

Addiction and the Humanities, Volume 1(12) - Moral relativity — Why do the Chinese people gamble if their culture considers gambling to be morally bad?

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Although some popular Chinese philosophies consider gambling to be morally bad, Raylu and Oei (Raylu & Oei, 2003) suggest that many Chinese people perceive gambling activities as a way of life. Interviews with 375 local residents in Macao (China) found that although most (57%) were morally against gambling, 63% felt comfortable with gambling and a little over 50% believed that gambling can contribute to the community (Kwan, 2004). The week's issue of *Addiction and the Humanities* discusses some possible explanations for this ambivalent and seemingly paradoxical finding.



A Chinese book (Guo & Xiao, 1996) titled “Zhong Guo Du Bo Shi” (English translation: Chinese Gambling History), which compiles historical documents from the last 2500 years in Chinese history, might provide an explanation to the seeming paradox. In this book, the historian authors discuss one of the earliest and perhaps most influential statements regarding the moral standard of gambling from Confucius’ analects. Those analects are comprised of a collection of his sayings and dialogues in ancient China, compiled by disciples after his death (~479 B.C.). During a conversation with the ruler Lu, Confucius stated that a gentleman should not gamble because gambling is morally bad. However, on another occasion Confucius commented that gambling was acceptable because gambling was better than being lazy and doing nothing. This suggests that

whether gambling is morally bad depends on its comparison point. Gambling might destroy the dignity of being a gentleman but at the same time some gambling is acceptable because activity is better than inactivity. Due to Confucius' enormous influence on the traditional Chinese culture, it is possible that the moral standard of gambling was cultivated on a relative scale; subsequently, millions who thought highly of Confucianism endorsed this view.

In addition to moral relativity, the moral hierarchy or priorities of the Chinese people might contribute to a decision about whether to gamble. Moral relativity operates on an individual level. However, many regard China as a collective society, and in collective societies social and familial obligations take precedence over individual needs. Because family approval and involvement exert a strong influence on Chinese gamblers (Raylu & Oei, 2003) family moral standards might be internalized into personal moral standards further complicating gambling decisions.

A recent market analysis (Access Asia Limited, 2002) reported the reasons why individuals in China purchased lottery tickets. In order of importance the major reasons were: (1) to purchase a house; (2) to make a donation to charity; and (3) to continue their own or their children's education. This evidence suggests that Chinese gamblers consider familial or social benefits (i.e. building a family house, children's education) to outweigh the potential damage of gambling loss and its impact on individual dignity. Sometimes the gambler's wishful thinking of bringing the family a windfall might justify the act even at the risk of family discord.

Perhaps a more direct explanation of why the Chinese gamble is for economic and psychological reasons. Let us not forget that in ancient China only the rich could afford to go to school and obtain formal education by Confucius and the like. Confucius' philosophy of gambling might influence the social elite and the ruling class more than other segments of the population. This influence might cause them to rely on his view to ban gambling because of its potential damage to social integrity and balance. However, many who are less well-to-do might be less likely to go to school and, consequently, less influenced by the view of gambling as a threat to social integrity. Their social and economic constraints may force them to care more about helping family but less about social balance. Heuristically, for them, gambling holds the possibility of becoming rich in a short period of time with a small amount of money.

In sum, moral relativity is one explanation for why some Chinese people gamble even though gambling is traditionally considered morally bad. But people in general are motivated to gamble for various other reasons including the hope to improve their standard of living, obtain a higher social class or seek excitement (Haruvy, Erev, & Sonsino, 2001; Piscitelli & Albanese, 2000). Individuals also might gamble as a means to avoid difficult life issues (Beudoin & Cox, 1999). Most of the literature on reasons for gambling utilizes evidence from Western gamblers and there is limited research examining Chinese gamblers and their attitudes and motivations for gambling. Within the context of Chinese culture where both moral standards and collective thinking are important, the idea of moral relativity can provide a link to connect operands of moral dissonance, including conflicts within and between individual and societal values.

What do you think? Comments can be addressed to Ziming Xuan.

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