

[Steinmuller, Hans](#)

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The Moving Boundaries of Social Heat: Gambling in Rural China

Dr Hans Steinmüller

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, Germany

steinmuller@eth.mpg.de

Abstract

Whilst gambling for money was prohibited during the Maoist era, since the 1980s it has become very common in many rural areas of central China. It is often the major communal activity in many villages, a focus point of daily gossip and an object of government campaigns. I describe several forms of gambling common in Bashan Township, Eastern Hubei Province, and relate them to local discourses on capability/skill and luck/fate. Gambling reproduces ‘social heat’, which is a desired form of social effervescence as long as it remains within certain boundaries. But the boundaries of accepted gambling and social heat in local sociality as well as those given in official representations and state discourse, are contested, and both stand in an ambiguous relationship to each other; a relationship that is described in terms of ‘cultural intimacy’. Using medium-range concepts such as ‘social heat’ and ‘cultural intimacy’ the article attempts to avoid the pitfalls of totalizing approaches which explain popular gambling as consequence of or resistance to ‘neoliberalism’.

Just about two weeks after my arrival in Zhongba village, some young men offered to teach me *zha jinhua*. *Zha jinhua* – ‘bash the golden flower’ – is a card game similar to poker but with only three cards for each player. The gamblers, usually half a dozen or more, take turns putting money on the table, each betting on the combination of cards in front of him. Everyone must put in at least one yuan¹ as an ante, a basic amount at the beginning to enter the betting round. As in poker, each player has three options: to increase the highest previous bet, to match the highest previous bet and “call”, or to give up his hand. Each game is worth an average of 50-100 yuan, and only lasts a couple of minutes.

I vividly remember the first evening I spent with these young men; notes of ten, fifty, and a hundred yuan were speedily handed over the low table. Most players placed their bills on the table softly, but now and then someone would hit the table with his palm to underscore his defiance of the others’ bets. In the beginning I didn’t understand why all the rustling heap of banknotes constantly shifted from one player to the other. The action was taking place so fast that I couldn’t keep up with the players or their bets. The ups and downs of the game were constantly accompanied by the jokes and swearwords of the gamblers, and commentary from the bystanders.

“Five.”

“Ten.”

“That’s it for me, I fold.”

“I’ll take this one.”

“I’ll do it. Double raise!”

And so it went on, until the next showdown, when either everyone had drawn level, or all save one had given up their hands. Filled with cigarette smoke, the room resonated with the exclamations, the swearwords, and the comments of the players and the swift clapping of cards and banknotes. It was ‘noisy and hot’ (E. *naore*²), quite literally.

Sitting there, I was surprised, almost shocked, at the amounts that these young men were gambling with – easily more than a week’s income from a job in Beijing, Shanghai or Guangzhou, let alone what they could earn in the odd jobs they could find locally. I thought of what I had read

before embarking on my fieldwork about the huge inequalities in wealth in China today, about neoliberal regimes and ‘casino capitalism’ (1986). Could it be that I had encountered here something akin to what the Comaroffs had called ‘the occult economies’ of ‘millennial capitalism and the culture of neoliberalism’ (1999; 2000)?

In the context of rural China, it seems that such an argument holds quite well: in fact most of the young people migrating to the cities to work in factories and other low-skill manual jobs are participating in a hugely unequal economy. According to official data, urban per capita incomes were on average three times higher than rural incomes, and five to six times higher if the gap of government spending on public services (health and education in particular) was taken into account (UNDP 2008:33), but this does not fully reveal the realities that are so visible to most people in the countryside. Both on TV and in their everyday lives in the city they are confronted with glaring inequalities on a daily basis. It is in particular the young who are susceptible to dreams of incredible wealth, who want to “take the plunge” (*xiahai*), leave the countryside and risk a business enterprise, yet who in the majority of cases end up as wage labourers (*da gong*). How would they explain it to themselves that some “got rich first”, that some in this society are buying cars and houses that they will be never able to buy in a lifetime, and that the countryside where they are from seems more and more stagnant, a place of boredom and dullness? Is not the most obvious explanation simply “luck” or something like “magic”, just what one would need in gambling? Is the gambling of the marginalized then not just a mirror of rising inequalities and dreams of easy money? A reflection of the frustrations and desires of ‘millennial capitalism’, and maybe even a form of resistance against it?

Several authors have described contemporary Chinese society in general, and internal labour migration in particular, in terms of ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘millennial capitalism’ (e.g. Yan 2003; Ngai 2003; Lee 2006). And at least one article puts a particularly spectacular form of gambling in rural China – the *liuhecai* underground lotteries – into the same framework (Bosco et al. 2009). But this is not the direction I want to take here. Following Andrew Kipnis’s recent critiques of ‘tropes of neoliberalism’ in China (Kipnis 2007; 2008), I argue that analysing popular gambling in rural China in terms of ‘neoliberalism’ would mean positing an absolute and totalizing frame which

misses out social action on the micro and medium range and obfuscating the interplay of local sociality, official discourse, and state control.

After a short introduction about gambling in China, I will look at various forms of gambling in the villages of Bashan Township³ in South-western Hubei Province, and try to delineate how they are inter-related with discourses of capability and fate in other areas of life. In gambling itself, one can find certain local expressions around desired forms of sociality, which open up a semantic field of vitality, heat and fire. But there are also many occasions where gambling goes beyond the borders of the socially acceptable. Furthermore, the boundaries of the acceptable in expressions of a vital and ‘hot’ sociality in general, and of gambling in particular, have changed greatly in the last decades. The central section of this paper then deals with the different ways in which these boundaries are contested in local communities and in official ideology. In the discourses and practices of gambling, people negotiate the moving boundaries of acceptable sociality between young and old, between urban and rural, and between modernism and traditionalism; this also implies a contestation of the boundaries between state control and market, and between local sociality and official representation in contemporary China.

Gambling in China

Gambling in many different forms has a long history in China (cf. Gernet 1962:226; Wakeman 1985:96, 625). There is even the probability that playing cards were first introduced to Europe from China (Wilkinson 1895). According to most accounts, gambling has been a part of rural life for a very long time. C.F. Fitzgerald for example writes about Dali in Yunnan in the 1930s, that the people there “are rather fond of gambling, card games being the favourite with adults, and dice with children” (Fitzgerald 2005 [1941]:191).

While all gambling was forbidden during the Maoist era, since the 1980s many different forms of gambling and betting have become increasingly common. There are now various state sanctioned lotteries, of which the national sports and welfare lotteries are the biggest. Lottery sales are

growing rapidly, and the revenue from legal lottery sales in China was already ranked eight or ninth largest in the world in 2006 (Schmittzehe & Partners 2006:9). The scope of illegal gambling and betting is even larger, with revenues up to tenfold that of legal lotteries, according to some estimates (ibid.:19). In recent years, the *liuhecai* underground lottery, for instance, has spread rapidly over many regions of central China (Bosco et al. 2009). In this paper, I will not deal with legal or underground lotteries – none of which were common in the villages of Bashan at the time of fieldwork in 2007.⁴ Instead I focus on mahjong and various local card games which will be described below. These forms of gambling have become the most frequent leisure activity in Bashan in the last decades, and they are mostly condoned by local government.

This surge of various forms of gambling – in particular the more spectacular illegal forms, such as the underground lotteries – invites explanation, and the context of a rapidly changing, ‘neoliberal’ economy seems to suggest itself. In a recent article, Bosco et al. describe in precisely these terms the *liuhecai* underground lottery that has spread rapidly throughout most regions of central China during the last decade (Bosco et al. 2009). They first reject the argument about ‘occult economies’ made in other parts of the world, where people reacted to the sudden arrival of commercialization and capitalism by viewing ‘the growth of money as magical and open to occult manipulation’ (ibid.:51). According to Bosco et al., this argument does not hold for the growth of underground lotteries in contemporary China, which has a long tradition of commerce and markets. In rural China, they suggest, ‘it is not the lack of sophistication in the market economy, but the accompanying frustrations and desires of consumer capitalism, and the growing gap in wealth, that underlies the lottery craze’ (ibid.:53). At pains to find an alternative interpretation for the apparent ‘irrationality’ of the underground lotteries, Bosco et al. conclude that this ‘irrationality’ makes sense once seen ‘in the context’ of an economy where luck, speculation, and corruption play a large role (ibid.:54). The lottery is ‘remarkably similar’ to speculation, it ‘captures the alchemy of neoliberalism: “to yield wealth without production”’ (ibid.:56); in sum, the lottery is yet another example of ‘millennial capitalism’.

It is this conclusion of an otherwise very rich ethnography with which I have problems. Bosco et al. yield to what Latour has called ‘the temptation to jump to the “context”’, providing the

absolute scale of the ‘Big Picture’ or ‘panorama’ on which everything can be seen (Latour 2005:184ff.). Various recent attempts at describing contemporary Chinese society in terms of ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘millennial capitalism’ (e.g. Yan 2003; Ngai 2003; Lee 2006) fall into the same trap: framing their analyses in these big terms obscures broader differences between various forms of (neo-)liberal and anti-liberal governance, their implementation, and the ongoing political negotiations of actors on the ground. By positing a social whole instead, the trope of ‘neoliberalism’ masks more than it reveals, as Andrew Kipnis has argued forcefully (Kipnis 2007).⁵

Most ethnographies of gambling do map out some ‘context’, i.e. they provide some correlations and associations between gambling and the socialities in which it takes place. Several recent anthropological interpretations of gambling have done so, while avoiding the leap to a totalizing picture. Evthymios Papataxiarchis for instance has described the idioms of spendthrift behaviour and ‘disinterested sociality’ in gambling on Lesbos (Papataxiarchis 1999), and Thomas Malaby has explored how people confront uncertainty and contingency in gambling on Crete (Malaby 2003). Both Paptaxiarchis and Malaby argue that gambling reflects something else of the wider social context in which it takes place. Yet they are careful not to leap too many scales and not to give a total panorama of Greek society.

Ellen Oxfeld Basu (1991) and Paul Festa (2007) have offered analyses of gambling in Chinese communities which similarly privilege social action at the micro and medium range.⁶ While both deal with mahjong in places far away from central China (the first in a Chinese community in Calcutta, and the second in Taiwan), several of the features they describe share some resemblance with gambling in Bashan.

Ellen Oxfeld Basu starts from the apparent contradiction between the “entrepreneurial ethic” of a Chinese community of tanners in Calcutta and the propensity, in particular, of adult males for high-stakes gambling. In her words gambling “mimics and re-enacts both the risks and possible gains of entrepreneurship, but it does so within an arena contained by both temporal and spatial restrictions” (Oxfeld Basu 1991:255). Drawing on Goffman’s model of “fateful action” (Goffman

1967), Oxfeld Basu interprets mahjong gambling as an action that is “problematic”, “consequential” and “done for its own sake”, and hence a great occasion for the display of character; beyond that, it expresses wealth and status, and possibly “the central contradictions of the community’s ethos”, in the sense of Geertz’s “deep play” (Oxfeld Basu 1991:256, quoting Geertz 1973). Even though there are certain similarities, the place and role of both the “entrepreneurial ethics” and of gambling in rural China in 2007 differs from that of overseas Chinese communities. Nonetheless, like Oxfeld Basu, I want to focus on the internal contradiction between striving and luck/fate that become apparent in gambling.

Paul Festa, in his analysis of mahjong gambling in Taiwan, also takes these two elements as distinctive parts of the social imagery of gambling. Using the theoretical framework proposed by Roger Caillois (2001[1958]) for the study of play, Festa distinguishes four modes of play: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimesis* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo). Using Caillois’s formal distinctions, Festa then provides the cultural content of mahjong gambling in Taiwan. First, he argues that “*agon* and *alea* animate dominant aspects of sociopolitical culture in Taiwan”, as in the ‘martial *agon*’ which men cultivate in politics and in the military. Festa connects the element of chance in gambling with certain images of the state, where both personal and national aspirations are linked together, as in the official lotteries, or in the astounding ways in which the state is also seen as an element of “fate” in individuals’ lives. The third element of *mimesis* is a “martial imaginary” that appears strikingly with his informants, who all took part in compulsory military service in Taiwan. The militarization of the island of course has a lot to do with the cross-straits conflict and the perceived threat of the PRC. The mainland also shares a history of militarization that is, however, different in many respects: perhaps most importantly, there is no compulsory military service, and for most men in Bashan, bodily movements at the mahjong table would barely remind them of military drill. Festa concludes his article suggesting that there are elements of vertigo and possession (*ilinx*) in mahjong, which might contain possibilities of a ‘sympathetic agonism’ that is ‘internalized and generalized’ by ‘mahjong *mimesis*’. Such a ‘sympathetic agonism’ might in the end partake ‘in the production of a public space marked by democratic plurality, progress, and change’ (2007:117). That mahjong could mimic a ‘sympathetic agonism’ of democratic plurality in Taiwan seems a bold speculation to me. But be

that as it may, the agonies of democratic development are surely very different across the Taiwan Strait.

As Festa argues, gambling animates certain ‘imaginaries’ intimately linked to the state. Yet these imaginaries are locally specific in Bashan, and they are linked to the state in different ways from those Festa may have observed in Taiwan. Before coming back to what might be ‘simulated’ or ‘mimicked’ in ordinary gambling in Bashan, let us have a look at what is concretely produced in gambling, according to local folk theory: social heat.

The Ambiguities of Social Heat

In Bashan any notable social event should be ‘noisy and hot’ (E. *naore*, P. *renao* or *honghuo*). The liveliness, noise, and heat implied in the word *naore* is the ideal characteristic of a festival, a banquet, a market, and of gambling. Houses that are high up in the mountains and far away from roads are said to be ‘lonely’ and ‘cold’ in the vernacular. Contrasted to this is the ‘liveliness’ and ‘hotness’ of the street and the market. This is related to the cultural ideal of having a household that is ‘lively and hot’ of which the most obvious sign would be many children crowded under one roof.⁷ Coming together for any eventful gathering – temple fairs, banquets, or gambling for instance – produces social heat and ‘red-hot’ exuberance according to a kind of ‘sociothermic theory of sociality’ as Adam Chau has called it. Using examples such as men’s drinking games and temple fairs, he has described this field of social heat as ‘red-hot sociality’ and a Chinese kind of ‘folk event production’ (Chau 2006: chapter 8; see also Chau 2008). Yet this kind of ‘red-hot sociality’ is not unequivocally evaluated positively: temple fairs had been prohibited for long times as feudal superstition and, for many urbanites, the drinking games which Chau cites as examples of the production of ‘red-hot sociality’ (Chau 2008:493-94) are signs of coarse and uncivilized peasantry. The negotiation around the social heat produced in gambling and how it is evaluated differently by different actors is thus precisely the focus of this article.

In the case of gambling, the ambivalence of social heat parallels the general distinction between ‘social gambling’ and ‘problem gambling’. In Chinese, this opposition is matched closely by the

two words that are most commonly used for ‘gambling’: *wan* and *du*. The first is more entertainment and play, whereas the second clearly denotes the involvement of money and betting. As Pina-Cabral and Chan illustrate in their analysis of gambling in Macao, the decision whether a certain game is better described as one or the other is certainly a question of perspective – frequently the gamblers themselves will prefer to speak of *wan* (Pina-Cabral 2002:82ff). This *wan* side of gambling is also extremely important for the celebration of kinship, of friendship, even of relatedness in general. To ‘play’ (*wan*) together is the best way to cement a relationship. *Wan* can involve gambling, but also many other social activities, such as playing games of any kind, eating, making an excursion, chatting, joking, etc. The social exchanges in these activities ideally should be lively, hot, and noisy (E. *naore*), in short, they should produce ‘social heat’. It is the other side of gambling – *du* – that is purely associated with betting and money. High-stakes card games played by young men such as the one mentioned at the beginning of this article are almost unequivocally called “gambling” (*du*). There are other games, in particular the pastimes of elders, which will be just as unequivocally called *wan*. But perhaps the larger part of these practices lies in between those two extremes, and there is a lot of ironic playing with the positioning of these forms of gambling with respect to what is socially acceptable and what not.

Zha jinhua, the game mentioned at the beginning, is in fact not the most common one in Bashan, and it is reserved generally for young men. The games most frequently played in the villages of Bashan are mahjong and two card games: *dou dizhu* (“struggle against the landlord”) and *shaofu* (P. *shaohu*, “pull and win”). These games are played in the most diverse occasions, during weddings, funerals, and other family celebration; and very often on rainy days at home. During the ‘idle’ period of the peasant calendar (*nongxian*), and in particular at the time of the Spring Festival, many people will gamble all day with their families, or with relatives and neighbours. The period of the Spring Festival is a time of permissiveness, of amusement in the home amongst relatives and close friends that more often than not takes the form of gambling.⁸ Such forms of gambling will be unequivocally called ‘*wan*’ – which is more the ‘play’ side of gambling. Similarly encouraged, if to a somewhat lesser extent, is the gambling at family celebrations like weddings, funerals and house inaugurations.

Setting up a gambling table and providing guests with a set of mahjong tiles or playing cards belongs to the proper ways of hosting a guest, together with offering cigarettes and a meal. This is particularly relevant for families of higher social standing, where guests are frequent and hosting is a sign of distinction; gambling equipment is a necessary household asset in such families. Guests can include friends, business partners and officials; and to entertain guests spending some time together in “amusement” and “play” (*wan*) is the best – and often necessary – way to establish and maintain good relationships. Before exploring the intricacies of gambling further, it is necessary to make explicit the images of fate and luck that are very often associated with such families as they play an important role in the social idiom in which gambling is viewed and evaluated.

Fate and Fire

In an article on Chinese notions of happiness and self-fulfilment, Wang Mingming (1997 [1986]) demonstrates how people in villages in Southern Fujian judge achievement and failure with the oppositional pair of capability (*nengli*) and life/fate (*ming*). *Ming* most basically means one’s life, but it also connotes someone’s fate.⁹ Wang delineates this opposition as a local ‘social ontology’ (*shehui bentilun*), structurally similar to the opposition of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ in the social sciences. The metaphorical relationship between ‘capability’ (*nengli*) and ‘fate’ (*ming*) can be paralleled in life histories, and also in the discourses on and the practice of gambling in rural China. When asked about their life stories, and in particular, the reasons for success or failure in their lives, many people in Bashan would end either with stressing their capabilities (*nengli* or *benshi*), or bluntly relating it to their good ‘fate’ (*ming*). Every time I insisted on this point, trying to force a decision on either of both, people would admit that it is in fact both elements, and the relationship between them can never be finally determined.

Beyond that, it is also difficult to claim at any point in time that someone’s life has been happy and successful. The criteria for happiness were traditionally sons, wealth, and long life, but sons can become prodigal, wealth can invite jealousy, and old people can fall ill. Moreover, these

traditional criteria have become highly ambiguous in recent decades, most obviously the aspiration for many sons. Family planning is strictly enforced in Bashan, and government propaganda continuously repeats that ‘girls are just as good as boys’. The pursuit of material wealth was strongly condemned under Maoism, and though it is now again fully legitimized, to become a marker of happiness and success wealth also needs to be continuously exchanged in proper ways. Regarding all these measurements of ‘happiness’, it is crucially important to demonstrate one’s success to others at appropriate times and in appropriate ways. This display of happiness and success invariably includes conspicuous consumption and the production of ‘social heat’, as for instance in banquets and family celebrations. Hence to be able to produce social heat is constitutive of living in a socially meaningful way, and showing one’s life-fate (*ming*) to others – and perhaps constitutive of having a life-fate (*ming*) at all.¹⁰

In this sense, it is not coincidental that the word for ‘luck’ that is commonly used in Bashan – *huoqi* – is also related to warmth and fire. In a standard Mandarin dictionary *huoqi* means “anger, temper; heat in human body; cold-resistant capacity; internal heat”, but in the local dialect it is generally used in the sense of luck (P. *yunqi*). Another very similar word can also be used as an attribute signifying luck and good fate: *huose*. This is explained by locals as similar to saying that someone’s ‘flame’ (P. *huoyan*) is ‘high’. There are at least two senses to this word. One is spiritual, meaning that one’s ‘life-force’ is strong; thus, one could say that ghosts will not attack someone whose *huose* is good, because they would fear him, whereas they would attack someone whose *huose* is not good. The other sense, which is much more commonly used by young people, means basically that someone is capable, tough, and impressive.¹¹

This semantic field of heat, vitality and success stretches from the proper warmth of a social occasion (E. *naore*), to luck (E. *huoqi* and *huose*), and can be also extended to how a business should be: like fire (*huo*). Saying that a business goes like “fire” (*huo*) means that it is going exceptionally well. And, this relationship is certainly not only semantic: people who are successful in business will have many reciprocal relationships (*laiwang*), to be seen in the fact that they frequently receive guests and partake in the “heat” of celebrations, of commensality, and of amusement (*wan*), which in turn often means gambling together.

Commensality in hosting a guest also reveals in particular ways the verticality and horizontality of the relationships between the people at the table: there will be a clear positioning of the seats at the table according to criteria of age, rank, and power. Inferiors, sitting on the “lower seats” (*xiawei*), will invite those at the “higher seats” (*shangwei*) to drink. (The ‘lower seats’ are generally closer to the doors and the ‘higher seats’ opposite the door, where the ancestral shrines were placed in farm houses.) An important guest will invariably sit at such a higher seat. In these toasts, one can clearly see an expression of homage on the one side (the inferior invites the superior), and of reciprocity on the other (both drink exactly the same amount).¹² Just as when inviting someone to eat and to drink, there is a particular emphasis on formality and equal participation in gambling. Gambling means placing one’s luck in the hands of that ruthless arbitrator, the mahjong tiles or the cards. Everyone sticks to the rules, and there is an elaborate ethics of proper behaviour and of paying one’s gambling debts. But just as with commensality, hierarchical relationships are plainly visible in gambling. During gambling, the powerful and rich generally end up showing that the “fire” (E. *huose*) of their life is higher – by demonstrating indifference to the loss of huge sums, or by winning. Often the inferiors will let them win to make the superior feel good, a form of indirect “gift” to them. If the social distance between the superior and the others is too great, the superior can also simply refuse an invitation to gamble, blocking the occasion for reciprocity and mutual indulgence in social heat all together.

This element of “fire” is parallel to what is called *yun* in the standard Chinese expression for “luck” (P. *yunqi*). Both categories are more susceptible to human influence than is *ming*, which is “fate”, but also just simply “life”. Fire-like luck (P. *yunqi*, E. *huoqi*) stands more for the everyday contingency, which can be manipulated by everyday means. It can be seen within gambling, and immediately so, after every round. *Ming* (fate/life), however, has to do with the outside limits of gambling, and its place in the wider social environment. One’s *ming* will not be changed in one round of gambling, but it is still visible in the way one participates – or does not – in gambling rounds. Through participation in gambling, people show that they are ready to take risks; in particular they take the risk of losing money at high stakes. The higher the stakes, the higher is the possible prestige of the person who loses it. The propriety of such behaviour, in particular of

the powerful, is much talked about. And so are the boundaries of gambling, of that which goes beyond what is socially expected as “entertainment” and mutual amusement (*wan*) in social “heat” and becomes unsocial gambling (*du*).

The Boundaries of Gambling

Boundaries of Gambling I: in Local Sociality

The contrary evaluation of the willingness to take high risks is crucial for the boundaries of socially accepted gambling in local sociality. If participation in gambling shows that one’s *ming* is really powerful, this is even more so the case if the stakes are high, and the respective games are ‘based entirely on luck’ (*wanquan shi huoqi*), as people sometimes said about mahjong and the local card games *dou dizhu* and *shaofu*. When asked directly, most gamblers would say that in these games the ratio of luck and capability is about 80% to 20%.¹³ But while some people (especially young men) would interpret this high risk as a display of strength and character, others (especially older people) would condemn it as irrational and immoral.

At least sometimes the risk taking of the young seemed to be excused as youthful folly, or even positively acknowledged as manly bravery.¹⁴ Several middle-aged men told me that they did not gamble much today but that when they were young, they were tremendous gamblers. So did one man in his thirties, when we were leaving the house where some neighbours had been gambling for about ten days in a row during the “idle months” (*nongxian*) of the peasant calendar. On the way home he burst out “mahjong, mahjong, mahjong; all the time mahjong. It is so boring and useless.” I asked him why then he gambled at all, if it was just boring? He answered that there is just nothing else to do. “Anyway, it’s just fun (*hao wan*), there are no big stakes in there.” When he was young, he went on, he gambled much more. And he would not lose tens or hundreds of yuan, like now, but tens of thousands of yuan in just one night. In this way, men often played down their gambling now as mere “entertainment” (*wan*), but still insisted that they had experience with much riskier and hazardous gambling when they were young.

Contrary to this acknowledgment of risk taking in high-stakes gambling, many others condemned the gambling attitudes of the young and described the belief that through gambling one could show daring strength and power as erroneous and misguided. If gamblers failed to fulfil social expectations, in particular earning enough money to marry, they will face fierce criticism, both from their family and from outsiders. Even worse would be the case of a married man who gambled away all of his family's wealth. Such examples were often referred to as people who had a bad 'fate' (*ming*), and so were their parents, who might have been hard-working people.

A case in point in Zhongba was Hu Yanglong. His father Hu Xungao had been extremely hard working, to the extent that the neighbours would often call him a "model worker" (*laodong mofang*). He had never been officially awarded this honorific title, however; to the contrary, during the Maoist era, he had been classed as a "rich peasant" and hence had suffered a lot in "struggle sessions" and everyday humiliation. Against many odds, and with a lot of hard work, he had built a huge tea factory in the 1980s. One of the first major tea factories in Zhongba when there was less competition on the tea market, it yielded substantial profit for the family. Far from retiring, the model worker started several other enterprises, toiling day and night. He was one of the first to grow his own tea shoots, and he also had a minor construction business. When there was nothing else to do, he made chairs and tables at home, as he was also a skilled carpenter and joiner. At the time of Hu Yanglong's marriage, his father was building a huge new house for his son on the market street of Bashan, on land belonging to Hu Yanglong's father-in-law. This marriage was considered an extremely good match, the father-in-law providing wealth and building lots on the market place and Hu Xungao building two houses, one of which they sold later to build the next tea factory.

Hu Yanglong was the youngest son of three; his two older brothers got the tea factory at home and the house, whereas he inherited the house on the market street. With that, he was clearly the most favoured one, a rather common pattern locally for the youngest son. His father had from early on demanded too much of the other sons, and the oldest son had left the area some fifteen years before to work in another province, while the second son had had several major fights with

his own father. Being the most favoured and youngest son, Hu Yanglong had never worked much in his life. He got involved in some small tea business but preferred spending his time gambling mahjong and visiting brothels.

Soon after I had made his acquaintance, the village officials told me not to spend time with him: ‘This guy is up to no good’, they said. Yet some young men would also speak in awe of his exploits at the gambling table, and tell stories about him and his companions. In 2007, after several fights with his wife related to gambling debts, he divorced her, and the family had to sell the house on the market. In local gossip he was then mostly described as a “spendthrift” and “prodigal son” (*baijiazi*), and not even the young men who had respected him before found many good words for him. It was clear that he had transgressed the boundaries of what was acceptable. The risks he had taken had been too high, and instead of displaying a mighty *ming*, he had shown not only that he had no ‘luck’, but also that his *ming* was bad.

This kind of condemnation by talk and gossip in the village community is well-documented in the literature on rural China.¹⁵ Citing cases like Hu Yanglong’s, older people frequently complained about the morals of the day. Similar to corruption and prostitution, such gambling was a kind of social heat which had become debauched and destructive. In comments such as this gambling was often linked with exploitation¹⁶ and speculation¹⁷ into a morality tale of social decline.

Let me now introduce a form of gambling which stands at the opposite of high-stakes mahjong in all aspects: a local card game, played mostly by old men, and unequivocally accepted as pastime and entertainment (*wan*).

The shaofu game

Mahjong is probably the most common form of gambling in the Chinese world, and is sometimes ironically called a distinctive trait of Chinese civilisation. In Bashan, another form of gambling stands in just such an ironic relation to local belonging and tradition: a card game called *shaofu*

or *changpai*. In various forms, this game can be found in many areas of central and south-western China, but each locality has its own rules and its own sets of cards. In Bashan the game consists of four sets of 24 long cards with one Chinese character painted in calligraphy on each of them.

The calligraphy is rather intricate, and so at first it was impossible for me to decipher it. When I asked for the meaning of the characters on the cards, a twenty-year-old told me that it is ‘Kong Yiji, you know, the Kong Yiji of Lu Xun’. That did not help me either, until an old man pointed out to me that this is the story of ‘Kong the second brother (*Kong Lao’er*). You know, in China we have Kong the second.’ And then he told me legends about this man Kong. It began to dawn on me that this must be Kongzi, i.e. Confucius.

The 24 characters form eight verses of three characters each, and make up a poem:

shang da ren	His Greatness
qiu yi ji	Confucius
hua san qian	has taught three thousand students
qi shi xian	of which seventy became virtuous scholars.
er xiao sheng	A young student like you
ba jiu zi	should study from eight or nine sages
jia zuo ren	should learn how to be benevolent
ke zhi li	and hence understand courtesy and manners.

The rules of the game are similar to mahjong; people pull cards from the stock in turn, and the one who first reaches a full combination of all his cards in families of three, or sets of three or four of the same card, wins.

What is remarkable about *shaofu*, however, is the social confinement within which it takes place: it is exclusively elder men who play the game, and it is played mostly on occasions where it clearly does not conflict with other demands. The accusation of wasting time instead of doing

productive work almost never appears here; people play *shaofu* only on the right occasions, that is, on rainy days when there is not much to do anyway, when visiting relatives or on holidays.

Furthermore, as if the ideals of Confucian ethics and propriety written on the playing cards demanded it, this game almost never takes place with very high stakes, nor is it played all night. It is primarily a pastime for elder men. This stands in stark contrast with high-stakes mahjong, played by the likes of Hu Yanglong. Whilst the latter is generally judged as “gambling” (*du*), *shaofu* obviously remains within the accepted boundaries of play and amusement (*wan*). Yet *shaofu* carries with it another kind of ambiguity, which is the ambiguity of a traditionalism which is an essential part of local sociality and at the same time a source of lingering embarrassment vis-à-vis outsiders and the modernist state discourse.

Boundaries of Gambling II: Cultural Intimacy and the State

The cards of the *shaofu* game, and the poem about Confucius on them, stand in an ambivalent relationship to dominant and official orthodoxy. On the one hand, they stand for uprightness and conformity, invoking solemn verses and ideals, and the social confinement of gambling. But they also represent parody of the archaism of the classical language of Confucian ethics – and of sentences that have been repeated countless times, and mostly only half understood.

The verses on the *shaofu* game were commonly used in late imperial China to teach reading and writing to boys, who had to copy the characters written with brushstrokes, and memorize the verse. By doing so, sons were supposed also to learn the good ways of ‘benevolence’ (*ren*) and ‘propriety’ (*li*). The stories that old men still tell about “Kong the second” and his deeds fulfil a similar purpose: they generally have a clear moral which is invariably phrased in the Confucian idiom of filial piety (*xiao*), loyalty (*zhong*), benevolence (*ren*), and propriety (*li*).

What the young man first told me when I asked after the meaning of the characters on the cards is nonetheless intriguing: he simply referred to the “Kong Yiji of Lu Xun”, and gave no further explanation. The short story “Confucius” (*Kong Yiji*) by Lu Xun belongs to the canon of required

reading that any middle school student in the People's Republic has to study. In the short story a bedraggled Confucian scholar is mockingly called by the nickname "Confucius" (*Kong Yiji*). Kong Yiji speaks the arcane language (*zhi hu zhe ye*) of the scholar-officials, but he is impoverished and known as a thief and a drunkard. The narrator describes him at the inn, where he usually gets drunk, whilst the other guests are poking fun at him. Written in 1918, the short story is a parody on the anachronism and emptiness of the classical language of Confucian ethics, and with it of traditional China in its totality.¹⁸

This short story became a core text of the radical critique of the Confucian tradition from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 onwards. Its radical turn against tradition was rather limited to urban intellectuals during the first decades of the 20th century. Yet over the course of the century, the extraordinarily forceful rejection of tradition would become hegemonic discourse in China. Slogans such as "Destroy the Shop of Confucius" (*dadao kongjia dian*) and put "Science and Democracy" (*kexue yu minzhu*) in its place were taken over by the Chinese Communist Party. During the Maoist era, similar slogans including the rejection of the Confucian tradition were taught in school and endlessly repeated in "class struggle sessions", over radios, loudspeakers, and on wall newspapers (*dazibao*).

Even though much has changed regarding the public evaluation of Confucianism, the memory of this past still renders elements of popular Confucianism into a lingering source of embarrassment. Let me quote now a description of *shaofu* that reflects a sense of embarrassment about the Confucian ethics of propriety, or *li*. The following is a blog entry on the internet written by a young man from the provincial capital Wuhan, probably an employee or government official, musing on *shaofu*:

In the evening some old people sat down next to the road in the shadow of the trees and played a card game together. [He went closer, and discovered, to his surprise, that the poem of "His Greatness Confucius" was written on the cards.] These 24 characters originally had been the "textbooks" used in feudal society to teach writing and educate children. [...] Confucius had been the patron saint for which every feudal dynasty

(*fengjian wangchao*) since the Han was beating the drums; obviously these 24 characters refer to Confucius and the basics of his thought, and they are imbued with feudal ritual and rules (*fengjian lifa*). But the fact that the vast masses of working people made this poem into a card game for entertainment is really quite interesting. Who says that the rules and etiquette of Confucius chagrined the working people? Your emperor treated it as the highest doctrine, and used it as a “textbook” to tyrannize students, you say? As for me, I play with this form, play with it in the same way I would play mahjong – what do you want to do about that?

[...]

This is just a card game, why think so much?

(Guangming Shibe 2007)

It should be noted that this was written in 2007; the modernist condemnation of the Confucian doctrine still had its grip on the mind of at least this blogger. This provides quite a glaring contrast to the re-appropriation of Confucianism by the government and mainstream media that was taking place at the same time in the cities and via academic circles. In recent years, the Chinese government has installed Confucius Institutes all over the world, and the study of the Confucian classics is a declared priority. TV shows in which university professors discuss the works of Confucius, Mencius, and other classics of Chinese philosophy, history, and literature, are hugely popular. The most popular of these is “Lecture Room” (*baijia jiangtan*), a programme where intellectuals discuss the classics and relate them to issues of contemporary everyday life. The most successful TV Confucians are Yu Dan and Yi Zhongtian. Their books, in particular Yu Dan’s comments on the Confucian Analects (Yu 2006), became huge bestsellers over the last couple of years. Actually one of my neighbours in Zhongba, a farmer and retired village official, also read one of Yi Zhongtian’s books in the evenings after working in the fields. This all goes to show that the modernist denial of the Confucian tradition has long ceased to be hegemonic. In fact, for many urban Chinese the kind of Cultural-Revolution style condemnation of Confucianism has become an embarrassment, a show of uncivilized peasant despotism.

As the Confucian morals represented by the characters on the *shaofu* cards have become highly ambiguous, so have the Confucian morals represented by the rounds in which *shaofu* is actually played. It is in these rounds that the strongest judgements about the lack of morality of the young can be heard. But for many of the young, the rounds and card games of the old men represent village-level gossip and peasant narrow-mindedness, exactly those things that have to be left behind if one enters ‘the big world’ (*da shijie*) of the cities. Recalling the ambiguities of popular Confucianism and potentially representing peasant backwardness, these games are also something that is not strictly encouraged by officialdom. It is rather something that is tacitly permitted – but definitely not publicly displayed.¹⁹ After all, *shaofu* itself is also a form of gambling.

Shaofu is also barely ever mentioned in the local media. The intricate ambiguities that come with it are more muted, especially when compared with high-stakes card games and mahjong. Every now and then, high-stakes gambling is loudly condemned in the newspapers and on TV, and regularly, there are reports about businessmen and officials who were punished for taking part in gambling.²⁰ In a similar vein, high-stakes gambling is often portrayed in the newspapers as the pastime of thugs and shady elements in society.²¹ In newspaper articles and political announcements, ‘gambling’ (*dubo*) is not presented as the flip side of economic development, but as residual of ‘backward’ (*luohou*) peasant culture, in the same category as lack of hygiene and ‘feudal superstition’ (*fengjian mixin*).²²

The irony here is that it is precisely those who try hardest not to be peasants, that is, migrant workers, rural businessmen and officials, who are the focus of such attacks. They themselves always describe their actions as harmless “entertainment” (*wan*), and yet the “fire-like” sociality that is created in such entertainment is something that is frowned upon by the authorities. Officials in particular are the targets of regular government campaigns against gambling. However, as everybody knows but no one can quite say publicly, there are good social reasons for the fact that local officials are very often heavy gamblers. Besides individual propensities and the boredom of a life in the civil service, there is another reason for the frequency of gambling amongst officials: it serves the function of establishing tight relationships to superiors, to peers

and to business partners, in the celebration of lively, vital and “hot” sociality. Tight relationships welded by social heat, however, are often necessary to be an effective official or businessman.

Officials, the businessmen who collaborate with them, and the migrant workers who aspire to become businessmen, all have to engage with the moving boundaries of socially acceptable gambling on an everyday basis. The official discourse of newspapers and TV is not yet very sophisticated here: gambling is either not mentioned at all, or strongly condemned. But elsewhere in China, gambling – mahjong at least – has already become the object of a normalizing discourse related to the government’s aim to create frameworks of “civilized” leisure activities.

So argues Paul Festa, for instance: with the example of a governmental and academic discourse on mahjong, he exemplifies a normalizing framework and a ‘moral regulation’ of the emerging mass consumer culture in the People’s Republic of China (Festa 2006). Dealing primarily with consumption, these discourses also elaborate on notions of civility and national belonging. Festa’s examples for these ‘mahjong politics’ are exclusively textual, mainly focusing on one treatise entitled “The Study of Mahjong” (*majiangxue*) by Sheng Qi, which suggests an academic investigation on mahjong, and gives recommendations for ‘healthy mahjong’ (*jiankang majiang*) that would be a proper expression of Chinese culture, against degraded “popular mahjong” which is simplified and mostly involves betting.²³ Predictably, Festa concludes that there are countless contestations around this discursive construction. He observes ‘that popular mahjong and the gambling that accompanies it are alive and well’ (2006:26), and that there is an ‘official ambivalence over whether or not to promote healthy mahjong’, which, however, ‘merely underscores the party-state’s unequivocal antipathy for popular mahjong, ensuring that playing mahjong in contemporary China will remain at once a personal and political act’ (Festa 2006:28).

In the countryside of Enshi, there is not (yet?) such a sophisticated ‘moral regulation’ of mahjong; the promotion of “healthy mahjong” is unheard of here. In the official and government discourses in Bashan, there is simply no positive evaluation of gambling that would point towards the normalizing moral framework Festa describes. This might arrive soon, but so far, gambling is either tacitly condoned (as is *shaofu*, mostly), or publicly denounced as corrupt practice.

As a practice that is both crucially important for local sociality and a potential source of external embarrassment, these forms of gambling are expressions of cultural intimacy in Michael Herzfeld's sense (2005). This sense of intimacy arises from the tension between a modernist outside representation (where gambling is continuously condemned) and the continuation of local practices, which partly contradict the former. Towards an outsider (an urbanite, a government official, or an anthropologist), people refer to something like *shaofu* with characteristic gestures of irony or embarrassment: such a game is presented as a curiosity, an oddity, and potentially a troublesome relict of peasant traditionalism.

The card games of the old men do not represent anything nearly as dangerous and unruly as the games of the young. Yet in another way, the high-stakes games of the young, of officials, businessmen, and migrant workers, also reproduce vital and hot sociality – a sociality that is the more intimate because it is frequently deplored in official discourse. The conflict between this local form of sociality and the ideological representation of gambling as a social pathology has to be confronted continuously. In the everyday practice of 'social poetics' (Herzfeld 2005), people creatively bring together outside representations and inside knowledge, and negotiate the moving boundaries of socially acceptable heat.

Conclusion

I started this article with the hunch about 'occult economies' and 'millennial capitalism' which occurred to me when I was watching young men gambling in Bashan. Admittedly, most of the other forms of gambling that I have described here are clearly less spectacular. But even for the high-stakes gambling of young men an explanation in terms of 'neoliberalism' would overlook the everyday contention of the boundaries of social heat which I have described here.

Over time I had to realize that there were many aspects to the different forms of gambling common in Bashan which a description in such terms would miss. If the analyst imposes an

absolute and objectivist interpretative framework such as ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘millennial capitalism’, social action at the micro and medium range (which is captured here in the concepts of ‘social heat’ and ‘cultural intimacy’) either gets completely lost from view or becomes a mere after-product of the posited whole. Instead of locating gambling in contemporary rural China somewhere inside the ‘bigger picture’ of ‘neoliberalism’ or ‘millennial capitalism’, I have suggested here that through the local idiom and practice of ‘social heat’ it could be understood better as a changing way of socializing and of displaying social success. Additionally, it epitomizes the contradictions between old and young, rural and urban, and local sociality and official/state discourse.

In this article I have described how local notions of capability, luck and fate relate to a kind of ‘social heat’ that is characterized by a certain ambiguity: while expected and necessary sometimes, it can also turn into deplored anti-social indulgence. From there I traced the boundaries of acceptable forms of “entertainment” (*wan*) against that which should be condemned as “gambling” (*du*), both in local sociality and vis-à-vis the local state. But the ways the boundaries of socially acceptable gambling are drawn in local sociality and in official discourse are partly contradictory. Official discourse largely condemns gambling as backward ‘peasant’ activity, and extends its blanket condemnation to forms of gambling which are essential to local sociality (for which *shaofu* was a prime example). Yet on the other hand, official discourse misdescribes the high-stakes gambling which is popular precisely among those who try to be hardest not to be peasants, but assertively modern (local politicians, businessmen, and migrant workers).

Older people, when asked about the morals of the time, frequently named gambling, prostitution, and the lack of filial piety as the signs of the decline of public morality. As regards gambling, it seems to me that this does not refer to gambling *per se* – which has long existed in China – but to the fact that gambling nowadays is increasingly expanding outside the confines within which it was socially acceptable and even expected. The production of ‘social heat’ – the liveliness and warmth that is good and proper on the one hand, but can turn over into corruption and chaos on the other – is crucial to both the accepted norms of old, and to what belongs to market

relationships now. The discourses and practices of gambling epitomize the moving boundaries of this social heat, and with them the boundaries of the socially acceptable within local sociality, and the outside boundaries of local sociality itself.

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Note on Contributor:

Hans Steinmüller is a research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany. He earned his PhD in Social Anthropology from the London School of Economics, and is the author of several papers on the anthropology of rural China.

Dr Hans Steinmüller

Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Advokatenweg 36

06114 Halle/Saale

Germany

tel +49 (0) 345 2927 222

fax +49 (0) 345 29 27 502

email steinmuller@eth.mpg.de

www.eth.mpg.de

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¹ Chinese *Renminbi* are given throughout in the unit of Yuan. The exchange rate in 2006 and 2007 was approximately 1 yuan to £0.07 (€0.11).

² Throughout the text, Chinese words are written italicized in the standard pinyin form. Words in the Enshi dialect that differ markedly in pronunciation and meaning from standard Mandarin Chinese I have marked with an “E”. All other Chinese words in italics are part of the vocabulary of standard Mandarin, and only marked with a “P” (for *putonghua*, i.e. standard Mandarin Chinese) if it was necessary to distinguish them from the Enshi dialect (e.g. “street” is “E. *gai*” and “P. *jie*”).

³ All names of persons and of places below the prefectural level are pseudonyms.

⁴ The welfare and sports lotteries are generally limited to urban regions and more common with people who have middle or high income; cf. Zeng and Zhang (2007) for a profile of lottery players in the city of Guangzhou. In Bashan there existed one lottery station in 2007, which was generally frequented by older men from the township. I have never seen anyone from the surrounding villages buy a lottery ticket there. The *liuhecai* underground lottery was very common in the Yangzi plains of Hubei in 2007, but had not yet arrived in the mountains of this region.

⁵ A related problem is whether the society and economy of contemporary China is ‘neoliberal’ at all. Referring to its oligarchic corporatist state and party, the strengthening of personalist ties, and the persistence of highly unequalitarian hierarchies, Kipnis (2008) and Nonini (2008) argue against using ‘neoliberalism’ to describe contemporary China.

⁶ Many ethnographies mention the topic in passing (e.g. Kulp 1925:325-326; Hsu 1948:26,65; Watson 1975:168), but to my knowledge Oxfeld (1991), Festa (2007), and Bosco et al. (2009) are the only texts providing focused anthropological analyses of Chinese gambling.

⁷ Since family planning has been enforced in the 1980s, most families have only one or two children.

⁸ “Both the New Year season and the Autumn Festival are times of increased licence. Gambling is sanctioned by custom if not by law.” (Feuchtwang 2001:104).

⁹ Harrell has described the dilemmas of fate (*ming*) as a Chinese folk theory (Harrell 1987). For a general overview over different concepts of *ming* throughout Chinese history, see Brokaw (1991) and the contributions to Lupke (2005).

¹⁰ Adam Chao imagines that in contrast to the Cartesian cogito, ‘a Chinese peasant philosopher’ might have said ‘I make social heat (*honghuo*), therefore I am’ (2008:485).

¹¹ In standard Chinese the equivalent in this sense would be *lihai*. The character “*li*” means originally sharp, fierce, and dangerous; it can also mean “evil ghost”, as in “*ligui*”.

¹² Cf. Pharoah (2005: chapter 4).

¹³ Festa’s gambling partners in Taiwan gave the same ratio of skill and luck in mahjong (Festa 2007:109).

¹⁴ It would be interesting to explore further the importance of risk taking for the performance of masculinity (as Paul Festa has done in his writing on Mahjong in Taiwan, see Festa 2007). Because I lack comparative data on women's gambling, and for reasons of space, I do not explore the issue of gender and gambling in this article.

¹⁵ See for instance Kulp 1925: 325-326.

¹⁶ A teacher from the local primary school explained this to me with a saying: "the gentleman loves money, and he knows morally appropriate ways to get it" (*junzi ai qian, qude you dao*). The good-for-nothing (*xiaoren*), however, does not have morals; he will use exploitation (*boxue*) and gambling (*dubo*) to accrue wealth.

¹⁷ The real estate market in bigger Chinese cities has been exploding, and the prices for apartments rocketing in the last three years; many people in the countryside, especially those who aspire to an apartment in a city, have been following these development closely, and they also frequently mentioned that this boom is driven by speculation and profiteering (*touji daoba* or *touji maimai*). Just like "exploitation" (*boxue*), "speculation" (*touji daoba*), was an activity the "bad classes" would engage in and be accused of under Maoism. I was told stories of neighbours that were criticized in class struggle sessions for selling minor goods like chairs or vegetables on the black market; they were said to have gone astray onto the "capitalist road" and to want to engage in speculation and profiteering (*touji daoba*).

¹⁸ In his other classic short story *Diaries of a Madman*, Lu Xun had depicted the consequences of the Confucian teachings even more drastically: whilst studying extensively the four books and the five classics, the narrator sees the words "Eat People!" (*chi ren*) emerge between the lines of these texts. He falls into paranoia, increasingly convinced that the people in his surroundings, including his doctor and his brother, are prepared to eat him. All these people are heartless and false, and bound to a tradition that is really cannibalistic. Shortly after its first publication, Wu Yu wrote an essay in which the message was further reduced to a simple equation between Confucianism and Cannibalism (Wu 1985[1919]). This argument was frequently cited by radical intellectuals, exemplifying the cruelty of Confucianism, the "doctrine of *li*" (*lijiao*). Lu Xun's short stories are reprinted in Lu Xun (2002).

¹⁹ In summer 2007 I visited the neighbouring township Songtaiping, which is known locally to be the origin of *shaofu*, and where until now *shaofu* cards are printed. During this short visit, I was given several introductions to the local situation, mostly about local economy and culture. Even though local officials are nowadays often "digging out" (*wajue*) anything that could count as "local culture", the *shaofu* game was never mentioned, only once as an anecdote and with a benign smile on the face of the official who told me about it.

²⁰ E.g. *Enshi Wanbao* (*Enshi Evening News*) 2nd January 2007, 'wo zhou sanqi dangyuan ganbu canyu dubo anli bei quanshen tongbao' (The Case of Gambling of Three Cadres from Different Levels of Enshi Prefecture has been Publicized in the Whole Province); *Enshi Wanbao* (*Enshi Evening News*) 29th September 2007, 'guanyu Li Zeyu

dengren canyu dubo wenti de tongbao' (Report about the Problem of Li Zeyu and Several Others who Engaged in Gambling).

²¹ E.g. *Enshi Wanbao* (*Enshi Evening News*) 28th March 2007, 'dubo shule qian toudao luo fawang' (Lost Money in Gambling – Thief Caught in the Nets of the Law); *Enshi Wanbao* (*Enshi Evening News*) 29th October 2007, 'dubo shule qian xing qie bei zhua' (Lost money in gambling – Delinquent was Caught).

²² A report entitled "Fascination for Rural Construction and Forgetting Adversities" (*mizui wangfan xin nongcun*) gives a stereotype of how the results of successful rural development should look like: "Now the villagers and neighbours live together in solidarity and harmony, the villagers are actively devoted to rural construction; gambling (*dubo*) and playing cards (*dapai*), disputes over trifles (*che pi la jin*), heterodoxy and superstition (*xiejiao mixin*), do not exist in this village, and instead development, construction and knowledge are quietly on the rise." (Songtaiping Township 2006).

²³ "Ideally, then, to play healthy mahjong would involve the self-cultivation of civilizing norms and, at the same time, the reproduction of Chineseness as a commercial value to be capitalized by the regime of accumulation" (2006:26).