly prevalent all over Guangdong.<sup>24</sup> *Fantan* was also common in Guangxi where a *fantan* monopoly existed in the mid-1910s.<sup>25</sup> According to a Late Qing source on the province of Fujian,<sup>26</sup> the game of *fantan* was to be found everywhere in the prefectures of Zhangzhou 漳州 and Quanzhou 泉州: “*Quan Zhang liangjun ze dao chu you zhi* 泉漳兩郡則到處有之”. But in Fuzhou prefecture it was important only in Nantai 南台, a suburb located in the south of the city of Fuzhou: “*Fuzhou wei Nantai wei sheng* 福州惟南台為盛”. Interestingly, Zhangzhou and Quanzhou were located in the southern part of Fujian province, close to the influence of neighboring Guangdong. By contrast, Fuzhou, where the presence of *fantan* was much less conspicuous, was further north. As a consequence, the case of Fujian suggests that the presence of *fantan* decreased with distance from its base in Guangdong. Also noteworthy is the fact that in the relatively de-centered Guangdong city of Shantou, according to a 1934 article of the *Judu yuekan*, the majority of the *fantan* dens were not controlled by locals, but by people from Guangzhou.<sup>27</sup> In a similar fashion, the province of Yunnan had *fantan* in the city of Kunming and Mengzi, but in both cases the relevant casinos were managed by Cantonese and apparently the practice of

23 This paragraph is a synthesis of information from the following sources: Interview with X, 11 July 2006; Inoue 1921, vol. 2, pp. 87–101; *Nanhai xianzhi* 1974, p. 586; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 23; Wei 1963, pp. 72–73; Gray 1878, pp. 386–88; *Chinese Repository*, vol. 10, no. 8 (August 1841), p. 474; Circumnavigator 1912, pp. 40–43; Xu 1984, p. 4909.

24 For example, besides Canton, *fantan* was played in Foshan 佛山, Jiangmen 江門, Shaoguan 韶關, Macao, Shenzhen, and Guangzhouwan 廣州灣 (nowadays Zhanjiang 湛江): Chen 1990, pp. 84–85; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 20; *Yuehuabao*, 21 June 1933. *Fantan* was played also in the eastern part of the province, for example in Shantou 汕頭, Chao'an 潮安, Jieyang 揭陽: *Chao'an xian shanghui rikan*, 22 December 1933; *Dalingdong ribao*, 24 March 1934, *Guowen zhoubao*, 17 October 1926.

25 FO 228/2007, Canton intelligence report for December quarter 1916; *Jindai Zhongguo jianghu miwen* 1997, vol. 1, pp. 369–70.

26 Shi 1985, *juan* 7, p. 113.

27 *Judu yuekan*, no. 77 (1934), p. 22.

*fantan* kept a distinctively “Cantonese touch”.<sup>28</sup> Also, in 1920s Shanghai, *fantan* appeared only in the districts where Cantonese immigrants congregated.<sup>29</sup> In the eyes of the Shanghainese travelers who wrote accounts of their travels in South China in the review *Lüxing zazhi* 旅行雜誌, *fantan* was seen as a somehow exotic game, distinctively Cantonese, and described at length.<sup>30</sup>

Besides the places previously mentioned, so far, I have been unable to find any mention of *fantan* elsewhere in China during the late Qing and Republican periods. Nevertheless, not unexpectedly, due to the fact that most overseas Chinese originated from Guangdong and Fujian, *fantan* was prevalent among the overseas communities. Several sources testify that in the late nineteenth century, *fantan* was widely popular among Chinese immigrants in the USA.<sup>31</sup> According to the missionary periodical *Friend of China*, *fantan* was one of the two most popular gambling games among Chinese immigrants in Australia.<sup>32</sup>

As a whole, in stark contrast with other gambling games, mah-jong in particular,<sup>33</sup> during the early twentieth century the extension of *fantan* was only regional, with Guangdong as its hotbed, and Canton its capital.

## NOT A MARGINAL ACTIVITY

During the early twentieth century, *fantan* was deeply rooted in Guangdong everyday life. It was by no means an underground activity. *Fantan* was both safe and legal, and the game had considerable importance in economic as well as social terms.

### Legality, Fairness and Security

According to witnesses, even though it was formally illegal, *fantan* was widely played in Guangdong during the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, during the second half of the century, provincial authorities were in need of funds due to the inability of the traditional fiscal system to meet the huge demand caused by wars, rebellions and modernization politics. As a consequence, they had been collecting money from *fantan* as early as in the 1870s under the guise of different schemes such as the “40 percent contribution from the provincial civil and military organization” (*wenwu yamen sicheng baoxiao* 文武衙門四成報效).<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, its *de jure* legalization by the governor general Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 happened only in 1900.<sup>36</sup> The year 1900 turned out to be a milestone, as during the first half of the twentieth century, *fantan* remained legal despite three short-lived attempts at

28 *Jindai Zhongguo jianghu miwen* 1997, vol. 1, pp. 400, 416, 418.

29 Inoue 1921, vol. 2, p. 94.

30 *Lüxing zazhi*, vol. 8 (1934), no. 11, p. 42; vol. 9 (1935), no. 3, p. 33.

31 Culin 1891, p. 1; Riis, p. 78.

32 *Friend of China*, vol. 7, no. 7 (July 1884), p. 133.

33 *Huazi ribao*, 9 November 1932, Chen 2009, pp. 150–52.

34 *Chinese Repository*, vol. 10, no. 8 (August 1841), p. 474; *Copy of All Correspondence* 1869, p. 55 (letter from Reverend J. Anderson to Alfred Lister, dated 5 June 1869).

35 He 1895, pp. 521–23.

36 *Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi* 1923, *juan* 11, p. 20; He 1996, p. 69.

enforcing a real prohibition (1911–1916, 1921–1922, 1936–1938).<sup>37</sup> Most of the time, *fantan* operations were farmed out to merchant syndicates. These syndicates were supposed to run *fantan* businesses in prescribed areas during defined periods of time to a fixed revenue quota. But in reality, they were also subject to forced contributions at different levels of administration down to the lowest, and to extortions by local toughs.<sup>38</sup>

It would be an over-simplification just to contrast periods of prohibition and periods of legalization. First, in some instances, due to lack of effective control, prohibition remained nominal or was only enforced in the capital city proper.<sup>39</sup> Second, because of the century-long prejudice against gambling, the authorities were concerned with the stigma represented by *fantan* legalization for their legitimacy vis-à-vis both the central government and, during the warlord period, rival neighboring powers. Even if it was legalized, they still wanted *fantan* to be as discreet as possible: they named the taxes derived from it in a purposely obscure way, for example in 1901 when it was called *ji bu jingfei* 緝捕經費.<sup>40</sup> More importantly, they imposed restrictions on *fantan* gamblers: in Canton, *fantan* houses were prohibited in the city center between 1925 and 1936, and tolerated only in one suburb (Henan, located on the Southern side of the Pearl River).<sup>41</sup>

Like other gambling games, *fantan* disappeared in the early 1950s, when the CCP conducted an effective nationwide campaign against the so-called social evils of gambling, drugs and prostitution.<sup>42</sup> It is today virtually absent from mainland China.

In Hong Kong, *fantan* had been banned since 1871 along with all forms of gambling except horse racing.<sup>43</sup> The ban was rather successful. This is why Shenzhen became an important spot for gambling: it was the first station on Chinese territory on the Hong Kong–Canton railway line. Especially on weekends, Hong Kong inhabitants came to patronize its casinos.<sup>44</sup> Macao, another destination for frustrated Hong Kong players, took a rather different attitude; *fantan* has been continuously legal there since July 1847, right until the present.<sup>45</sup> Still prohibited nowadays in mainland China as it is in Hong Kong, *fantan* is available in eight Macao casinos.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from its overall legal status is the question of deception. Many articles published in newspapers and periodicals as well as some *wenshiziliao* deal at length with different

37 What makes the situation even more complicated is that sometimes the status of *fantan* differed according to the division of the province into regions under the control of competing warlords.

38 He 1996, pp. 89, 102–103; Wei 1963, pp. 63–69; FO 228/3276: Canton intelligence report, September quarter 1920.

39 *South China Morning Post*, 27 October 1913, 18 February 1916, 9 March 1916; FO 228/3276, Canton intelligence report March quarter 1921, *Guangdong qunbao*, 9 June 1921; Guangdongsheng Jindu Weiuyuanhui 1936, p. 243–55.

40 He 1995, p. 527.

41 Guangzhoushi Shizhengting 1927, p. 9; *Huazi ribao*, 2 September 1936.

42 Ge 2005, pp. 340–41.

43 Guo and Xiao, p. 350.

44 *Shenbao*, 31 March 1935; *Canton Gazette*, 18 September 1935.

45 Hu 2006, p. 10.

46 Author's field work in Macao, July 2008 and July 2009. The eight casinos are: Casa Real, Casino Ponte 16, City of Dreams, Grand Lisboa, Jai Alai, Lisboa, Sands, Venetian.



ploys used by gambling houses to cheat patrons: false coins that could be divided into two pieces at will, or croupiers secretly adding or removing a coin to change the result of the draw to the house's advantage.<sup>47</sup> But in fact cheating was not so common. First, as Virgil Ho convincingly demonstrates, Cantonese gamblers of all kinds were alert to trickery, and disappointed betters by no means submitted to trickery quietly. It is therefore highly misleading to describe them as the helpless prey of swindlers.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, why should a gambling house run the risk of losing its reputation? With many other places for gamblers to patronize, any untoward incidents could lead to the immediate closure of the establishment. The *tanguan* could make money simply by profiting from the laws of probability. In such circumstances, it would have been absurd to risk destroying the confidence of the public, which could rightly be considered the most valuable asset of the house, when abiding by the rules was a much safer way to earn higher profits. Even if in some individual cases *tanguan* managers might have succumbed to the temptation of making easy money by cheating, it would have been irrational for the casinos to swindle.

On the contrary, the *tanguan* went out of their way to make it as clear as possible that there was no cheating. The counting of *tanpi* was done slowly with a long wooden stick, instead of using the hands, because it made it much more difficult to cheat. Similarly, the croupiers before and after any manipulation of cash or *tanpi* always presented both sides of their open hands to the public, again to show that there was no way of cheating.<sup>49</sup> All these factors may explain why *fantan* among the Cantonese population enjoyed the reputation of a gambling game in which, compared with others, cheating was especially difficult and rare.<sup>50</sup>

If legality and trickery by proprietors was not an issue, another potential risk was security. There is no shortage of news items detailing attacks, brawls and robbery taking place in *tanguan*.<sup>51</sup> Among all the venues for socializing, *tanguan* had an obvious predisposition for poor security. The conspicuous presence of money laid on the table for betting was likely to attract thieves. But *tanguan* managers were alert to this potential risk for the customers. Guards (known as *xunchang* 巡場) and, during the most troubled times, soldiers posted at the entrance, were there for the sole purpose of protecting the gamblers against robbers and pickpockets.<sup>52</sup> As a whole, it seems *tanguan* were not especially dangerous places, and violence in *tanguan* may be regarded as a spillover of its presence in Canton society at large. The sources, when they characterize *tanguan* patrons, use expressions like “everyone, regardless of whether young or old, men or women” (*wu fen laoshao nanfu* 無分

47 Wei 1963, pp. 81–82; *Yuehuabao*, 5 October 1930; *Guangzhou shehui zazhi*, vol. 1 (1923), *Zhuan du* 賺賭 section, p. 1.

48 Ho 2005, pp. 195–98.

49 Interview with Mai Zhaoshen, 15 and 18 July 2008; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 25. This is still nowadays a common practice in some casinos in Macao (author's field work).

50 *Shehui heimu*, no. 6 (1933), pp. 4–5; Ho 2005, p. 207.

51 For example: *Shangqi huabao* 1906, no. 2; *Guangzhou gonghebao xiebu*, 21 December 1923; *Huazi ribao*, 22 May 1928; *Yuehuabao*, 23 June 1931, 7 August 1931, 12 November 1931, 29 October 1931, 25 June 1932.

52 Xu 1984, p. 4909; Wei 1963, p. 80; *China Weekly Review*, 24 March 1923, 23 October 1923; Interview with Mai Zhaoshen, 15 and 18 July 2008; *Yuehuabao*, 14 February 1931, 19 June 1931.

老少男婦).<sup>53</sup> Of course this may reflect a degree of rhetorical exaggeration, but several witnesses confirmed that they went to a *tanguan* in the company of an adult of their family when they were children.<sup>54</sup> The presence of children in *tanguan* is also testified by a traveler who entered several *tanguan* in the city of Shantou and mentioned the presence of children in their early teens (*you shijisui xiaohai* 有十幾歲小孩).<sup>55</sup> Also, the presence of women in *tanguan*, a rare sight in the late Qing, became relatively common during the 1930s, another important indication of the relative safety of these places.<sup>56</sup>

## The Social and Economic Impact of *Fantan*

Many clues suggest that *fantan* was widespread and one of if not the most popular gambling games in Guangdong during the early twentieth century. The anti-gambling discourse can of course be suspected of overstating the impact of *fantan*, but it is nevertheless noticeable that among the extremely wide spectrum of gambling games available, they clearly focused their attacks on *fantan* (“the worst of all gambling games”<sup>57</sup>), which suggests that its impact was especially significant. When a local gazetteer in 1910 published a list of the various games in Canton, *fantan* appeared on top of the list.<sup>58</sup> When general prohibitions against gambling were published (for example in 1925 and 1936), *fantan* also appeared first in the relevant lists.<sup>59</sup> The same was true of lists of the gambling games included in Guangdong anti-gambling literature.<sup>60</sup>

Further evidence for the wide popularity of the game may be found in technical terms related to *fantan* (such as *shesanhong*), which occur *verbatim* in Cantonese opera scripts like *Maihua demei* 賣花得美, as well as in news items in the daily press.<sup>61</sup> Also noteworthy is the fact that a high proportion of witnesses of the late Republican period (including women), when asked about *fantan*, were able to recall precisely how it was played.<sup>62</sup> The vernacular language current in Republican Canton reflected how expressions deriving from *fantan* passed into the common language, another obvious indication of the remarkable popularity of *fantan*. For example, the saying *ying fantan gen wei* 贏番攤跟尾 “the winner of *fantan* stakes has followers” was a reference to the unlucky gamblers who watch fortunate individuals and follow them out of the room to beg for a share of their gains.<sup>63</sup>

53 *Guangzhou shehui zazhi*, no. 1 (January 1923), *Zhuandu* section, p. 1.

54 Interview with Liu Su'e 10 July 2006, interview with X, 11 July 2006.

55 *Lüxing zazhi*, vol. 8 (1934), no. 11, p. 42.

56 Wei 1963, p. 77.

57 Li 1921, p. 11; *Jinyandu zhuankan*, no. 1 (September 1937), p. 43.

58 *Nanhai xianzhi*, pp. 586–89.

59 *Guangzhou minguo ribao*, 8 July 1925; *Guangdong sheng jindu zanxing tiaoli* 廣東省禁賭暫行條例, 1 September 1936, reproduced in *Jinyandu zhuankan*, no. 1 (September 1937), p. 74.

60 Guangdongsheng Jindu Weiyuanhui, *Jindu gailian*, pp. 240–41; *Jinyandu zhuankan*, no. 1 (September 1937), pp. 17 and 45.

61 *Maihua demei*, p. 139; *Yuehuabao*, 8 November 1931.

62 Interview with Long Jin, 10 July 2006, interview with Liu Sue, 10 July 2006, interview with X, 11 July 2006, interview with Mai Zhaoshen, 15 and 18 July 2008.

63 Stevens 1902, p. 91.

As a whole, although it is impossible to quantify accurately the proportion of the population that played *fantan* more or less regularly, it seems safe to conclude that *fantan* was very popular. Another sign of its importance was the volume of *fantan* tax revenues collected by the authorities during the times when it was legal. The revenues it produced made up the bulk of gambling taxes overall: in 1909, proceeds from gambling taxes were 4.35 million taels of which no less than 2.95 million (67.8 percent) were *fantan* taxes. As such, *fantan* taxes represented a significant portion of the overall revenues of Guangdong province (37.27 million taels).<sup>64</sup> Under the Republic, the figures are even more impressive: between 1925 and 1931, the *fantan* taxes yielded 68 million yuan of revenue for the province of Guangdong (an average of about 10 million yuan a year). In comparison, the total fiscal revenue for the year 1928 was 59 million yuan.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, the economic impact of *fantan* was certainly not limited to taxation. It also provided a living for many people, be they *fantan* house runners or employees and their families. Running a *fantan* house was a labor-intensive activity. Only the small *tanguan* closed during the night, and they did so only between 1 and 7 a.m. According to a 1936 article, each of the Canton *tanguan*, with three teams of clerks running on 8-hour shifts, had twenty employees, not including the young servants who performed menial jobs (such as cleaning). The article ventured to say that more than 2,000 people in the city made their living directly and indirectly thanks to the *fantan* business.<sup>66</sup> According to a Japanese source dealing with the issue of unemployment in Guangdong, tens of thousands of former employees of those *tanguan* that had closed their doors due to the prohibition of gambling imposed in October 1936 suddenly swelled the ranks of the unemployed, another convincing indication as to the considerable importance of *tanguan* in the overall local economy.<sup>67</sup> Some shops located in the vicinities where *fantan* houses clustered also made a living derived from *fantan*, not only the pawnshops which profited from the presence of unlucky gamblers short of funds, but also peddlers, restaurants and tea houses.<sup>68</sup>

Usually, when one raises the issue of the social and economic impact of *fantan*, as of other gambling games, what generally surfaces are tragedies caused by heavy gamblers sacrificing the interests of their family to their deadly passion for *fantan*. This is not a myth. For example, one newspaper story tells of a sixty-year-old woman living with her son, a coolie fond of gambling who forced her to beg in order to get more money for his passion. One day, she tried to commit suicide after her son gambled away all his salary in a *tanguan* the very day he had received it and sold the rice that had been purchased to feed the family.<sup>69</sup> Such stories testify to the potentially destructive nature of *fantan*. But in fact accounts of tragedies caused by *fantan* turn out to be rather rare in the press. In crime statistics such as the various social surveys published during the 1930s, it is impossible to distinguish the impact of *fantan* from that of other gambling games. Virgil Ho, in analyzing

64 He 1995, p. 546.

65 Zhang 2005, pp. 300, 552; Liu and Wang 1992, pp. 106–08.

66 *Huazi ribao*, 2 September 1936.

67 Andō 1937, p. 381. This estimate concerns all sorts of gambling houses (not only *tanguan*).

68 He 1995, p. 542; Ni 1936, p. 118.

69 *Yuehuabao*, 28 June 1932.

these sources, provides ample evidence that the destructive impact of gambling in Canton was limited. He concludes that it tended to be exaggerated in the anti-gambling literature as well as in the press for the sake of sensationalism.<sup>70</sup> As a whole, considering its obvious popularity, one gets the feeling that moderation prevailed among *fantan* players.

The success of *fantan* in South China must also be understood in terms of its competition with the wide choice of other gambling games. Due to the fact one's gain could not exceed three times the stake, a player of *fantan* could hardly expect to make a fortune, but the game had other specific appeals. In particular, *fantan* was accessible not only because it did not require skill, but also because the minimum amount for a bet was very low. Most importantly, *fantan* was played collectively, and the overall success of *fantan* had not only to do with the game itself, but also with the social context in which it took place, and especially the undoubted appeal of the *fantan* houses.

## THE ALLURING FANTAN HOUSES

We have already mentioned that *fantan* players patronized *tanguan*, but one should underscore that *fantan* was actually played *only* in these places.<sup>71</sup> In Guangdong, there were *tanguan* in important, middle-sized cities and even in villages.<sup>72</sup> For example the village of Jiufenghuang 舊鳳凰 with 750 residents had one *tanguan* in the 1930s.<sup>73</sup>

If we focus on the relatively well documented case of Canton, a city that probably had 600,000 inhabitants at the end of the nineteenth century and more than a million in the 1930s,<sup>74</sup> the estimated number of *tanguan* varied considerably. One often-quoted source mentioned 600 to 700 *tanguan*, most likely an exaggeration, in the last years of the Qing.<sup>75</sup> According to the *Hong Kong Daily Press*, there were about 300 *tanguan* in late 1905, and previous articles in the same publication gave figures of 259 in October 1909 and 368 in March 1911.<sup>76</sup> A missionary periodical claimed 400 *tanguan* in the late 1910s.<sup>77</sup> In contrast with these figures, an estimate of "about one hundred" appears in a 1910 local gazetteer (*fangzhi* 方志).<sup>78</sup> In the following two decades, the figures are much lower: according to a 1927 official report, the number of *tanguan* was only 37,<sup>79</sup> and in

70 Ho 2005, pp. 185–87.

71 For example, two social surveys conducted during the 1930s show that Cantonese players always went to *tanguan* when they were in the mood for *fantan*: Lingnan Shehui Yanjiusuo 1934, p. 109; Wu 1936, p. 48. Moreover, I have so far been unable to find any mention of *fantan* played at home or anywhere outside the *tanguan*. One of the implications of this is that *fantan* seems never to have been played "for fun" (without any money at stake).

72 *Yuefeng* 3:3/4 (1 November 1936), p. 12; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 25.

73 Ho 2005, pp. 182–83.

74 Imbault Huart 1896, pp. 58–59; Guangzhoushi Diaocha Renkou Weiyuanhui 1933 gives a figure of 1,042,630 inhabitants for 1932.

75 Xu 1984, p. 4909.

76 *Hong Kong Daily Press*, 30 November 1905, 25 October 1909, 21 March 1911, quoted in He 1995, p. 542.

77 *The Chinese Recorder*, August 1920, p. 589.

78 *Nanhai xianzhi*, p. 586.

79 Guangzhoushi Shizhengting 1927, p. 9.

the mid-1930s, two different sources put their number at around 50.<sup>80</sup> Finally, the Portuguese Consul provided an estimate of 173 in early 1939, in the very different context of Japanese occupation.<sup>81</sup>

Such a variation from 37 to 400 is puzzling and obviously presents a problem for analysis. We should by no way exclude the possibility of important variations in the number of *fantan* dens during the period under focus and in particular that the low figures of the 1920s and early 1930s were a reflection of reality: at that time, even if *fantan* was legal, it was nevertheless subject to considerable restrictions. In particular, as we have mentioned, between 1925 and 1936, the *tanguan* were forbidden outside the Henan suburb, located on the southern side of the Pearl River. *Tanguan* were also of very different sizes. Therefore, it is possible that the high figures in the 1900s and early 1910s may be due to the proliferation of tiny, low-standard *tanguan*: we are told that such places represented no fewer than 323 *tanguan* among the total of 368 previously mentioned for March 1911.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, even if figures of several hundred *tanguan* may suggest they made up a significant proportion of places of entertainment, the numbers are not necessarily a reliable reflection of their importance. This fact will become more obvious by making clear the huge differences between the categories of *tanguan*.

## A *Tanguan* for Everybody

It is possible to distinguish two standards of *tanguan*. This duality is reflected in the way they were named in Canton: low-standard *tanguan* were called *qianpai* 錢牌, as opposed to high-standard establishments, which employed the same suffix but used prefixes referring to precious metals (silver and gold): *yinpai* 銀牌 and *jinpai* 金牌.<sup>83</sup>

The low-level *tanguan* accepted only small stakes, as small as one copper cash. In the most prestigious places, by contrast, a substantial minimum was required for each stake. Because the stakes could be high, for the sake of safety, it was forbidden to lay one's bets in cash on the table. As in modern casinos, the gamblers had to change their money into tokens issued by the house. Of course, when they finally left the premises, they could change these and any winnings back into cash.<sup>84</sup>

Low-standard *tanguan* were crude and small, sometimes no more than huts made of straw and wood.<sup>85</sup> It seems their sole amenity was the four-foot high (1.2 meter) gaming table. For the common people, the appeal of these *fantan* houses also derived from the shortage of alternative cheap leisure places. Tea houses, also notably inexpensive (a few cash were sufficient for one cup of tea and the right to sit there), were the only alternative,

80 *Huazi ribao*, 2 September 1936; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 22.

81 Mo Jiadu 2000, p. 240. It is necessary to mention this estimate concerns all sorts of gambling houses (not only *tanguan*) but at the time that the population of Guangzhou shrank severely due to the Japanese occupation.

82 He 1995, p. 542.

83 Ni 1936, pp. 118–19; *Judu yuekan*, no. 90 (June 1935), p. 3, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 21; Inoue 1921, vol. 2, pp. 100–01.

84 Xu 1984, p. 4909; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), pp. 24–25; Wei 1963, p. 77.

85 Lingnan Shehui Yanjiusuo 1934, p. 109.

as restaurants, brothels and opium houses all entailed much greater expense.<sup>86</sup> Theatres, cinemas, and even traditional Cantonese opera were costly venues for ordinary people.<sup>87</sup> In that sense, anti-*fantan* advocates were perfectly correct to single out the low cost required to enter the game as a decisive inducement for many people. As a whole, however, the sources do not provide much information about the characteristics of low-standard *qianpai* as their attention was largely drawn to the conspicuous deluxe *yinpai*.

Luxurious *tanguan* were also accessible to ordinary people. As in upscale opium houses,<sup>88</sup> the *yinpai* were characterized by their size and their multi-storied buildings, which made spatial segregation of customers inside the premises possible. They were built with two or three floors. They had only one gaming table, on the ground floor, around which ordinary people stood and staked their money. But it was also possible to watch the procedure through a large opening in the upper floors, sitting comfortably around a sturdy rail or leaning against it. The people in these balconies sent down their stakes in small reed baskets, lowered and raised on ropes by attendants, to the croupiers around the table.<sup>89</sup> In the case of a win, the gains were sent back to the lucky gambler in the same fashion. In this way it can be said that well-to-do customers patronized the same establishments as coolies but without having to rub shoulders with them.<sup>90</sup> The upper floors were beautifully furnished for the comfort and convenience of the patrons. When the authorities decided to close the Cantonese *tanguan* in September 1936, a Hong Kong reporter marveled at the elegant and precious furniture he saw being removed from the *yinpai*.<sup>91</sup> It was also possible to have a meal or a pipe of opium in a separate room, away from the room where *fantan* was played.<sup>92</sup> In many cases, snacks and alcoholic drinks were available.<sup>93</sup> More generally, everything was made to attract and please the patrons, and, exactly as in casinos nowadays, the golden rule was to ensure they felt comfortable, to make them stay as long as possible.

### ***Tanguan* Generate an *ad hoc* Conviviality**

The way *fantan* was played conditioned the spatial and temporal organization of the *tanguan*, which in turn conditioned the interactions between the gamblers. The result was a very specific kind of conviviality which was a crucial part of the game's appeal.

Spatially, the whole *fantan* house was organized around the high gaming table, which was the focus of general attention. Gamblers stood around it, except for the side reserved for the croupiers (see Figure 1). There is no mention or representation of patrons *seated*

86 *Judu yuekan*, no. 23 (July 1928), p. 48.

87 Guangdongshenghui Gong'anju 1934, "Zalu changshi" 雜錄常識 section, p. 53.

88 Paulès 2005, pp. 145–52.

89 *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), pp. 21–22; Wei 1963, pp. 77–78; Lilius 1930, p. 82.

90 It is interesting to note that this was a general rule in Late Qing and Early Republican Canton in these sorts of multi-storied public places: the upper floors were reserved for the use of the most well-to-do patrons. Not only did luxurious *tanguan* and opium houses follow that rule, but also tea houses; Muramatsu 1931, pp. 56–57.

91 *Huazi ribao*, 2 September 1936.

92 *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), pp. 19–21; *Minguo ribao*, 27 July 1931.

93 *Minguo ribao*, 27 July 1931; *Yuehuabao*, 4 July 1930; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), p. 20.

around the table (as they would be in modern Macao casinos where *fantan* survives).<sup>94</sup> Played by crowds of people congregated around a single table, *fantan* produced a lively (*renao* 熱鬧) atmosphere. No patron felt enthusiasm for playing *fantan* at an empty table. To dispel this “empty table syndrome”, which was common during the first minutes following the opening of the *tanguan* in the morning, the *tanguan* had a trick called 圍攤 *weitan*.<sup>95</sup> In that situation, members of the staff joined the game to create the required “lively” atmosphere artificially, thereby inducing newcomers to join in. When a sufficient number of genuine players had joined the game, the staff members progressively withdrew. Modern-day players at Macao gaming tables likewise seek a “heated” atmosphere by congregating at crowded “hot” tables and ignoring empty ones offering the same game only a few steps away.<sup>96</sup>

The temporality of the *tanguan* was based on the rhythm that characterized each draw: betting, counting, distributing gains and collecting the losses, and so on. The climax was the counting, more precisely the crucial time when a sufficient number of *tanpi* had been counted out so that it became possible for the observers to anticipate the final result.<sup>97</sup> The interval between draws was extremely short. Although there is no explicit evidence on this duration, it is likely that, as in Macao nowadays, a draw was available approximately every three minutes.

Certain characteristics of the game can also explain why *fantan* had the distinctive feature of generating not simply excitement, but also pleasurable feelings of empathy among the assembled gamblers. This was possible because the gamblers did not play against each other, as they did, for example, in mah-jong, cards and dice games. The gains were unaffected by how the other players had placed their bets. Another point is the fact that, as in other kinds of gambling,<sup>98</sup> the *fantan* devotees did not understand the game in terms of pure statistical probability. They did not consider the different draws independently from one another (a basic principle of the laws of probability), but as a connected sequence, thereby “narrativizing” the game – this is the reason why *fantan* houses provided a list of the results of draws over the previous few hours to their customers.<sup>99</sup> In particular, they believed that if the result of the draw was the same three consecutive times or more, this number was unlikely to come out in the next draw, or, conversely, that if one number did not come out for a long time, it was more likely to come up in the next draw. As they anticipated the results more or less in a similar way, the players had therefore often the same expectations concerning the upcoming draw.<sup>100</sup> During the

94 *Shishi huabao*, no. 7 (April 1906), p. 6; Franck 1925, p. 264; Gray 1878, p. 386. There is only a single brief mention in the sources of patrons *sitting* around the table: *Minguo ribao*, 27 July 1931.

95 *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), pp. 22–23.

96 As described in a recent article; see Eadington and Siu 2007, p. 2.

97 Chen 1990, p. 85; *Yuehuabao*, 7 August 1931.

98 Dickerson 1996, pp. 158–62.

99 *Jindai Zhongguo jianghu miwen*, vol. 1, p. 400; Lilius 1930, pp. 83–84. Zhong 1949, p. 51.

100 This principle still governs the way *fantan* gamblers place their bets nowadays in Macao; author's field work in Macao, July 2008 and July 2009.

excitement of the counting of the *tanpi*, playing *fantan* gave a strong feeling of “facing fate” collectively.

## FANTAN AND PEOPLE’S FATE

Probably for many ordinary people, not only heavy gamblers, *fantan* was important also because it influenced how they perceived their own life and destiny.

In the late Qing period, the people often included the following phrase in their New Year greetings to friends: “May you alone win the Weixing lottery stakes (*Weixing du de* 圍姓獨得!)”<sup>101</sup> The expectation of a gambler who bought a lottery ticket was not only excitement, but also the possibility of changing his or her fate by suddenly becoming rich. This dream was purchased at modest cost. By contrast, *fantan* did not provide the prospect of a great gain with a modest stake. Let us take the example of an initial bet of one yuan for a gain of 2,600 yuan. In the case of *fantan*, with an initial bet of one yuan, it would have required six successive wins when betting *fan* and keeping all one’s money on the table (odds of 1 in 4,096). Intuitively, one had a much better perception of what odds of 1 in 4,096 meant when playing *fantan* than when buying a lottery ticket (in the latter case, there was only one draw, so it seemed “easier”).<sup>102</sup> In terms of pure probability, the chances are exactly the same, but people simply did not perceive it in the same way.

We must keep in mind that most players preferred ways of betting (typically *sheshanhong*) that only created expectations of a small gain in comparison to the stake.<sup>103</sup> It seems obvious that with a limited amount of money, players could not and did not expect to change their lives by playing *fantan*. But this is not to say that *fantan* was never played to change one’s life: in some cases *fantan* offered a riskier alternative of its own, which took the form of a double or quit: “A better life or no life at all.” In that case, the possibility of a better life was far from unrealistic. In the press, one can find a significant number of similar stories: somebody (often a shop clerk) having temporarily in hand a significant sum of money that did not belong to him headed to a *fantan* house to gamble it. Due to the specificity of the game of *fantan*, he had a reasonable chance to quickly double or triple the sum at his disposal. If he succeeded, he could then discreetly return the money he had borrowed and keep the remaining gain, which would ensure him a better life.<sup>104</sup> If he was unlucky and lost the money (the news items of course mention this outcome more frequently), he then committed suicide.<sup>105</sup>

In considering such a situation, it is important to bear in mind that attitudes toward suicide are culturally determined. In the West it tends to be considered an abnormality, or at the very least not an acceptable and sensible alternative based on rational choice, as a result of the centuries-long influence of Christianity that considers suicide a deadly sin. If we set aside this prejudice, the behavior of these people was by no means absurd.

101 Stevens 1902, p. 93.

102  $1 \rightarrow 3.7 \rightarrow 13.7 \rightarrow 51.3 \rightarrow 189.8 \rightarrow 702.2 \rightarrow 2598.2$  (this calculation – decimals – was simplified for the sake of clarity);  $4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4 = 4,096$ .

103 Interview with Mai Zhaoshen, 15 and 18 July 2008.

104 Two examples of these success stories: *Yuehuabao*, 11 March 1930, 17 March 1930.

105 *Yuehuabao*, 3 July 1932, 17 July 1932, 21 June 1933; *Guangzhou gonghebao xiebu*, 22 December 1923.



Suicide should not necessarily be considered as the last resort for people driven out of their minds by despair because they had lost all their money and found themselves at an impasse. It could be in some cases an accepted alternative *before* the game took place.

Of course one could conjecture that certain people did not initially consider suicide an option and were actually induced to such action by superstition, for example the belief that, for some reason, it was a lucky day for them, or that they had a sudden decisive intuition. But generally, “superstitions” associated with *fantan* took the shape of well-considered risk-limiting “do not” prescriptions rather than recipes to guarantee a gain. One of the most frequent recommendations, for example, was to withdraw after an important series of successive wins.<sup>106</sup>

This is not to say that in Guangdong society of that time there was no prevention against suicide. But for people perfectly aware of the risks they were taking, it seems likely that suicide could be a consciously accepted alternative in a rational choice rather than the fate of naïve and foolish people blinded by superstitious belief. Another very moving news story illustrates this point.

A man and a prostitute were deeply in love. He paid a fixed sum to the madam so that she would let the prostitute live with him. But the madam, aware of their mutual feelings, was afraid that they might run away together, and in order to avoid that risk, she decided to force him to buy the prostitute outright. Unfortunately, the lovers realized they had only half the required sum at their disposal. So they decided to try to double their capital by playing *fantan*. Fate turned against them and they lost the entire sum. They then rented a room in a hotel and committed suicide together by swallowing opium.<sup>107</sup> In this case, the sum of money that was risked did not belong to somebody else, but the couple considered their separation to be an unacceptable alternative, in much the same way as shop clerks had to face the consequences of having betrayed the confidence of their bosses by stealing the equivalent of several months or even years worth of pay.

*Fantan*, as we mentioned, originated from a divination practice before evolving into a form of gambling. But even in this way, it retained part of its primitive function, a way for ordinary people to test their fate. In most cases, it remained harmless, but as in some of the examples we have just seen, it could become a test in which the player's own life was at stake.

## CONCLUSION

In the eyes of Late Qing and Republican South China administrative and political elites, who were eager to promote hard work and frugality, gambling was not only a total waste of time; it was also a corruption of public morals. But its suppression was also problematical for these elites because the taxation of gambling had become a vital source of income for the authorities. As scholarly research on gambling has so far been based on the traditional sources produced by these elites, it has, unsurprisingly, focused on gambling both as a social pathology and as a source of income.

All the findings in this article, which focuses on the highly popular game of *fantan*, indicate that, in this respect, popular culture was not deeply influenced by the elite

<sup>106</sup> Lilius 1930, pp. 28–29; Zhong 1949, pp. 34–35; *Judu yuekan*, no. 91 (August 1935), pp. 20–21.

<sup>107</sup> *Huazi ribao*, 5 September 1927.

anti-gambling stance. Tragedies caused by excessive *fantan* gambling existed but were not so frequent. Perhaps this negative side was counterbalanced by the fact it provided a living for many people. Indeed, *fantan* could never have had such economic importance if it had not been a widely accepted practice.

The most critical shortcoming of the conventional view of gambling is that it implicitly considers gamblers as passive victims, deceived by unscrupulous gambling operators. Yet playing *fantan* was a positive choice, and as simple a game as it may have been, it was clearly something enjoyable. *Fantan* houses (*tanguan*), found everywhere including the countryside, were widely patronized, including by women and children. People enjoyed frequenting them because they were not especially dangerous venues and had a lively (*renao*) atmosphere, with everyone shouting and loudly commenting on the process of the draw. But, more importantly, they generated a specific kind of conviviality, which derived not only from the excitement due to the money at stake but also from feelings of empathy among participants consequent upon the way they collectively anticipated the results of the draw.

By underestimating the role of *fantan*, one runs the risk of missing not only a socially significant activity, but also something that more than superficially influenced the way commoners perceived their own lives. A most convincing point is that *fantan* contributed to the personal expectations of many people even if they were not heavy gamblers.

It is likely the impact of *fantan* was not necessarily representative of other gambling games. On the economic and social side, it is possible that its impact was stronger than that of other games not only because it was the most popular, but also because *fantan* went on day and night throughout the year, whereas lottery draws (for example) occurred a maximum of four times daily. Only *fantan* could generate group conviviality as it alone was played in specifically dedicated *tanguan*. Nevertheless, a reconsideration of all kinds of gambling games at grassroots level, as well as reconstructing the perceptions of the players themselves, could offer significant revisions not only from the perspective of gambling scholarship, but also seminal insights for a more complete picture of people's daily life and mentalities.

## REFERENCES

- Andō 1937  
Andō Gensetsu 安藤元節. *Nanshi taikan* 南支大觀 (“A Panorama of South China”). Tokyo: Nihon Gōdō Tsūshisha, 1937.
- Canton Gazette*  
*Canton Gazette*. (English language newspaper, Canton, November 1923 to July 1938).
- Chao'an xianshanghui rikan*  
*Chao'an xianshanghui rikan* 潮安縣商會日刊 (“Chao'an Daily Business News”).
- Chen 2009  
Chen Xiyuan 陳熙遠. “Cong madio dao majiang, xiaowanyi yu da chuantong jiaozhi de yi duan lishi yinyuan” 從馬吊到麻將，小玩意與大傳統交織的一段歷史因緣 (“Madio and Mahjong in Popular Culture and Elite Discourse”). *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 80 (2009), pp. 137–96.
- Chen 1990  
Chen Yiguang 陳以光. “Guangzhouwan duguan ceji” 广州湾賭館側記 (“A Glimpse at Gambling in Guangzhouwan”). In *Zhanjiang wenshiziliao* 湛江文史資料 (“Historical Materials of Zhanjiang”), pp. 81–85.

- Zhanjiang: Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi Zhanjiangshi Weiyuanhui Wenshiziliao Yanjiu Weiyuanhui, 1990.
- Chinese Repository*  
*Chinese Repository* (English language weekly). Canton, May 1832 to 1846.
- Circumnavigator 1912  
 Circumnavigator (pseud.). "Macao, the Monte Carlo of the Orient." *Travel* (June 1912), pp. 40–43.
- Copy of All Correspondence* 1869  
*Copy of All Correspondence, Materials, Replies to Memorials, and Papers Relating to the Ordinances of the Legislative Council of Hong Kong, whereby a Government Form of Gambling Houses has been Created in that Colony, or Relating to the Revenues Derived or to be Derived from the Same, and the Appropriation of Such Revenue*. London: Harrison and Son, 1869.
- Culin 1891  
 Culin, Stewart. *The Gambling Games of the Chinese in America. Fan t'an: the Game of Repeatedly Spreading Out, and Pak kop Piu or, the Game of White Pigeon Ticket*. Series in Philology, Literature and Archaeology. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1891.
- Dalingdong ribao*  
*Dalingdong ribao* 大嶺東日報 ("East of Guangdong Daily").
- Dickerson 1996  
 Mark Dickerson. "Why 'Slots' Equals 'Grind' in Any Language. The Cross-cultural Popularity of the Slot Machine." In *Gambling Cultures. Studies in History and Interpretation*, ed. Jan McMillen, pp. 152–66. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Doolittle 1865  
 Doolittle, Justus. *Social Life of the Chinese*. New York: Harper, 1865.
- Eadington and Siu 2007  
 Eadington, William and Siu, Ricardo. "Between Law and Custom – Examining the Interaction between Legislative Change and the Evolution of Macao's Casino Industry." *International Gambling Studies* 7:1 (April 2007), pp. 1–28.
- FO 228  
 Foreign Office Archives (Kew, Great Britain).
- Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi 1923  
*Foshan zhongyi xiangzhi* 佛山忠義鄉志 ("Accurate Gazetteer of Foshan District"), 1923.
- Franck 1925  
 Franck, Harry. *Roving through Southern China*. New York: The Century Company, 1925.
- Friend of China*  
*Friend of China*. (Monthly) London: Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade, from 1875.
- Ge 1995  
 Ge Chunyuan 戈春源. *Dubo shi* 賭博史 ("History of Gambling"). Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1995.
- Ge 2005  
 Ge Chunyuan 戈春源. *Zhongguo jindai dubo shi* 中國近代賭博史 ("History of Gambling in Modern China"). Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 2005.
- Gray 1878  
 Gray, John Henry. *China, a History of the Laws, Manners, and Customs of the People*. London: Macmillan, 1878.
- Guangdong qunbao*  
*Guangdong qunbao* 廣東羣報 ("Journal of the Guangdong Masses"), Guangdong.
- Guangdongsheng Gong'anju 1934  
 Guangdongsheng Gong'anju 廣東省公安局. *Shimin yaolan* 市民要覽 ("An Overview of the City Population"). Canton: 1934.
- Guangdongsheng Jindu Weiyuanhui 1936  
 Guangdongsheng Jindu Weiyuanhui 廣東省禁賭委員會. *Jindu gailan* 禁賭概覽 ("General Survey on the Suppression of Gambling"). Canton: 1936.
- Guangzhou gonghebao xiebu*  
*Guangzhou gonghebao xiebu* 廣州共和報籌部 ("Canton Public News").
- Guangzhou minguo ribao*  
*Guangzhou minguo ribao* 廣州民國日報 ("Guangzhou Republican Daily").
- Guangzhou shehui zazhi*  
*Guangzhou shehui zazhi* 廣州社會雜誌 ("Cantonese Society Magazine").

- Guangzhoushi Diaocha Renkou Weiyuanhui 1933  
Guangzhoushi Diaocha Renkou Weiyuanhui 廣州市調查人口委員會. *Guangzhoushi ershiyi nian renkou diaocha baogaoshu* 廣州市二十一年人口調查報告書 (“Guangzhou Municipality Report on the 1932 Census”). Canton, 1933.
- Guangzhoushi Shizhengting 1927  
Guangzhoushi Shizhengting 廣州市市政廳. *Guangzhoushi shizhengting shehui diaocha gubao, shehui buliang shiyue* 廣州市市政廳社會調查股報, 社會不良事業 (“Report of the Social Enquiry Commission of the Guangzhou Municipal Government on Bad Customs”). Canton, 1927.
- Guowen zhoubao  
*Guowen zhoubao* 國聞週報 (“National News Weekly”). Tianjin.
- Guo and Xiao 1996  
Guo Shuanglin 郭雙林 and Xiao Meihua 肖梅花. *Zhongguo dubo shi* 中國賭博史 (“History of Chinese Gambling”). Taipei: Wenjin Chubanshe, 1996.
- He 1995  
He Hanwei 何漢威. “Qingmo Guangdong de dubo yu dushui” 清末廣東的賭博與賭稅 (“Gambling and Gambling Taxes in Late Qing Guangdong”). *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 66:2 (1995), pp. 489–557.
- He 1996  
He Hanwei 何漢威. “Qingmo Guangdong de dushang” 清末廣東的賭商 (“Gambling Farmers in Late Qing Guangdong”). *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 67:1 (1996), pp. 61–108.
- He 2002  
He Hanwei 何漢威. “Guangdong jinshi dushang Liu Xuexun (1855–1935)” 廣東進士賭商劉學詢 (“Rediscovering the Life of Liu Xuexun, a Cantonese Franchised Gambling Operator with a Jinshi Degree”). *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 73:2 (2002), pp. 303–54.
- Ho 2005  
Ho, Virgil. *Understanding Canton: Rethinking Popular Culture in the Republican Period*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hu 2006  
Hu Gen 胡根. “Aomen bocaiye caoqi de hetong faze” 澳門博彩業早期的合同罰則 (“Penalty Clauses in Early Gaming Contracts in Macao”). *Journal of Macao Polytechnic Institute* 澳門理工學報 4 (2006), pp. 10–18.
- Huazi ribao  
*Huazi ribao* 華字日報 (“Huazi Daily”), Hong Kong.
- Huc 1854  
Huc, Évariste-Régis. *L'Empire chinois faisant suite à l'ouvrage intitulé Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie et le Thibet*. Paris: De Gaume, 1854 (2nd edn).
- Imbault Huart 1896  
Imbault Huart, C. “La population de Canton en juin 1895” (“Canton Population in June 1895”). *T'oung Pao* 7:2 (1896), pp. 58–59.
- Inoue 1921  
Inoue Kōbai 井上紅梅. *Shina fūzoku* 支那風俗 (“The Customs of China”). Shanghai: Nihondō Shoten, 1921.
- Jindai Zhongguo jianghu miwen 1997  
*Jindai Zhongguo jianghu miwen* 近代中国江湖秘闻. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Renmin Chubanshe, 1997.
- Jinyandu zhuankan  
*Jinyandu zhuankan* 禁煙賭專刊 (“Special Publication about Gambling and Opium Suppression”). Nanjing.
- Judu yuekan  
*Judu yuekan* 拒毒月刊 (“Anti-drugs Monthly”). Shanghai.
- Li 1921  
Li Peisheng 李培生. *Guixi juyue zhi youlai ji qi jingguo* 桂係據粵之由來及其經過 (“The Origin and Course of the Guangxi Clique Occupation of Guangdong”). Canton, n.p., 1921.
- Lilius 1930  
Lilius, Aleko. *I Sailed with Chinese Pirates*. London: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1930.
- Lingnan Shehui Yanjiusuo 1934  
Lingnan Shehui Yanjiusuo 嶺南社會研究所. “Shanan danmin diaocha baogao” 沙南蛋民調查報告. *Lingnan Xuebao* 嶺南學報 3:1 (January 1934), special issue.

- Liu and Wang 1992  
Liu Fujing 劉付靖 and Wang Mingkun 王明坤. *Jiu Guangdong yanduchang* 舊廣東煙毒娼 (“Prostitution, Gambling and Opium in Old Guangdong”). Hong Kong: Zhonghua Shuju, 1992.
- Luo and Xu 1994  
Luo Xinben 羅新本 and Xu Rongsheng 許蓉生. *Zhongguo gudai dubo xisu* 中国古代賭博习俗 (“Traditions of Gambling in China Ancient Times”). Xi’an: Shanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1994.
- Lüxing zazhi*  
*Lüxing zazhi* 旅行雜誌 (“Travel”). Shanghai.
- Macgowan 1907  
Macgowan, John. *Sidelights on Chinese Life*. London: Kegan Paul Trench Trubner & Co, 1907.
- Maihua demei*  
*Maihua demei* 賣花得美 (“Sell a Flower, Get a Beauty”). Canton: Shezili, s.d., p. 1, excerpted in Lam Fung-sham. “Er, sanshi niandai yueju juban yanjiu 二三十年代粵劇劇本研究” (“A Study of Cantonese Opera Scripts of the 1920s and 1930s”). Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hong Kong, 1997, p. 139.
- Matsumoto 1947  
Matsumoto Sökichi 松本鎗吉. *Chügokujin no tokusei to seikatsu* 中國人的特性と生活 (“Chinese People’s Life and Characteristics”). Tokyo: Meirin Kaku, 1947.
- Minguo ribao*  
*Minguo ribao* 民國日報 (“Republican Daily”). Shanghai.
- Mo Jiadu 2000  
Mo Jiadu 莫嘉度 (Vasco Martins Morgado). *Cong Guangzhou toudi zhanzheng* 从广州透视战争 (“The War Seen from Guangzhou”). Shanghai: Shanghai Shehuikexueyuan Chubanshe, 2000.
- Muramatsu 1931  
Muramatsu Shōfu 村松梢風. *Nankani asobite* 南華に遊びて (“A Journey in South China”). Tokyo: Osaka Yago, 1931.
- Nanghai xianzhi* 1974  
*Nanghai xianzhi* 南海縣誌 (“Nanghai Gazetteer”). Taipei: Chengwen Chubanshe, 1974 [1st edn, 1910].
- Ni 1936  
Ni Xiyang 倪錫英. *Guangzhou* 廣州. Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936.
- Paulès 2005  
Paulès, Xavier. “High-class Opium Houses in Canton during the 1930s.” *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 45 (2005), pp. 145–52.
- Riis 1971  
Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Dover Publications, 1971 (Rpt. of 1st edn, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890).
- Shangqi huabao*  
*Shangqi huabao* 賞奇畫報 (“Enjoying the Strange, Illustrated”). Canton.
- Shehui heimu*  
*Shehui heimu* 社會黑幕 (“The Scandalous Side of Society”). Canton.
- Shenbao*  
*Shenbao* 申報. Shanghai.
- Shi 1985  
Shi Hongbao 施鴻保. *Min zaji* 閩雜記 (“Random Notes about Fujian”). Fuzhou: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 1985 [Rpt. of *Shenbao* edn, 1878].
- Shishi huabao*  
*Shishi huabao* 時事畫報 (“Current Events Illustrated”). Canton.
- Smith 1991  
Smith, Richard. *Fortune-tellers and Philosophers. Divination in Traditional Chinese Society*. Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1991.
- South China Morning Post* Sun 2005  
Sun Shunlin 孫順霖. *Zhongguoren de du* 中國人的賭 (“Gambling of the Chinese”). Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou Zhongyuan Nongmin Chubanshe, 2005.
- Stevens 1902  
Stevens, H. J. *Cantonese Apothegms*. Canton: E-Shing, 1902.
- Thomson 1899  
Thomson, John. *Through China with a Camera*. London: Harper, 1899.

Wei Gong 1963

Wei Gong 衛恭. "Guangzhou duhai: fantan, shanpiao, baigepiao" 廣州賭害 番攤, 山票, 白鴿票 ("The Gambling Scourge in Canton: *fantan*, *shanpiao* and *baigepiao*"). *Guangzhou wenshi ziliao* 廣州文史資料 ("Historical Materials of Canton") vol. 9, Canton, 1963, pp. 62–94.

Wu 1936

Wu Ruilin 伍銳麟. "三水河口蛋家調查報告 Sanshui hekou danjia diaocha baogao" ("Report of a Survey on the Danjia of Sanshui"). *Lingnan xuebao* 嶺南學報 5:2 (July 1936), pp. 1–53.

*Wuxian manhua*

*Wuxian manhua* 五仙漫畫 ("The Five Immortals Illustrated"). Canton.

Xu 1984

Xu Ke 徐珂. *Qingbaileichao* 清稗類鈔 ("Classified Collection of Qing Notes"). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984 [Rpt. of 1st edn, Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1917].

Yang 1990

Yang Yinshen 楊蔭深. *Zhongguo youyi yanjiu* 中國遊藝研究 ("Research on Chinese Amusement"). Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1990 [1st edn, 1935].

*Yuefeng*

*Yuefeng* 粵風 ("Wind of Guangdong"). Canton.

*Yuehuabao*

*Yuehuabao* 越華報 ("Yuehua News"). Canton.

Zhang 2003

Zhang Ning 張寧. "Shi yundong haishi dubo? Paogou lunshu yu xiandai Shanghai de chengxing" 是運動還是賭博? 跑狗論述與現代上海的成型 ("Sport or Gambling? Greyhound Racing Discourse and the Formation of Modern Shanghai"). *Bulletin of the Institute of Modern History Academia Sinica* 中央研究院近代史研究所集刊 42 (2003), pp. 73–123.

Zhang 2005

Zhang Xiaohui 張曉輝. *Minguo shiqi Guangdong shehui jingji shi* 民國時期廣東社會經濟史 ("History of the Economy and Society of Guangdong during the Republican Period"). Canton: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2005.

Zhao 2001

Zhao Yinglan 趙英蘭. *Minguo shenghuo lüeying* 民國生活掠影 ("A Glimpse of Life in Republican China"). Shenyang: Shenyang Chubanshe, 2001.

Zhong 1949

Zhong Zhongjin 鐘重金. *Guangzhou heishehui miji* 廣州黑社會秘紀 ("The Mysteries of Canton Secret Societies"). Canton: Guangmin Tushushe, 1949.