The Myth of Unproductivity: Leisure and Change in Early Twentieth Century China

By Jeremy Paguibitan[1]

The Republican Era of China, dating from 1912-1950, was one of great social upheavals. From its beginnings in the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, that forced the Qing Dynasty to step down, many reformers promoted the idea that Western modernization was the way to build the new China. Thus, these reformers attacked anything associated with the former Qing Dynasty, attacking leisurely activities in particular as the cause of the dynasty's (and the standing of China's) downfall.[2] However, modernization did not happen as reformers had hoped. The young republic became unstable after the revolution, with a complete breakdown in order happening from 1916-1928, and foreign invasion by Japan during the 1930s-40s. In attempts to modernize the country, government officials and intellectuals attempted to portray leisure as one of the major enemies of this new China.[3] They promoted the idea that people should be joining committees of action and commit to work instead of "wasting" their time in leisure. In the eyes of the government and many intellectuals, it was unfathomable that leisure could be a productive aspect of Chinese society, at least not without heavy reform. However, the attitudes toward leisure by intellectuals and the government contradicted their actions, as they used places such as teahouses and played games to further their various political agendas, thus pointing towards the relative importance of these locations and pastimes as influential forces. There are three activities that are generally associated with the shadier and unproductive side of Chinese society, those being spending time in the teahouse and the related gambling games of mahjong and fantan.

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[1] The author, being also an editor, recused themselves from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

[2] Maggie Greene, "The Game People Played: Mahjong in Modern Chinese Society and Culture," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 5, no. 1 (2016), 20.

[3] Ibid., 20.

These leisure activities reflected a changing Chinese society both on a local and national level, whether it is through the examination of spectacle, its use in political expression, or how it reflected the state of progress throughout the Republican Era.

Leisure was an area of spectacle in the Republic of China (ROC), due to the sensationalism that the media afforded it, though the context behind the spectacle revealed the importance of such institutions to changing society. Critics of leisure often targeted institutions that were considered shady, though not outright illegal, such as teahouses or forms of gambling, and then connected these institutions to more detestable aspects of society, such as opium smoking or gang activity. These ideas were projected in newspapers. For example, in Nantong, a city in the southeast province of Jiangsu, the newspaper *Xinbao* commonly described teahouse operators as "conscienceless, peremptory, manipulative, or violent."[4] The newspapers emphasized the instances of violence that took place in these teahouses, and as a result, these stories overshadowed the people who were just trying to make a living in the progressing world. Another example of the spectacle associated with teahouses was a widely publicized incident that happened in 1929 in Chengdu, a city in the southwestern province of Sichuan, the 1929 "Murder at the Oriental Tea Balcony," involving the death of a teahouse worker by its owner.[5] The violent nature of the story attracted much negative attention, defining the teahouse as a place of conflict and violence. However, by doing so, newspapers also unintentionally showed how the teahouse was an integral part of the social life in communities, and how knowledge of events can

[4] Qin Shao, "Tempest over Teapots: The Vilification of Teahouse Culture in Early Republican China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57, no. 4 (November 1998), 1026.

[5] Di Wang, "Struggling for Livelihood: Social Conflict through the Teahouse in Republican Chengdu," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2006), 247-48.

spread around quickly in the presence of the teahouse. The critiques of the teahouse show how communities were centered around them and other forms of leisure.

The well-known game of mahjong was also sensationalized as being a drain on society, a relic of the Qing Dynasty, associated with the violence and criminality of the teahouse and leisure in general. Mahjong is a 144-tile based game in which people make combinations out of various tile suites in order to make a hand, and is subject to many different local rule sets. Mahjong was a major part of the criticism of the state of leisure in Republican China as evil in part due its widespread, popular nature. Mahjong's supposed threat is visible in statements such as the reason for its 1932 ban order in the province of Kwangtung (Guangdong) in particular. An article in the English language Hong Kong based *South China Morning Post* vaguely reported the reason for the game being banned as being "detrimental to public morals," a sentiment shared by officials in the neighboring province Kwangsi (Guangxi).[6] Furthermore, this view of mahjong as harmful to public morality is represented in films throughout the era, such as *Little Angel* (1935) which emphasized the moral decay of Republican Chinese society through the usage of mahjong tables in homes visually neglected as a metaphor, representing the supposed lack of morals and work ethic associated with the game.[7] Though in the end, despite a hostile attitude by some forms of media, the game still flourished, with people seemingly undeterred by its depiction, as seen in its survival until the present.

Beyond media, expanding on its association with the teahouse, mahjong was considered a "legal type" of gambling permitted in these establishments, at least in provinces where it had

[6] "Ban on Mahjong: Canton's Prohibition Against Gambling Kwangsi Example Canton, Oct. 29," *South China Morning Post (1903-1941)*, October 31, 1932.

[7] Greene, "The Game People Played: Mahjong in Modern Chinese Society and Culture," 16.

legal status.[8] Its association with the establishment portrayed it as an all corrupting vice, both a relic of the past but still relevant because of its pervasiveness. Like the teahouses, mahjong was a tool, used as a critique of societal stagnation in China as a whole, leisurely activities being a scapegoat of which detractors can easily point their fingers to as the major problems with Chinese society without having to tackle the actual problems that these activities supposedly caused, ignoring mahjong's cultural and social importance as the most popular game in China.

This is also seen in another popular gambling game, Fantan. Fantan is a game of chance. Tokens are hidden underneath a covering of some sort by a dealer on a table for fantan. Afterwards, tokens are unveiled after by the dealer, and then set aside by a croupier in stacks of four. This continues until one, two, three, or four tokens are left, the winners being those who bet correctly on how many tokens are left. The bettings takes place before the unveiling of tokens. There are variations of how you could bet, mainly concerned with betting on more than one outcome, albeit with less of a pay off. Criticism of the game of fantan came from people on top of the social hierarchy, with them arguing that it was an evil and destructive game. This critique of fantan can be seen in a 1915 article from the *South China Morning Post*, in which the author describes the moral opposition to the legalization of fantan in Canton, a city in the southern province of Guangdong. In the article, a group made up of men of the upper class petitioned the city government to stop the legalization of Fantan, with their petition stating that "a calamity will be shared not only by all classes of men, but also by women" if this legalization were to happen.[9] In this petition, these leading figures of the gentry emphasized Fantan's negative impact on the morality of society, not particularly going into detail however in how it negatively impacted it.

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[8] Shao, "Tempest over Teapots: The Vilification of Teahouse Culture in Early Republican China," 1025.

[9] (Our Own Correspondent), "Fantan in Canton: Petition Against Revival of the Evil Canton, Dec. 23," *South China Morning Post (1903-1941)*, December 24, 1915.

Further newspaper stories expand on these vague threats, emphasizing the "tragedies caused by heavy gamblers sacrificing the interests of their family to their deadly passion of fantan."[10] However, there are no records discovered so far that state this as the norm, rather than the exception. Instead of ruining lives constantly like the newspapers purported, fantan provided people with a means to network and socialize in this era, through places such as the tanguan, the building where the game was enjoyed. Such newspapers ignore the fact that these places were the cornerstone of many people's lives, employing "more than 2,000 people in the city" in Canton at the very least.[11] In regards to fantan, the media highlighted the excess of leisure but seemed to reject the fact that these institutions provided a livelihood, that they were important in the daily lives of many people during this era, from customers, employees, and even the government. In Guangdong, according to a 1937 Japanese record, "tens of thousands of former employees of those *tanguan* that had closed their doors due to the prohibition of gambling imposed in October 1936 suddenly swelled the ranks of the unemployed."[12] Note that this observation came at a time when the Japanese had a considerable presence in the area, with a puppet state set up in North China in conjunction with the Republican government launching "powerful campaigns launched against the Communists".[13] Despite criticism of the destruction caused, these Fantan houses provided a means of living and normalcy during this unstable era, especially in the early-mid 1930s with the threat of Japan looming in the north and a country disunified, with conflict still rife with communists. Like the criticism of mahjong and teahouse

[10] Xavier Paulès, "Gambling in China Reconsidered: Fantan in South China During the Early Twentieth Century," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 2010), 189.

[11] Ibid., 189

[12] Ibid., 189.

[13] Rana Mitter, "The War Years, 1937-1949," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China*, by Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Oxford University Press, 2016), 152.

visitation, criticism related to the game of fantan focused on the spectacle of destruction it supposedly caused. A deeper look into these activities reveals how important leisure was during this era to the common populace.

Leisure was a political tool, used by both private citizens and the national government during the Republican Era. Teahouses were an outlet for political expression, with their accessibility making them an important political site in the ROC. On a local level, the teahouse was a place that illuminated the major changes of Chinese society through its customers. Conversations about the dissatisfaction regarding the new "modern" regime were plentiful, with overheard conversation pieces such as one between two old men on the outcome of Xinhai Revolution, "The happiness promised in 1911 has not reached us," commenting on the failure of the 1911 Xinhai Revolution to provide prosperity, or even a sense of stability.[14] Though not overt political action, conversations such as these inherently painted the teahouse as sites encouraging the exchange of free thoughts in a public space, despite the heavy surveillance by both local and national government. The government in return recognized the potential political capital of leisure, and sought to control this sphere for political clout. In the public sphere, nationalist propaganda filled the tea house as, "government regulations required all teahouses to provide government-selected books and newspapers."[15] The government designated teahouses as places to promote propaganda, and this contradicts the notion of leisure in general as a waste of time. The tea house functioned as the marketplace of ideas, in which the local community was connected to the larger political discourse pervading the country. The government recognized this connection, and targeted these places, along with other avenues of leisure, to exert their

[14] Di Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 233.

[15] Ibid., 238.

authority and to influence the discourse to benefit them. Control of leisure was an assertion of the government's legitimacy, by using it to educate and assert its devotion to the morality of the state.

This political expression inherent in the teahouse is replicated in mahjong, one of the most popular national pastimes. Like the teahouse, mahjong provided socialization, and provided a background to political discussion. However, unlike the teahouse, mahjong was both public and private, enjoyed in places such as the teahouse, but also in the safety of one's own home. The ability of mahjong to induce political discourse is present in how Republican intellectual, Wu Han, utilized its private nature; under the guise of hosting mahjong games he "managed to host gatherings to discuss politics and events at his home" despite heavy government surveillance by using the shuffling of tiles to block out noise.[16] Hence, leisure activities provided an avenue for discussing politics in local Republican China, both in public and private spaces even as the nationalist government attempted to assert more personal control in the later years of the republic. Mahjong's flexible nature as a private game allowed discussion of politics with less fear of government surveillance, which also shows why the government interfered so much with the leisurely activities they could access, in order to gain as much political capital as possible in public before people withdrew into private pastimes, where the pleasures and discussions enjoyed there were not as accessible or malleable to the government's will.

If mahjong represented leisurely activities that could not be controlled easily, government regulation of fantan highlighted the aggressive control government officials attempted to exert over leisure where they could. The assertion of the government's will and ideals is especially

[16] Greene, "The Game People Played: Mahjong in Modern Chinese Society and Culture," 21.

present in the attempt to regulate fantan, an area where "the authorities were concerned with the stigma represented by *fantan* legalization for their legitimacy."[17] Once again, leisure was an important area to tackle because of the need to appear as the rightful government, especially in an era as turbulent as the Republican Era. However, despite the fact that banning activities related to it could give the government some authority, it also prohibited them from enjoying the revenue brought in by these institutions. As mentioned before, there was much opposition in Canton to the possible legalization of fantan by the elite. An article from 1917 talking about the presence of fantan in Canton indicated that the opposition failed, and that the lure of revenue brought in by the game was too much for authorities to ignore.[18] The authority that could be gained did not justify the loss of revenue.

However, a 1926 article once again discusses the legalization of fantan once again, with it stating that "the financial administration in Canton is about to legalize fantan gambling in the city again", indicating that sometime between 1917 and 1926 the city government banned the game again, presumably for moral reasons presented before.[19] Once again, it seems that the allure of profits from fantan were too great to keep up whatever bans they had, and between 1925 and 1931 "… the fantan taxes yielded 68 million yuan of revenue for the province of Guangdong…", indicating its contribution to society.[20] The pattern of the legalization and illegalization also revealed how the government utilized fantan, and leisure in general, to assert their authority. In this case, the Canton city and Guangdong province administrations flexed their

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[17] Paulès, "Gambling in China Reconsidered: Fantan in South China During the Early Twentieth Century," 186.

[18] "Fan-Tan Profits," *South China Morning Post (1903-1941)*, July 25, 1917.

[19] "Canton Affairs: Finance Problem Bearing Heavily Canton, March 11," *South China Morning Post (1903-1941)*, March 15, 1926.

[20] Paulès, "Gambling in China Reconsidered: Fantan in South China During the Early Twentieth Century," 189.

moral authority with a ban on Fantan whenever it was necessary to raise their political capital, and then rescinded it whenever it was deemed possible, having enough political capital. Thus, it was imperative that the government participate in questions of leisure whenever they came up; 'shady' activities provided much in the way of revenue and demonstration of moral authority and rightful rule. People at both the local and national government level used leisure for political gain.

As leisure reflected various ways of political reflection, it also reflected various societal changes in the ROC. This is despite criticism of various avenues of leisure as being a useless relic of the past, namely of the Qing Dynasty. The state of the teahouse reflected the larger societal change in one aspect by being a mirror of the state of stability in the ROC. For example, in Chengdu, during the Warlord Era, citizen Wu Yu sent out a servant to check out the situation every so often, and "If the servant reported that the neighborhood teahouses had opened, he felt safe to venture out… ."[21] In this case, the teahouse provided a sense of stability in Chengdu in such chaotic times, and reflected the abrupt and rapid change not only in the city, but through Republican China as a whole. As mentioned above, the teahouse became a space of propaganda during World War II and the Chinese Civil War, reflecting the rapidly changing times. The lack of stability represented in the teahouse correlates with the rise of crime in the later years of the Republic. Records indicate that "In 1947, the Teahouse Guild reported to the police that 'teahouses suffer an enormous loss' from theft… ."[22] This rise in theft reflected the increasingly worsening state of the Chinese economy and the faith people had in the state to provide a means of living during the Chinese Civil War of the late Republican Era. The teahouse at this stage, like

[21] Wang, *The Teahouse: Small Business, Everyday Culture, and Public Politics in Chengdu, 1900-1950*, 231.

[22] Wang, "Struggling for Livelihood: Social Conflict through the Teahouse in Republican Chengdu," 262.

its status during World War II, represented the chaotic nature of Chinese society, and signaled the arrival of rapid change, with cemented parts of daily life undergoing massive difficulties and social conflict.

The volatile and disjointed nature of societal change during this time when analyzing it through leisure is especially visible with the status of women during this time. Moving away from the teahouse, Tanguan also reflected societal change, as "the presence of women in *tanguan*, a rare sight in the late Qing, became relatively common during the 1930s."[23] The presence of people not usually associated with seedy places of leisure indicate in some part, a progressive inclusion and increased status of women into society. However, the association of the movement of women with fantan can be seen much earlier than 1930, with fears of women going to tanguan evolving from negative observations of women going out to restaurants at the present. [24] On one hand, his fear indicated that there was an already visible increased participation of women in Chinese society during the early years of the Republic, which with the example above, blossomed into their association with tangaun in the 1930s. The increased presence of women in the tanguan, and by extension leisure in general, reflects the increased participation of women in Republican Chinese society, not just confined to the household despite the wishes of men. On the other hand however, it reflected social conflict and displayed issues and obstacles to such change in participation, seen with the negative reaction to the movement of women.

Questions of social conflict, and the uneven nature of social change in China can be further seen in the popularity of mahjong amongst women in the ROC. In contrast to fantan, and its public nature in Tanguan, mahjong could be a more private affair, as stated before. As stated

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[23] Paulès, "Gambling in China Reconsidered: Fantan in South China During the Early Twentieth Century," 188.

[24] (Our Own Correspondent), "Fantan In Canton: Petition Against Revival of the Evil Canton, Dec. 23."

above with mahjong being utilized for political purposes, Mahjong provided an outlet to express modern societal issues within the household and culture. One of the stories that came out from private mahjong gatherings was that one of the participants "… was stuck at home with a husband who refused to let her work… ."[25] Mahjong gave avenues to these women to voice their discontentment with their lack of social participation and reward promised in the 1911 revolution, namely the promise of more rights for women. This is similar to the previously mentioned conversation between old men about the 1911 revolution, though it is more of a critique of a lack of cultural progress rather than political change. The enjoyment of leisure reveals conflicting reports of societal change and progress, revealed in the contrasting role of women in fanguan and mahjong. Furthermore, as with the teahouse, gambling also provided a sort of sanctuary in the ROC. Though unlike the teahouse, the sanctuary did not come in the form of extreme change as the teahouses in the Warlord Era. Leisure provided a place where marginalized people, such as women, could safely participate in society, whether simply socializing in a safe environment such as women playing fantan, or critiquing the system, in the case of Mahjong, without fear of reprisal.

In any case, shady leisurely activities such as teahouse drinking, and the gambling games above, got intertwined with the larger societal changes during the Republican Era of China. Even the tiniest conversation that took place during these activities and in these places holds larger ramifications for issues in a rapidly changing world. Leisure, despite attempts of heavy reformation and surveillance by the government for the sake of a new, modern China, managed

[25] Greene, "The Game People Played: Mahjong in Modern Chinese Society and Culture," 17.

to reflect and display issues quite clearly, whether it was their status during times of struggle or simply through local gossip.

Leisure was not only for innocuous diversions from work, but it was also a thing of livelihood (even through spectacle), a political tool used by all walks of life, and it was a marker of Chinese progress, or lack thereof. Though the media at the time focused on the violence and supposed moral degeneracy related to places of leisure, these same ideas of spectacle also reveal the importance of leisure to the livelihood of the community. Though decried as unproductive, people from all parts of society used it to advance their ideologies, whether in plain public view or in private. Finally, the state of leisure represented the state of progress and stability in Chinese society, providing critiques in progress. Through the lens of leisure, one can provide a three-dimensional view of the progression of Republican China.

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