



## Spectacular Macau: Visioning futures for a World Heritage City



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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conflicting sentiments generated by Macau's recent developments and how these dynamics have helped galvanize particular visions among Macau's residents holding different possessive relationships to the city. More specifically, it explores these processes through the simultaneous construction of two incongruent landscapes: a fantasyland of gaming and leisure propelled by the liberalization of the casino industry, and a 'historic city of culture' exemplified by Macau's newly acquired UNESCO World Heritage City status. Building on Debord's conception of the dialectic of the spectacle, this paper illustrates how the growing support for heritage conservation in Macau has been propelled by a shared anxiety over the phenomenal changes brought by an expanding casino industry and concomitant erosion of Macau's cultural identity. Through extensive interviews with local architects, conservation experts and activists, I elucidate how the designation of Macau as a World Heritage City has helped consolidate particular sets of moral claims around heritage and culture as well as introduced new commodifications of the environment that cannot be easily delinked from other spaces of the 'spectacle city'.

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### Introduction

What makes Macau architecture truly remarkable is the symbiotic relationship between the Portuguese and the Chinese representation... Being at the marginal place geographically and politically, Macau had the chance and need to break away from either cultural doctrine for pursuing a new expression.<sup>1</sup>

Before 1999 there was more social distance. But now, that older 'provincial attitude' has changed. After the handover, ways of doing things have become more professional for the Portuguese who chose to stay. And most importantly the Chinese have become more proud of their achievements.<sup>2</sup>

We need to acknowledge that gaming has always been part of Macau's heritage... The construction of every new casino should offer us opportunities to create good public spaces that contribute to a better city that makes Macau's citizens feel proud.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Chen (2001), from Revitalizing the cultural symbiosis of Macau, in: Culture of metropolis in Macau: An international symposium on cultural heritage strategies for the 21st century, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Quote from personal interview, 14 March, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from personal interview, 26 March, 2014.

In the short span of fifteen years since its sovereignty was returned to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1999, Macau's cityscape has been transforming at mindboggling speed and scale. Once a sleepy colonial backwater under Portuguese administration, Macau in the postcolonial present is a city of spectacle par excellence. New casinos and hotels of the most opulent sort have been erected at breakneck pace thanks to a liberalized gaming industry and deregulated PRC market<sup>4</sup> (Simpson, 2008; Liu, 2008; Luke, 2010; Wan, 2012). This urban remaking has also been shaped by incessant efforts to restore Macau's architectural heritage and develop them into new cultural sites. Although an emphasis on conservation was first ushered in by the Portuguese regime in the 1980s with the aim of enacting a positive colonial legacy, the momentum accelerated under the post-handover Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government in its bid to promote Macau as a 'World Heritage City' under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (a status that was achieved in 2005) (Luke, 2010; Chung and Tieben, 2009; Du Cros, 2009). The unlikely pairing of gaming and heritage – the two key engines driving Macau's spectacular urban change and surging gross domestic product (GDP) – has elevated the tiny city into a prime tourist destination in the region. Tourism and gaming operators, heritage experts and academics around the world have flocked there to

<sup>4</sup> Macau's gaming industry was liberalized in 2002. For a glimpse of some of the ongoing mega casino projects, see cover story and other articles in a special edition on Macau, *Inside Asian gaming* (November 2013); and Beyette (2006).

attend conferences and study trips. These activities have in turn prompted a large number of publications on all aspects of Macau, ranging from policy research on heritage and development strategies, to more critical interrogations of changing urban identities under neoliberal globalization.

To many critical urban scholars, contemporary Macau is an exemplar of spectacular urbanism, a kind of fantasyland where the ‘invincible universality of capitalism’ is fully inscribed in its built landscape (Simpson, 2008, p. 1075, 2013, pp. 22–23). With an economy driven largely by gambling, tourism and speculative investment, capital in Macau has come to assume an ‘occult’ form, generating enormous profits that seemingly defy all normal production-oriented precedents of economic growth. As Tim Simpson writes, city spaces in this context are continuously being transformed into an phantasmagoria that lure millions of tourists, particularly Mainland Chinese from across the border, to come gamble and consume (1075). Other commentators problematize the conservation of Macau’s heritage by highlighting its role in the ongoing commodification of the built environment (Manfredini et al., 2012; Luke, 2010; Liu, 2008; Porter, 2009; McCartney and Nadkarni, 2003). The inscription of Macau as an UNESCO World Heritage City has also prompted, somewhat ironically, the demolition of many older buildings across Macau as developers, wary of the possibility that these structures may one day be listed as ‘heritage,’ race against time to replace them with new ones with potentially higher real estate values.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, critics also point out that it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between the official heritage buildings from the pseudo-historical designs of new casinos and theme parks (Porter, 2009, pp. 84–90), and the phenomenon has already raised some concerns that it may soon threaten Macau’s World Heritage City’s status (Imon, 2008; Porter, 2009; Simpson, 2008, 2013).

This paper aims to contribute to the growing scholarly interest in Macau by examining the multiple tensions generated by its recent urban developments and how these dynamics have helped produce new knowledge of the city and visions of its future among its residents. Although much has been written on Macau’s spatial production in connection with the advent of global capitalism and heritage practices over the past decade, less attention has been paid to responses from local actors. Overwhelmed by the influx of tourists that flood the casinos and the World Heritage zones, many Macau residents now prefer to stay away from these places and retreat to other neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> But the situation has not diminished the growing enthusiasm toward heritage and conservation. Indeed, many residents are proud of Macau’s World Heritage City status, seeing it as an opportunity to help strengthen awareness of histories and culture and as a means to counter the onslaught of casino development that threatens to further transform the city into an unrecognizable form.

This paper argues that a study of the narratives of local actors can provide a fuller understanding of the construction of cultural discourses, which involve the participation of constituencies holding different possessive relationships to the city. Through a series of interviews with Macau’s architects and government officials involved in conservation work as well as several heritage activists and cultural workers, I illustrate how the transfer of sovereignty and Macau’s nomination as a UNESCO World Heritage City helped

galvanize particular sets of moral claims around heritage and gaming, and created new alliances between different actors.<sup>7</sup> Although the interviews are confined to those belonging to Macau’s ‘conservation network,’ their divergent backgrounds and upbringings nevertheless illustrate how personal and historical circumstances have played a central role in shaping individual aspirations and how, challenged by the experience of ruptures ushered in by rapid urban change, these aspirations have together (and despite their differences) become the basis for forming a new collective vision of the future. This vision, which centers on the preservation of histories and culture, is often posited against a soulless ‘spectacle city’ of gaming and was greatly bolstered by Macau’s successful inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage City in 2005. At the same time, the recognition of heritage sites as powerful economic assets also encourages tourism operators and businesses to convert even more historical places into new forms of ‘spectacles’ for consumption alongside other attractions of the city.

These unfolding dynamics make clear that the emergence of two incongruent spectacular landscapes in Macau – namely, a fantasyland of gaming and a ‘historical city of culture’ – have been mutually constituted under accelerating globalization and, despite them often being juxtaposed, the demarcation between the two is often quite blurry. Moreover, although posited as a resistant force against ‘casino capitalism,’ some heritage projects are actually supported by revenue from the gaming industry, which also invests in other public amenities to fulfill requirements by the Macau government<sup>8</sup> (Wan, 2012; Wan et al., 2007). Indeed, the entanglement between investments in gaming and other urban projects is complex and has a long history in Macau. The fact that the expansion of the gaming industry has significantly raised Macau’s GDP and provided some real benefits to the local population has also allowed the SAR government to gain a degree of legitimacy that the Portuguese administration had never enjoyed. However, the rapid pace of gaming development and urban transformation in recent years has begun to raise alarms among Macau’s citizens that the city is losing its urban identity. It is under these conditions that heritage becomes a regularly featured topic in local news and everyday conversation, often centering on the call for better conservation frameworks and community involvement that follow the practices in other World Heritage Cities.<sup>9</sup>

The precarious relationship between gaming and heritage suggest that the ‘spectacle city’ represented by countless seductive images of Macau cannot simply be interpreted as a totalizing, hegemonic dream world of consumption, but is a contested field on which different social actors attempt to define the cultural agenda on their terms. The paradoxical roles of heritage as a moral anchor for local identity and as a resource for generating more fantastical spaces for consumption arguably exemplify what Debord refers to as the dialectic of the spectacle; that is, it is both inscribed with the characteristics of the dominant mode of capitalist social relations and also defines the conditions of possibilities for resistance to it (Debord, 1967; Gotham and Krier, 2008; Leung, 2010). This view points to both the need for alternative practices, but also the difficulties in implementing strategies that can lead to lasting changes in the existing mode of capitalist relations. This limitation is evidenced in some of the interviews presented in this paper, which show that many aspirational claims of shaping a better urban future for Macau mostly adhere to the existing economic

<sup>5</sup> Some of these processes of demolition have been documented in a photography exhibition, entitled *Awaiting Reflection on Urban Voids*, by Nuno Soares, held at Creative Macau, Centre for Creative Industries, Macau, in 2008.

<sup>6</sup> This is a view that appears to be shared by a majority of Macau’s citizens, as reflected in many articles in Macau’s local newspapers as well as my personal encounters with local residents. Similar situations can also be observed in other heritage cities, where the conservation of buildings has often resulted in out-migration of urban functions, leading to a divided city that separates tourists and local residents. See discussion in Graham (2002).

<sup>7</sup> All of the interviews were conducted between December 2013 and July 2014. To protect the identities of the interviewees, their names have been changed.

<sup>8</sup> Each casino operator is required to negotiate with the Macau government to provide a series of urban improvements and economic benefits to Macau when a contract is awarded to them. For a discussion and critique of such arrangements, see Lee (2014).

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Moore (2013), and collection of articles by MHAA (2011).

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