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ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

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APA Citation: Fitzgerald, R., & Johnson, M. R. (2022). Mind the gap: The fantasy and façades of Macao's themed resort casinos. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 3(2), 185-193.

<https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs144>

### Article History:

Received July 2021

Accepted June 2022

Published July 2022

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## Mind the Gap: The Fantasy and Façades of Macao's Themed Resort Casinos

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**Abstract:** This article is a commentary by Richard Fitzgerald and Mark R. Johnson, written for the Philosophy and Gambling: Reflections from Macao special issue of *Critical Gambling Studies*.

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs144>

The [Great Exhibition of 1851](#) held at the Crystal Palace in London was a showcase of the British Empire designed to demonstrate to the world Britain's role as an industrial powerhouse. Britain was at the height of its power and the event attracted exhibits of art and colonial raw materials from around the world, but most prominently from the four corners of the British Empire. The showcase of industry and cultures of the Empire bore testament to the power of Britain and its dominion around the globe where the sun never set, and it was always over the yardarm in some corner of the empire. The essence of the Great Exhibition was to display the power of Britain by bringing the world to London. In doing so the exhibition showcased Britain as the powerhouse of the global industrial economy, and presented its citizens and the newly emerging wealthy this power through the range of the goods produced.

Some one hundred and seventy years later China is now experiencing a similar boom, with the economy experiencing sustained growth and projected to overtake the US before 2030. The resulting rise in incomes lifting many out of poverty and creating a new middle class has also created an empire-sized population with money to spare, and a thirst for international travel, high end shopping, and gambling. However, while high end shopping is possible, international travel, due to the pandemic, is not - and on top of this there are no casinos in Mainland China. However, in Macao all these things come together and the territory has been developed specifically to cater to these particular desires. As a Special Administrative Region (SAR), Mainland visitors require a visa to enter

Macao. There are 41 casinos operating 24/7 and, along with massive gaming floors, each of the casinos is littered with the same high-end designer shops. No matter which casino you are in, you can always get a Louis Vuitton bag. Unlike Hong Kong - its sister SAR across the Pearl Delta - which represents the international engagement of business, trade, commerce and financial services, Macao represents a place of fun and leisure, a holiday destination, and the amusement park of China.

A central part of this amusement park is the context of Macao as an "exotic" destination with its still visible and highly promoted Portuguese heritage sanitized and colonized for tourists with pastel-colored buildings, street signs in Portuguese, black and white calçada paving, and the promise of authentic Portuguese food. On top of this, while many US casino operators are currently 'de-theming' their casinos (Curtis, 2017), Macao continues to embrace the practice of theming with open arms, with the two latest casinos to open in 2021 being the Londoner Macao themed on swinging 60's London with a Houses of Parliament exterior façade, and the Lisboa Palace, which is designed to look like a massive European palace. Along with these 2021 casinos, Macao has the Venetian, which is themed on mediaeval Venice, the Parisian, which is themed on 18th Century Paris, and Studio City, which is themed on 1930's Hollywood. The themed casinos are all adjacent to each other along what is called the Cotai Strip; Looking down the Cotai Strip it is then possible to see Venice, Paris, Hollywood, London, and a European palace, all in the same place.

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*The Cotai Strip. Studio City, Parisian, Venetian with the Londoner to the right.*<sup>2</sup>

The themes of these casinos are not random but represent iconic and desirable international tourist destinations for Chinese tourists, reproduced in Macao. In Macao there are no 'Chinese' themed casinos either by country, landmark, mythology or cities, such as the Orleans or the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas. In the theming of the casinos there are no domestic locations or references, such as the Great Wall or the Forbidden City, with the overall emphasis in Macao being instead on *international* travel. In this way tourists not only cross the border to enter Macao from Mainland China into what has become a desirable place to visit with its visible European heritage, but once in Macao there are more desirable international destinations to visit, offering the illusion of global travel in one location. Once in Macao the hotels and services are designed around luxury and opulence with the routine level of service making even the budget traveler feel important. While Hong Kong engages in global trade, Macao attracts the globe to it by building massive cathedrals to gambling where people can see, marvel and enjoy the fruits of China's economic power. These casinos can be seen to represent the ability of China to attract the world to the geographically convenient and the culturally and linguistically familiar Macao. The idea of "bringing these destinations" to Macao is also a central

theme of the advertising. When promoting the impending opening of the [Parisian Casino in 2016, the advertising](#) focused on how it was capturing the authentic Paris and Parisian way of life and replicating it in Macao, in essence claiming that its designers have been to Paris and brought it back to you, so you don't have to go. Similarly, the [Londoner was advertised](#) via David Beckham going to various places in London and putting a sticker that said "To Macao" on various objects and buildings.

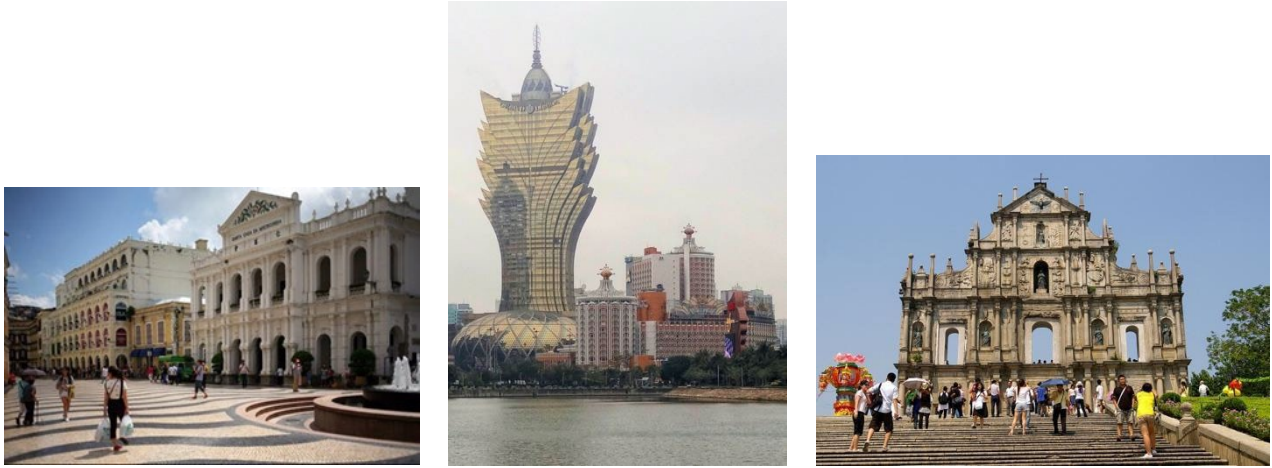
### **Macao, A City of Façades**

Of course, until recently, many Chinese did travel the globe, becoming a major tourist population to be catered for. However, if one currently can't travel due to the pandemic-related travel restriction, or one lacks the time or money to travel to these exotic destinations, Macao offers the consumer these destinations just a short walk or bus ride across the border. The border between Macao and Zhuhai is one of the busiest in the world with just shy of 40 million visitors in 2019, and the main Gongbei land border between Macao and Zhuhai records up to 500,000 people crossing the border on any one day. The population of Macao is around 650,000, so when combined with the rest of the daily

<sup>2</sup> All photos, unless otherwise noted, were taken by the first author, Richard Fitzgerald.

border crossings this almost doubles the population in a day. With the main source of gamers coming from China and the government taking over 40% of gaming revenue in tax (with gaming tax being 78% of the entire Macao economy)<sup>3</sup>, it is not hard to see why ensuring the

border between China and Macao is open and safe, while keeping everyone else out has been a priority during the pandemic.



*Senado Square Macao<sup>4</sup>, The original Lisboa and Grand Lisboa<sup>5</sup>, Ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral, Macao<sup>6</sup>*

As mentioned, there are over 40 casinos in Macao ranging from older and smaller ones to the massive new constructions arranged along and around the Cotai Strip. The first modern casino, the Lisboa, must have seemed like it had landed from outer space, especially with its light of multiple-colored circles reminiscent of the arrival of the (voice of the) [Mysterons from Captain Scarlet](#). Yet it is now dwarfed by its sister hotel the Grand Lisboa, with - whatever one thinks of the architectural style - a striking gravity-defying design based on Brazilian show girls' costumes. This highly distinctive building now dominates the surrounding area and has become an icon of Macao.

However, despite such a striking design, like many of the casinos in the main downtown area of Macao the design of the building retains the familiar architecture of many world casinos as large glass-clad buildings of gold and silver. They are arresting and spectacular but not really out of the ordinary, architecturally, as *casinos* (Simpson, 2018). This is also the case inside these casinos where the gaming floor takes up the biggest space on ground floors, with restaurants and hotel rooms above. Moreover, these casinos are mostly designed as mainly casinos, with little attention to families or children. The main aim is to keep the gambler at the table while making them feel special through excellent service and providing ways of

spending any money won on gold, jewelry, designer handbags or manbags, and fine restaurants.

### **The Resort Casinos**

While the rapid development of the casino industry in Macao is fascinating with many stories of wealth, corruption, shady characters and gangsters willing to shoot up cars and casinos in pursuit of the lucrative money lending and laundering services, Macao has begun to seek to diversify the casino industry and provide a more family-friendly face. Since 2007 the development of resort casinos was encouraged to diversify the economy, being designed to also cater to the mass tourist market with large shopping malls, water parks, arenas able to host large events, convention centers for trade shows and children's entertainment. The result of this was the creation of 'Cotai', a strip of swamp between the islands of Taipa and Coloane south of the main Macao peninsula where the Lisboa casinos are located. In joining these two islands Macao named the land 'Cotai' and it was here that the new experiment in family friendly casinos was initiated through building the massive resort casinos. The strip, modeled on the Las Vegas strip, began with the opening of the unusually large Venetian in 2007, the largest casino in the world; The strip area is now nearing completion with the opening of the Lisboa Palace, the third of the franchise, in 2021. This development on the

<sup>3</sup> Macao SAR Government Portal. "Statistics". <https://www.gov.mo/en/content/statistics/>

<sup>4</sup> Image credit: Paolobon140, Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La\\_Santa\\_Casa\\_da\\_Misericordia,\\_in\\_Largo\\_do\\_Senado,\\_Macao.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_Santa_Casa_da_Misericordia,_in_Largo_do_Senado,_Macao.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> Image credit: Bjorn Christian Torrissen. Wikimedia Commons. [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Lisboa](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Lisboa)

<sup>6</sup> Image credit: Jakub Halun. Wikimedia Commons.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20091003\\_Macau\\_Cathedral\\_of\\_Saint\\_Paul\\_6542.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:20091003_Macau_Cathedral_of_Saint_Paul_6542.jpg)



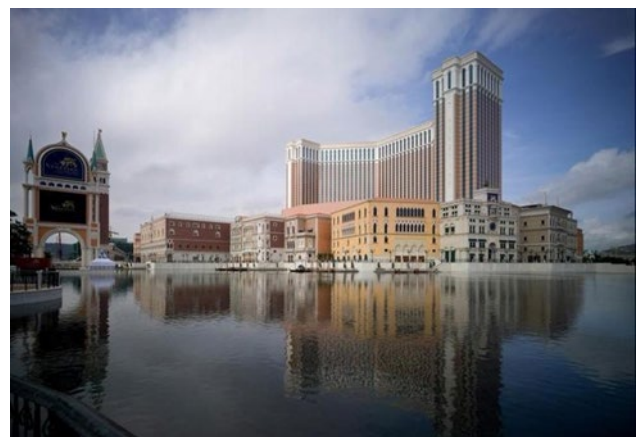
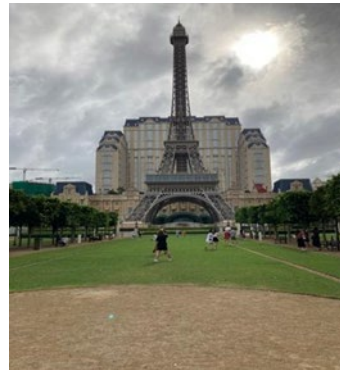
Cotai strip has now become a major tourist hub with mass crowds moving through and between the casinos. However, unlike the areas surrounding St Paul's ruins or the narrow walkways of Old Taipa Village, this strip was designed for mass movement both inside the buildings and between them. The wide pavements and large passageways linking casinos complement the design within the buildings to allow people to move through and between buildings in air-conditioned comfort. Thus, although based on and hosting some familiar Las Vegas casino franchises, the themed casinos serve a different purpose than in the US, with the selling point of the themed casinos to bring Venice, Paris, London, Hollywood, Europe to you. Their purpose is to provide a fantasy world, their design an idealized façade to envelop the shopper and the family, rather than the gamer, as the themes are only rarely carried into the gaming floor.

### The Façades and Fantasy of Space, Place and Time

While there is a central strip along which many of the casinos explored in this article are located, the Cotai strip is not really a strip but arranged in a grid layout

with other casinos either side of the strip. These casinos tend to be of the same ilk of the big glass boxes, except for the massive Lisboa Palace that seems like a whole town across from the main cities on the strip. Aside from the Lisboa Palace, the resort themed casinos are also mostly connected to each other through air-conditioned walkways or a short walk across a road. So, from the medieval streets of Venice, tourists can walk to 18th century Paris, the swinging streets of London, or 1930's Hollywood, in minutes.

Having everything on your doorstep obviously cuts down on costs, long flights and immigration lines, and avoids the traffic congestion, fear of terrorism and racism abroad, and now Covid. While each of the casinos is designed around different locations, through their idealized façades, they also exist in different historical periods, providing not only the façade of place outside and inside but also a temporal façade that tourists can wander through and be part of. It is then interesting to take a walk through the casinos to examine how they reproduce and represent an ambient time and place, beginning with the first and arguably the most complete reproduction: the Venetian Macao.



*The Lisboa Palace from the Champ de Mars, The Parisian also from the Champ de Mars, The Londoner and The Venetian<sup>7</sup>*

### The Venetian, Macao

When you visit Macao, the place to start on your world tour is arguably the Venetian. It is the oldest of the themed casinos, has the oldest setting - medieval

Venice - is centrally located, and is the largest. The Venetian has one of the biggest indoor spaces in the world and undoubtedly the one that shows off the themed casinos most impressively. The first to open on

<sup>7</sup> Image credit for The Venetian: Wikimedia Creative Commons.

the strip in 2007, the Venetian boasts a spectacular design on the outside with the façade of medieval Venice including the Rialto Bridge, Doges Palace and St Mark's Tower.

Impressive as the outside is, it is inside where the carefully curated 'wow' factor comes into force. It is here that groups of tourists on cheap day tours are guided through the buildings with their badges identifying their number and the particular tour group as they are led in a Chinese dragon formation by the guide with a stick held high, usually with some kind of small soft toy attached to the top. Whichever way you enter the Venetian, either from the front from the Cotai Strip or the rear from the bus and taxi park, you are confronted with a spectacular vision. From the front you enter into a massive high gold gilded corridor with vaulted

ceilings with classical paintings in the style of the Sistine Chapel. From the rear you are guided to a large escalator that as you ascend and look back reveals the massive gaming floor. From this view you reach the top of the escalator and step into St. Mark's Square where your senses are further confused by the sky above your head. It takes a moment to remember that you are indoors and that the sky must be painted on the very high roof. This is replicated many times a day as tourists encounter it for the first time before regaining their senses to begin taking pictures and filming. What makes the Venetian unique is that unlike leaving it at one or two 'wow' moments it creates a series of 'wow' moments as you move through the building and which continually surprise you and puts you in awe of the attention to detail that envelops you.



*'Wow' moments in the Venetian.*

Once you have got over the indoor sky in St. Mark's Square, you might look to the left and right and see that the architectural theme continues both ways. The black cobbled streets underfoot, the clouded sky above, and the medieval buildings housing the shops completely envelop you as you walk along the banks of the canals. During the day it is permanently dusk, providing a cool evening atmosphere - which is of course the best time for shopping and eating. After midnight when the

shops and restaurants are closed, the lights are dimmed and it becomes night time. The scene is then further brought to life through the inclusion of opera singing from some of the balconies and actors dressed in carnival costumes engaging the tourists and the gondola rides with gondoliers serenading passengers, as well as overhearing shoppers, as they float along the canals. While other casinos use similar techniques, it is the Venetian that stands out, as evidenced by the



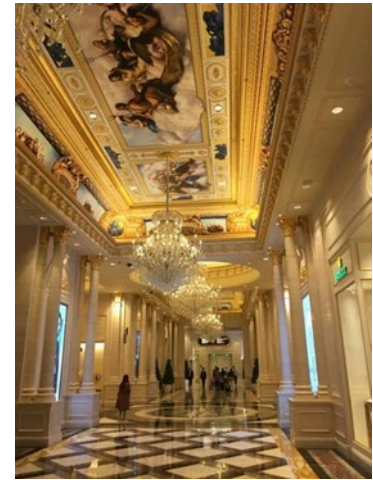
continuing stream of tourists consistently impressed by their first encounters with these spectacles at exactly the same moment.

### **The Parisian, Macao**

A short walk away from the Venetian is The Parisian. Though not as large as the Venetian, it uses many of the same techniques including presenting the overall façade of the building in the shape of an idealized chateau and various design elements 'brought back' from Paris. With a representation of Apollo's Fountain from Versailles, a half size Eiffel Tower and Paris Metro-inspired green ironworks with visible rivets at the entrance, as you enter the lobby you are confronted with the Winter Fountain. To your left and right are the

hotel services and lobby where you enter the Louvre to check in.

While Napoleon rides triumphantly into the lobby (the horse is not live but the rider actually is), on the first floor the streets of Paris await with ladies and gentlemen dressed in 18<sup>th</sup> Century costumes strolling along the Champs-Élysées, tipping their hats to you, onto Napoleon's statue and the perennial Can-Can Dancers. While here there is the obligatory food court of various Asian foods there is also a French Brassiere, cunningly called The Brasserie, and decked out to look like a classic French restaurant with a marble preserving console in the middle and even a large Manet style pre-distressed mirror behind the bar.



*The Parisian, Macao*

### **The Londoner, Macao**

The Londoner is one of the latest themed casinos, which opened January 2021. Although strictly a renovation of an existing casino, the Londoner is a \$2 billion architectural restyling. The outside has been restyled to represent the British Houses of Parliament, including Big Ben, along with an assortment of black marble lions dotted around the entrance and the British flag festooned throughout. Interestingly this is the only

casino where a national flag is prominent, unlike the flag of France in the Parisian or the US in Studio City.

Inside there are objects from London "brought back by David Beckham" including a replica of the Eros statue, marble statues of various kings and queens, a replica mews where you can park your Mini, blue plaques indicating where famous people lived and, with a hint of schadenfreude in relation to the opening simile, there is a 'Crystal Palace' atrium. You can have lunch at Gordon Ramsey's Pub or Churchill's Table

where the Mad Hatter conducts his afternoon teas. You can also ride in a Black Cab where the cheeky cabbie speaks fluent Mandarin and where the cab is always hijacked by David Beckham. While the Spice Girls play on the radio promising to tell you what they really, really want, Beckham leans back to tell you about this other place called the Londoner Macao and promptly drives

into a wall and through a portal which whisks you away from the rain-soaked streets of London to arrive at the Londoner, Macao. Without thinking too much about why you wanted to go to Macao or how much the cab fare cost, Beckham introduces various restaurants as you arrive.



*Enjoying a cab ride from London to the Londoner with David Beckham. The Mews, Beefeater, Eros, and a blue plaque indicating where Charles Darwin lived when in Macao.*

With the first author having been stuck in Macao since early 2019, not being able to leave due to not being able to return as the borders to foreigners are firmly closed, this idealized version of London even engenders nostalgia and belonging, as something of home. Moreover, as 95% of tourists are from the mainland, westerners have started to unintentionally become part of the fantasy by just walking around the place and being present within Macao's global dreamscape. Along with the knowing wink of the performance of British bobbies doing a dance routine to the theme tune of Monty Python's *Flying Circus* (the reference being lost on most of the tourists), it is also tempting to dress up as Austin Powers or John Cleese's Minister for Silly Walks and walk around saying groovy to everyone before ordering two pints of lager and a packet of crisps at Gordon Ramsey's Pub and Grill.

### **Studio City, Macao**

Next door to the Parisian, but with no air-conditioned walkway between them, stands Studio City Macao. This striking art deco building inspired by Gotham City has two massive silver statues standing

outside and has a striking figure 8 Ferris Wheel in the middle of the building. Once inside, however, it is at first glance the least impressive of the themed casinos. The streets do not seem as bright or busy as the Venetian and have a shadowy eeriness about them as you walk down the 'street' past the shops towards Times Square. In here there is no fake 'sky' to represent the time of day and the top of the shop façades seem to disappear into the darkness. However, on closer inspection you realise that high above your head are dark gantries with film lights suspended and pointing in different directions. The streets are not then a replica street in Hollywood, but a film set of Anytown, USA. The high camera gantries work to layer the fantasy and façade as you walk through a film set between filming. The dimmed lighting and the buildings disappearing into the shadows deliberately produces the feeling of a slightly spooky empty film lot. What is also interesting is what is replicated in the food court. Here we are no longer in an "average" slice of imagined Americana but rather most definitely in Macao. Macao itself is replicated in the food court and based on Rua da Felicidade or 'Happiness Street' on the Macao peninsula. This famous street with



its red shop-fronts is on the list of must-see places to visit as a tourist and a place to buy the required food souvenirs to take back to China. Studio City then recreates the street, along with the wavy patterned calçada paving of Senado Square. But this again is under

film lights and gantries - the actual street in Macao then becomes a film set where you can buy lunch and also buy the necessary authentic food souvenirs, all without leaving the casino.



*Studio City, The food court in Studio City, a street in Studio City.*

### **The Lisboa Palace and Lisboeta**

Replicating Macao is taken to a new level with the opening of the Lisboa Palace and adjacent Lisboeta shopping mall. The Lisboa Palace built to resemble a European chateau is many times larger than the similar looking Parisian. Inside, however, there are no famous European streets to stroll through on the ground floor, offering instead rather clinical marble with many large, commissioned artworks representing the history and

culture of Macao, often including the Lisboa in them. The first-floor shopping may be designed on a theme, but at the time of writing is not yet open. It is the Lisboeta where the themed action takes place. However, this is not themed on the cobbled streets of Alfama in Lisbon or the Ramblas in Barcelona but of Macao, of the streets of Macao, of 'old Macao' with Portuguese style pastel-colored buildings, calçada paving and even a replica of the floating Casino Macao Palace.



*The Macau Palace, and shops from Old Macau.*

This now derelict casino still exists in Macao's Inner Harbor and was the one featured in the James Bond film *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974), as the place where Scaramanga collected his golden bullets (the casino depicted in the Macanese scene in *Skyfall* (2012) is entirely fictional). This old casino along with the pastel-colored Portuguese buildings and calçada paving having been expropriated after the handover (Zandoni & Amaro, 2018) are themselves expropriated (for a

number of Macao and Casino walkthroughs see videos posted by [Urban Canvas: Streets of Hong Kong & Macau](#) on Youtube). This, then, brings us full circle as the Lisboa creates Macao in Macao as an idealized tourist destination alongside Venice, Paris, Hollywood and London. In doing so it sells the promise that they don't even need to visit 'Macao' as they will bring Macao to you and so you can continue spending money here.

## Reflections

The opening of the Lisboa Palace brings to a close the current round of casino building in Macao, with the final two adding London and Macao to the territory alongside Venice, Paris and Hollywood. The Lisboa is also the largest themed façade and certainly “wins” the ever-present competition between casino owners over who has the biggest. However, and returning to the original simile, Britain’s power in the world began to decline after the Great Exhibition, whereas with the ongoing pandemic the softness of the economic model of Macao is beginning to show. The competition for the most opulent and spectacular buildings come with a high price to build, service and keep running along with the cost of attracting visitors through staging events and attractions. While the appetite and ability for travel outside China has been severely curtailed, Macao is potentially in a unique position to take advantage of the pent-up spending from China, yet the sheer number of visitors required to fuel this industry is proving a major problem as tourism remains less than half that in 2019, even on a good day. Thus, while once it was a sure bet for a casino to open and immediately be profitable, only time will tell if this funding model will be sufficient in the face of long-term travel restrictions and sudden lockdowns. But with Macao one learns never to predict what will happen next. One of the first things you learn when living in Macao are the sayings that Macao has its own common sense, and that Macao is unique. This, as you come to learn is not just a saying but is a way of life; It really does explain the confounding and inexplicable and so, whatever happens in the future, Macao promises to remain a wonderful and monstrous enigma, a fascinating place to visit and even more so to live in, for the scholar of gambling cultures and practices.

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