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Book Review

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Janet Ng is Professor of East Asian Literature in the Department of English at the City University of New York. In *Dreamworld of Casino Capitalism*, she dissects the disenchantment ensuing from failed promises of emancipation brought by exponential economic growth in Macao triggered by gambling development. It provides a candid, if not gloomy, portrait of a city in search of its own humanity, 'trapped' in a global corporate culture and tourist utopia that dictate the use of space and the death of the collective.

More specifically, the book sheds light on the lifestyles, expectations and identity struggles of Macao residents through the soul-searching and soul-opening paths of literary and film narratives produced in Macao by people who live or have lived there following the 2002 gambling liberalization. It presents the reader with powerful imageries throughout, weaving together stories and excerpts from fiction books and essays as well as film descriptions with elaborate theoretical discussions that channel us back to the world of academia.

Ng sets off to understand the nature of places of financial capitalist culture in the wake and ripening of the unfulfilled project of modernity. In the **Preface**, she argues Macao is the epitome of such places of global capitalist fantasy, "a product of global corporate vision [...] nurtured under Neoliberal policies" (p. xiii). Here and throughout the volume – organised into eight chapters – she takes stock of some of Walter Benjamin's seminal works on modernity and the experience of metropolis (i.e., *The Arcades Project*, *Illuminations*) to reflect on Macao's recent urban and socio-economic transformation under a seemingly more unrelenting version of capitalism, which she likens to the act (risky) and nature (random) of gambling. While providing great insights on its genesis as a social practice, Ng traces gambling's relationship with the development of financial capitalism. "If Paris is the capital of nineteenth-century industrial modernity, casino cities like Las Vegas and Macao capture the culture and ethos of our twenty-first-century financial system" (p. xii). In this world, dreams – of consumption, social mobility, and different lives – are cast and shattered.

Chapter one provides the bulk of information necessary to understand Macao's conversion into the world's gambling capital. *Dreamworld: Macao and Twenty-first-Century Casino Capitalism* stands in lieu of introduction to the book, describing the city's historical relationship with gambling as an economic activity-turned-state industry, and some of the political processes that have allowed its shaping into a modern casino locale. The introduction of Chinese zoning technologies with the establishment of Macao as a Special Administrative Region (SAR), for one, continues to feed China's ideological paradox vis-à-vis gambling: an illegal activity in the mainland while being Macao's *raison d'être* (pp. 26-27). It is also in this chapter that Ng traces the parallel between the rise of gambling as an industry and the rise of the financial economy, reminding us that their speculative nature is conjured up in the idea of *casino capitalism*. The gambling industry promotes the reign of "corporocracy" (p. 32) that defines the private control of human and environmental resources and public space, sweeping off local culture and identity. Thus, Macao's overreliance on the business is concurrently the source of its staggering economic growth and accumulated wealth and of its main plights.

Chapter two captures some important findings permeating Ng's work, embodied in the idea that Macao's glitzy atmosphere is shaded by gloomy moods. In *Feeling Bored in the Party Capital*, the author examines how the city's "transformation into the entertainment and gambling capital of the world has resulted in mental dissonance among its residents" (p. 60). The city's exuberance – with its lavish casinos, diverse tourist attractions, and extravagant performance productions – is matched by lack of enthusiasm. This "atrophy of experience" (p. 52) is portrayed in stories by local writers in which different characters witness Macao's rapid changes with perplexity rather than inspiration. To these young men and women, the casino 'fantasy' leads to profound boredom, withdrawal from one's feelings, and individual alienation from family and romantic relations. At best, their disengagement from society



under an overbearing tourist-centric agenda conveys a sense of suffocation and disapproval of the *status quo*.

In **Chapter three**, Ng focuses on Macao's heritage industry and the search for answers to historical erasures following the city's gambling boom and the appropriation of several of its UNESCO-listed sites for tourism purposes. In *The Struggle for Memories in the City of Heritage*, she wonderfully describes and analyses a novel reflecting on a collective history, set in Macao during the early years of Communist China (1954-1967), and a film delving into an individual past, built upon an anachronistic style set to evoke Josef von Sternberg's 1952 film, *Macau*. Underlying both narratives is the story of a new form of *colonization* sparked by unfettered economic development transforming the cityscape beyond recognition to its inhabitants. These are works that invite the audience to acknowledge the disappearance of a Macao that was once known to its citizens or a lifestyle and a sense of community that no longer exist. In showing how people choose to reanimate places of memory and identity, this chapter provides great insights on how history has been usurped to serve the volatile interests of a consumption-oriented economy with no particular respect to the culture of place.

Chapter four provides a strong critique of gambling as a state project, exploring its efficacy as a metaphor for contemporary life and the illusion of 'self-agency' under a (capitalist) system where one exerts virtually no control. Embracing gambling as a form of work, Ng claims, equals an attempt to redress uneven social development and redistribute wealth and social resources, arguably signalling a failure in governance (p. 94). *The Gambler's* leitmotif alludes to the eponymous short novel by Feodor Dostoevsky, of which characters engage in one way or another in risky behaviour to attain instant wealth, one's love, or a way out of work. The stories analysed in this chapter take up a similar vein, with Macao casinos arising as the site of desperate dreams ensuing from lives caught up at violent economic transitions that impart individuals with the burden of their own fates: the state withdraws from its social responsibility conveying a neoliberal narrative that transfers the ability for success and the load of failure solely to the individual. In this dreamworld, "dreams come and dreams go" (p. 100).

Exposed in **Chapter five** are Macao's social and cultural divides and the continuous subjugation of transient workers who reach the city to fill in the lower ranks of the gambling industry. In *City of Sojourners*, Ng bases her analysis off the work of writers who are not Chinese nor born in Macao, who have settled in the city at some point in time. In particular, she delves into a novel that narrates the life dramas of a group of foreigners of the upper and lower classes who converge in the protagonist's café, "a shelter from the hostile environment outside" (p. 139). Here, Ng exposes the inherent contradictions underlying the official narrative of multiculturalism celebrated by the Macao SAR

Government and the reality of segregation and discrimination many migrant workers encounter as they try to fit in. These are the disenfranchised classes, mostly composed of women, who "do not have any social standing let alone cultural and political influence on the society of Macao" (p. 122), and whose aspirations for a more dignified life continue to be frustrated in the global exchange system.

Chapter six delves into crime and detective fiction with the genre being particularly used as an allegory for Macao's transformation under unrestrained capitalist forces and people's attempts (mostly futile) to cope with it. In *Walking the Murderous Landscape: Crime Stories*, Ng returns to the theme of consumption and spectacle-as-distraction to discuss how different urban archetypes relate to Macao's new enclosed spaces inside casino complexes: those who exist under the shopping arcades' lights, i.e., the gawker or tourist, and those obverse to such bright displays, i.e., the detective. Throughout the chapter, the author skilfully summarizes a couple of stories conveying social traumas and pathos that throw a depressing allure to the city, depicted as a place of vice where even the police are greedy and deceiving. A central idea characterizing the genre, that a sense of justice and balance is re-established through law enforcement (p. 168), is thus frustrated. The brutality and violence revealed towards a case's disclosure is what these crime narratives are about: an allegory for Macao's traumatic 'coming of age' in the era of casino capitalism and people's struggles to adjust and exist in this new environment.

Chapter seven expands on heritage as an industry and as part of continuous efforts to re-define Macao's cultural narrative harnessing the city's Portuguese imprint as the most distinctive trait of its urban identity. Ng's strong critique about the representation of the city's past at the Macao Museum – a loose collection of objects and symbols with "hardly any history or social narrative, let alone reflections on the political world of Macao" (p. 177) – reinstates her discussion on the culture of consumption and superficiality that define the alienation informing many spheres of life in Macao. In *Extraordinary Treasures in a City of Old Things*, she reflects on the ways people reassess history by highlighting the role of another urban character introduced by Benjamin, the collector, capable of reorganizing our past to evoke a new world. She does so by examining one novel in which several characters engage in reanimating fragments of their past in ways that challenge official narratives, stripping them of their commodity value, the only way to open up "the possibility of politics" (p. 196).

A society that no longer relies on the wisdom found in *storytelling* as a community event, prizing individual effort and material accomplishment to the detriment of collective life, is the focus of **Chapter eight**. Here, Ng questions the possibility of restoring a sense of community in a "fast-moving world where monetary

transactions seem to replace traditional human exchanges" (p. 199). In a society that has undergone profound social changes and struggles with alienation, people's dreams and imagination also seem to have vanished. *Tales of Contemporary Lives* examines an unconventional crime novel with many parallel fictional worlds embedded within it, filled with a series of violent crimes. It portrays a decadent society that operates according to casino rules and practices in which bluff, lies, and risky behaviour prevail, and people are depicted as both criminals and victims as they are strongly affected by the casino culture. Rumours and gossip displace traditional forms of communication, such as communal stories, which are indeed "community building, affirming, and instructive" (p. 210). Revealing our inevitable connectedness to one another, the novel is itself an act of storytelling at the center of social discourse, communication, and social change (p. 226).

Ng closes her book with an **Epilogue** that reiterates the idea of Macao as a microcosm of casino capitalism and the need to cautiously approach the 'miracles' of economic growth. Although the scale has changed from its predecessors in the rise of nineteenth century capitalist centres, the sense of alienation and anxiety that seize Macao residents under its overwhelming twenty-first-century transformation is undeniable. In capturing their ennui and resignation, the city's fiction writers have been ultimately a dissonant voice, defying the dominant narrative of "stability and prosperity" while "working to change the narratives of the city" (p. 231).

China's position regarding gambling in Macao has pivoted vertiginously since. Harsher measures to curb corruption, the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism, and recently enacted stricter gambling regulations have shaken the confidence in its continuity there in the long run. Ng's book provides an important outlook on the industry's character and impact before its transformation and (now impending) decline in the city.

This is a captivating and enlightening work on Macao's unprecedented and unexpected development and the many social and cultural dilemmas arising from it. It is a remarkable contribution for scholars in the social sciences and humanities working on Macao, gambling development and policy, and urban and identity studies. It provides an insightful account of forms of accommodation, contestation and subversion to gambling as a form of life, inviting further consideration about the future of cities under casino capitalism and the importance of alternate narratives to redirect development.

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