

*The Identity & Personality of Female Gamblers as Portrayed
in Chinese Gambling Movies*

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Abstract

The current study is a qualitative investigation on the identity and the personality of female gamblers portrayed in Chinese gambling movies. Eleven Chinese films produced from 2000 to 2017 were selected for this study. A qualitative content analysis was employed to understand the gambling motivation and the identity development of the characters in the movie. The findings indicate that women gamblers often gamble to escape from personal emotional problems. For a majority of these gamblers, their motivation for gambling is to please their partners and to win back a relationship. Further, on the movies produced prior to 2006, the identities of female gamblers are often depicted with a negative overtone. In many instances, they are described as individuals with little education and career development and having personal emotional problems. However, female characters in movies produced after 2008 demonstrate a more positive portrayal of the identities of women gamblers, in terms of career success and personal development. This shift of identity may be due to the fact that, since early 2000s, more women have become successful in their careers in business and the government services in Hong Kong. In many elite occupations such as medical doctors and lawyers, a lot of women are having the equal professional status as men do. Further, gambling, a traditional Chinese social disgrace, especially for women, is now more acceptable in the Chinese community. The current study highlights the important point that women in the Chinese communities are no longer marginalized, socially and psychologically, as housewives only ----- they can be successful business executives, medical doctors, lawyers, politicians and may be the “Goddess of Gamblers” as well.

Keywords: Women gambling, Chinese gambling movies, the personality of women gamblers, the identity of women gamblers

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Introduction

The identity and personality of female gamblers as portrayed in Chinese gambling movies has been a subject of concerns among researchers in popular culture. In psychology, popular culture is the entirety of attitudes, ideas, images, perspectives, and other phenomena that are within the mainstream of a given culture (Storey, 2006). Heavily influenced by mass media, popular culture can be seen as forms of public fantasy, issues of concerns and the collective dream world of a community (Chan & Ohtsuka, 2007). Movies genre, as an important aspect of mass media, reflects the popular culture of a community as people inscribe their histories, beliefs, attitudes, anxieties, hopes, desires and dreams in the images they make (Chan & Ohtsuka, 2008). To date, studies on Chinese gambling movie genres indicate a significant gender difference on the identities and the personality of gamblers. On this issue, Ohtsuka and Chan (2009) writes:

“Thus, recent Hong Kong movies with gambling themes project a prejudicial attitude towards women who participate in gambling. In other words, while the male heroes in gambling movies are striving to be all gods or saints of gamblers, pitching a lonely and desperate fight for moral and social causes; the female counterparts in gambling movies are truly desperate housewives whose daily gambling sessions are an only means of breaking the monotony pervading their otherwise unremarkable existence (p. 237).”

Further, a number of investigations on the psychological analysis of movies with gambling themes have helped us understand the personality development of gamblers (Chan & Ohtsuka, 2011; Ohtsuka & Chan, 2009; Dement, 1999; Turner, Fritz & Zangeneh, 2007). Among these studies, gambling researchers in film studies in Hong Kong have found that:

- a. There is a significant gender difference on the motivation among gamblers. Men usually gamble for excitement and monetary rewards while women gamble or emotional escape (Au & Chan, 2015; Chan & Ohtsuka, 2011; Ohtsuka & Chan, 2010).
- b. There are three significant pathways among problem gamblers, namely behavioral conditioned gamblers, emotionally vulnerable gamblers and antisocial/impulsive gamblers (Chan, 2014).

On the issue of identity and personality development, Chan and colleagues (Au & Chan, 2015; Chan & Ohtsuka, 2007; Chan & Ohtsuka, 2008; Chan & Ohtsuka, 2011; Ohtsuka & Chan, 2009) have asserted that the characters in Chinese gambling movies demonstrate the following developmental pathways:

- a. All characters report an early access and availability of gambling opportunities.
- b. Very often, they come from a family environment that encourage them to gamble.
- c. They are more likely to report a preference for land-based gambling over online-based gambling, having lower self-control, and adopting a variety of superstitions and cognitive distortions.

And, incorporating the development model of Blaszczynski and Nower (2002) of gamblers, Chan (2014) has summarized the three distinctive pathways of personality development of gamblers portrayed in Chinese movies. These are:

(1) Behavioral conditioned gamblers: these gamblers are usually free from psychological problems before they start gambling. Very often, they learn gambling from their friends and relatives. Their early gambling experiences are always positive and reinforcing. But as they continue their gambling, psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and relationship and work problems appear. The focus of their problems is their loss of self-control in gambling;

(2) Emotionally vulnerable gamblers: this group of gamblers, in contrast with the first group, have significant psychological problems prior to their development of gambling habits. Thus, they might, rather unconsciously, seek gambling for emotional escape. Women are over-represented in this group. For these gamblers, helping them to understand and solve their emotional problems is the key in the treatment process;

(3) Anti-social/impulsive gamblers: this last group gamblers, prior to their acquisition of gambling habits, usually have a criminal record and a history of arrests, and/or substance abuse addictions and dependence. These gamblers have significant personal/emotional problems. The personality characteristics of the antisocial gamblers are impulsiveness, the lack of moral reasoning, and the inability to make rational decision in life in general. These gamblers often do not seek treatment voluntarily as they seldom have insight to their own problems.

In the analysis of the identity of gamblers in Chinese gambling movies, Chan and his colleagues (2014) have analyzed the gambling movies made in Hong Kong in the period 1970-2006. There have been few, if any, reported study on the identity and the clinical construction of gamblers from Chinese movies after 2006. The present study thus intends to fill in this research gap. We would attempt to research on the identity and the personality of female gamblers in movies with gambling themes produced in Hong Kong from 2001 to 2016. In the current study, our hypotheses are:

- (1) The portrayal of female gamblers has significantly changed from a negative perspective in the gambling movies made in the 2000s to a more positive and socially acceptable perspective on movies produced after 2010;
- (2) A significant shift in the protagonists' motivation of gambling and life in general can be observed in the movies during this period.

Method

Materials:

As shown in Table 1, the authors surveyed all the Chinese movies produced in Hong from 2000 to 2016 and carefully selected the following eleven movies with gambling genres.

English	Title in Chinese	Release year
A Gambler's Story	(一個爛賭的傳說)	2001
Fat Choi Spirit	(嚟咕嚟咕新年財)	2002
Bet to Basic	(打雀英雄傳)	2006
House of Mahjong	(嚟咕嚟咕對對碰)	2007
My Wife Is a Gambling Maestro	(我老婆係賭聖)	2008
Poker King	(撲克王)	2009
Mr. and Mrs. Gambler	(爛賭夫鬥爛賭妻)	2012
From Vegas to Macau I	(賭城風雲)	2014
From Vegas to Macau II	(賭城風雲 II)	2015
From Vegas to Macau III	(賭城風雲 III)	2016
Book of Love	(北京遇上西雅圖之不二情書)	2016

Table 1: Chinese Movies Produced in Hong Kong from 2000-2016

Procedure

The current research project employed a qualitative approach. All the movies were examined in details by two raters who are also the authors of this writing. The first author is an aspiring psychologist in Upper Iowa University (Hong Kong center). She has a great interest in psychology and aiming to promote well-being. She is currently the mentee of the second author, who is an experienced psychologist with over 20 years of clinical experiences. To date, the second author has co-authored three books on gambling. His research team has presented over 45 research papers in international conferences in gambling studies. Both raters are ethnic Chinese and can understand all the Chinese dialogues in the movies.

This investigation utilized qualitative content analysis on the genre and characters of 11 gambling movies. Content analysis is a method used to analyse qualitative data (Gondim & Bendassolli, 2014). This approach allows researchers to take qualitative data and to transform it into quantitative data. The technique can be used for data in many different formats, for example interview transcripts, film, and movie analysis (Chan & Ohtsuka, 2011).

In the analysis of the movie characters, the researchers first developed “coding units,” which varied widely depending on the data being measured. For example, when the researchers wanted to assess the motivation of the gamblers in the movie, the coding units were the particular behaviors or words that the characters explained the motives of their gambling. These “coding units” were then gathered under specific headings or “themes.” Further, relevant dialogues that represented the themes were recorded and they formed important pieces of materials for the analysis. In the current study, the gambling behavior of the lead characters in the movies were critically examined. The purpose was to discover the common themes on their motivation, personality development and the gambling behavior in the stories.

Results

a. Demographics:

- 1) Age: The movies do not give out details of the ages of the women gamblers. All the protagonists are young, usually in their 20s and early 30s.
- 2) Occupation: The protagonists come from all walks of life. There are a casino dealer, a nightclub manager, an office worker, a boss in a criminal gang and a professional gambler. One gambler is unemployed. One interesting common characteristic is that all protagonists are attractive young Chinese women.

b. Games:

- 1) Most common games in the movies are Taiwanese mah-jong and card games, casino games.

c. Thematic analysis on the identity and the motivation of the female gamblers:

- 1) The shift in the identities of female gamblers: The movies in 2001-2007 usually portray the female gamblers in a negative light. They are often young attractive women with little career development. The majority of them come from a humble working class background as they fail to achieve a college or professional education. The prototypical character is Ah Gi in *"House of Mahjong"* (2007). Gigi is an attractive young woman with little career and educational success. Aimless and without purposes in life, she plans on cheating others in mah-jong in order to get rich. The movie portrays a negative image of a manipulative young woman who cheats in gambling for quick money.

A similar theme appears in *"Fat Choi Spirit"* (2002), where Gigi seeks to improve her mah-jong and interpersonal skills to impress her boyfriend, Andy. In the movie, she is portrayed as an emotional person with significant problems in self-control. And through learning new skills in mahjong, she wins back the approval and the true love. This pattern of gambling of seeking the approval and the love of others also forms the theme of *"Bet to Basic"* (2006)."

As a movie genre, the movies in this period often depicts the female gamblers as attractive women who are deeply in love with their partners and they gamble for maintaining their romantic relationship. In the outcome of the movies, they often find their true love with a happy ending.

In all these movies, some of the defining personality characters of the female gamblers include mood disturbance, negative childhood experiences, and emotional vulnerability which originates from frustrations in love relationships. However, in the movies produced from 2008 to 2016, there is a significant shift in the gambling motivation among the female gamblers. A good example can be seen in *"My Wife Is a Gambling Maestro"* (2008) which is the first positive portrayal of female gambling. The female lead character, Na-Na, is

presented as an intelligent and attractive young woman. She is an excellent Kung Fu fighter. Further, she has perfect gambling skills. In contrast, her husband is an emotionally fragile and non-assertive figure who seeks protection from the wife. Through her efforts and strong will, she beats the opponents at the ending of the movie. Her story casts a similar vignette of the male gambling hero story in the “*God of Gamblers (1990)*” starred by Chow Yun Fat.

A similar theme on the positive portrayals of female gamblers is evident in the “*Form Vegas to Macau series (2014-2016)*.” The protagonist (Molly) in the story is a successful career woman, who gambles for career advancement and personal success. She assumes very much a prototype of a successful woman of the 21st century.

Thus, the first hypothesis is supported.

2) The motivation of gambling

In the movies produced prior 2008, the motivation for gambling for the female gambler emphasize on relationship issues. The gamblers either gamble to escape from emotional problems or gamble to please the partner. This depiction is seen in the “*A gambler’s Story (2001)*.” The female protagonist, named Princess in the movie, presents a number of emotional problems. She is depicted as moody, risk taking and has poor coping skills and low self-esteem that might link to childhood experiences of inadequacy, inferiority, and rejection. For her, gambling represents a venue of emotional escape.

On a similar genre, Gigi, the attractive yet emotional vulnerable lady in “*Fat Choi Spirit (2002)*”, gamble to please her boyfriend, Andy. Gigi has bad temper and has significant problems in self-control. On one occasion, she throws all the mah-jong on the floor during a game set. Thus, to help on issues of self-control, her boyfriend, Andy, trains her the skills of mah-jong as he believes that if one’s mah-jong skills are well developed, one’s characters are also good. To Gigi, the motivation for gambling is for the development of positive trait of resiliency and humility.

However, in movies after 2008, there is a significant shift of gambling motivation among female gamblers. Though relationship and romance are still important elements in women’s lives, career success and personal growth are brilliantly highlighted for the female gamblers in recent Chinese movies. In the “*Form Vegas to Macau series (2014-2016)*,” Molly is a tycoon in a major corporation. In the movie, she is portrayed as an independent, assertive and successful businesswoman, a prototype of the successful women in 2010s.

A similar depiction of female gambler is evident in “*My Wife Is a Gambling Maestro (2008)*,” where the female protagonist, Lung Ying Ying once says, “The most important thing in a woman’s life is love. (一個女人最重要係愛情).” In this movie, we discover the reversal of the depiction of the hero figure. In this movie, Na Na is described as a confident, assertive and independent person. In contrast, her husband, Chow Chai Lun, is a social failure with little career development and achievement. The characterization of the hero genre is the

reversal of the usual Kung Fu and Chinese gambling movies such as Chow Yun Fat's "*God of Gamblers series (1989-1991)*," where the male hero is usually depicted as intelligent, brave and risk-taking and would save the women around him at all costs.

Thus, the second hypothesis is supported.

Discussion

In our current study, we have examined eleven gambling movies produced in Hong Kong. We discover a significant shift of identity and personality among female gamblers. Movie, as an integral element of popular culture, represents the public concerns, hopes and dreams and problems in a particular community. Hong Kong, a former British Colony and currently a Special Administrative Region under the People's Republic of China, has long been considered as a melting pot of Chinese and Western cultures. In this predominantly Chinese community in the southern tip of China, Chinese traditions form the basic values and the life styles of the majority of people. Incorporating the findings of gambling researchers in Chinese gambling movies of 1980s through 2000s (Chan & Ohtsuka, 2007, 2008; Chan & Ohtsuka, 2011; Ohtsuka & Chan, 2009), we find three types of female identities representing three distinct generations of Chinese women in this community:

A. Desperate housewives (1980s to 1990s)

Movies produced in the 1980s and 1990s often carry a negative portrayal of female gamblers. In these movies, they are often depicted as women with little education and career prospects. Their games of choice are often mah-jong and Mark Six lottery (the major public lottery game in Hong Kong). Usually, they play mah-jong in the afternoons. The games last only a few hours as they have to prepare dinner for the husband and the children at night. They do not gamble a large amount of money. None of these characters ever play in the casinos. In these movies, most of the gamblers do not win big in the games. Some even loses money in the process. Deep down, these gambling movies convey a moral message to the viewers: A good woman should focus on family issues and children and should not gamble. A game of mah-jong, where the risk is relatively small, is acceptable provided that the players have to fulfil the fundamental household duties (caring of children and cooking at night) after the mah-jong game in the afternoons.

B. Ally McBeals or moody singles (2000s)

Female protagonists in Chinese gambling movies in 2000s often demonstrates signs and symptoms of emotional disturbances. Their gambling often represents an attempt of emotional escape. A dialogue of the protagonist, Princess, in "*A Gambler's Story (2001)*" can well illustrate this. Talking to her boyfriend, who is a problem gambler, she says, "I have not been happy for a long time until I met you. Now I know what happiness is (我已經好耐好耐唔記得咩叫開心，直到我認識咗你，原來開心係咁樣)." The emotionally vulnerable gambler prototype might represent many women gamblers at that era. Many of these gamblers are not married. And they do not need to rush home to prepare dinners desperately after the game. Instead, they might gamble in the casinos and they might wager a larger amount of money as the movies demonstrate.

C. The successful businesswomen

Movies produced in 2010s portray female gamblers as successful persons. Molly in *“From Vegas to Macau II (2014)”* is the cultural prototype of this era. She is the boss of a major crime organization – She represents a career-oriented, attractive, independent, brave and daring, and resilient over failures and frustrations in life. She is a role model for the contemporary Chinese career woman. Molly represents the success and struggles of the new generation of the Hong Kong successful women. Deep down, she has significant relationship problems. And gambling is a part of her life. Her story speaks for career-minded professional women who seek for personal success and advancement.

As we strive to be objective in our analysis of Chinese gambling movies and the identities of contemporary women gamblers, our efforts are often baffled and, may be somewhat compromised, by the limited amount of Chinese gambling movies produced in the last 15 years. Added to our difficulties is the fact that all of the movies are made by commercial film companies. To attract a wide audiences, many of the scenes and actions in gambling are exaggerated in the movies. Nonetheless, we trust our endeavors would help us understand the female gamblers in the movies. For the Chinese female gamblers in the 2010s, our conclusion does not concur with the argument of Ohtsuka and Chan (2009), who formulated their theories from movies of an earlier decade. We trust that the majority of contemporary female gamblers are no longer “desperate housewives whose daily gambling sessions are an only means of breaking the monotony pervading their otherwise unremarkable existence (Ohtsuka & Chan, p. 237).” Many of the gamblers are intelligent business women and members of elite professionals. Some of them gamble for emotional escape; others gamble with partners to make them happy and some play the games for personal success and career advancement. These diverse motivations and pathways development are evident in the identity and personality of female gamblers as portrayed in Chinese gambling movies.

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