

DEALT A BAD HAND

Casinos target the Bay Area's Asian communities to pump up business Story by Dean Blaine



Photo illustration by Jack Bland

A pair of regal Chinese lion sculptures, the type traditionally employed to ward off evil spirits, guard the entrance to Lucky Chances casino in Colma. Inside, Chinese characters adorn the walls of the Asian game rooms. Large gold characters representing, "prosperity," "happiness," and "fortune," shine like beacons on the busy gaming tables below.

Pai Gow Poker is the game of choice here. A popular version of standard poker, Pai Gow Poker is associated with Pai Gow, the traditional Chinese domino game. The action is fast. The players toss \$10 chips around like pennies. Though their eyes are glazed and their heads drooped, they remain meticulous and determined. When one player quietly slips from his seat, defeated, a well-dressed pit manager, who oversees the players and dealers, moves to the seat and announces, "Seat open! Seat open! Pai Gow Poker! Seat Open!" He motions to patrons watching the action at another table and repeats the call in another language. A smiling, young man takes him up on his offer, and all seats are again full. On this night, nearly 100 percent of the players in the games room are of Asian descent. On average, Asians constitute approximately 70 percent of the total crowd tonight. Though the Bay Area's Asian population stands at approximately 20 percent, according to the 2000 United States Census, Asians constitute 50, 60, even 70 percent of those who frequent area gaming establishments, say experts on problem gambling and casino representatives.

"Gambling has been a popular and culturally accepted form of recreation and social interaction within Asian communities for hundreds of years," says Dr. Durand Jacobs, clinical professor of medicine at Loma Linda University Medical Center and founder of the Project on Asian Problem Gambling. Games are played at home among family and friends, and gambling is often associated with holidays and celebrations, Jacobs says. But here in the United States, gambling is big business—and casinos, lotteries, and card rooms play to this cultural affinity, he says. They employ dealers who speak the customer's primary language, provide games in cultural traditions, and celebrate traditional holidays. "They create a very welcoming place for Asians and it becomes a magnet for people in those communities," Jacobs says.

Many Asian-American communities are suffering, according to experts on problem gambling.

Jacob's Project on Asian Problem Gambling distributes brochures about getting help with gambling in 11 different Asian languages: Korean, Thai, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Chinese (Simplified), Chinese (Traditional),

Vietnamese, Japanese, Ilocano, and Tagalog.

"They really exploit the weaknesses of our people and I don't think that's fair," says Hieu Tran, a social worker with Santa Clara County Social Services and a founder of San Jose's Together Against Gambling. Tran, who treats child neglect cases, says that about 20 percent of the cases he sees have their roots in problem gambling. The parents leave the children at home or alone in the car while they're gambling, Tran says.

In a 1997 survey conducted by NICOS Chinese Health Coalition in San Francisco's Chinatown, nearly 70 percent of 1,800 Chinese American adults in San Francisco listed gambling as a problem in their community. That same year, two UC Berkeley students surveyed 150 Chinese in Portsmouth Square, an area in Chinatown. Of those surveyed, 30 percent admitted to gambling at least once a week and nearly 15 percent identified themselves as problem gamblers.

Problem gamblers affect others in the family and community, according to Tina Shum, family counselor with Donaldina Cameron House, a Presbyterian church in Chinatown. About one-third of the domestic violence cases that Shum sees are related to gambling.

The Asian market may be essential to the success of area casinos and many California card rooms and Native American casinos actively target those in the Asian community.

"There are many casinos located in California that are dependent on Asian communities for their continued success," says Tom Bowling, vice president with Hollywood Park Casino in Southern California and board member of the California Council on Problem Gambling. Some of the geographic locations for California's card rooms were chosen because of their proximity to large Asian populations, Bowling says.

Once a location is developed, a marketing campaign begins.

Casino San Pablo targets the Asian population through advertisements in Asian-language publications and on Asian television, according to Sally Hogarty, the casino's director of public relations. Hogarty admits that the local Asian population is essential to the success and continued operation of Casino San Pablo and that the casino caters to the Asian-American community. Casino San Pablo celebrates Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cambodian New Year and contracts various Asian music promoters to bring in celebrities and performers from Vietnam and Cambodia as entertainment, Hogarty says.

Lucky Chances runs television commercials on KTSF, a Chinese-language

station carried all over the Bay Area. One Lucky Chances spot features a dapper Asian gentleman at a Lucky Chances card table with a large pile of chips. His friends look on with envy, amazed. The short spot concludes, as the gentleman, now with an attractive and enamored young lady on his arm, smiles triumphantly.

The larger casinos target this market too. Harrah's in Reno holds an Asian Summer Festival. Buses stocked with eager gamblers depart Stockton Street in San Francisco's Chinatown each morning, headed for Harrah's or one of the Native American casinos like Cache Creek.

Some in the Asian community experience devastating losses from gambling.

Tan Khong, who asked that his real name not be used, is seated at a small table in San Jose's Asian Pacific Resource Center discussing his addiction. The regular Monday night Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meeting is on a break and the others are outside smoking. Hunched and nervous, Khong's hands keep busy as he speaks; he twiddles his thumbs and cracks his knuckles as he stares down at the table.

Khong, an admitted problem gambler, immigrated to the United States from Vietnam in 1975 as a political refugee. America was "like heaven," he says. He could go to the local card rooms and pick up a couple hundred dollars a day. He liked the atmosphere. "When you're on the table, they make you feel important," he says. "They make you feel like you're a big shot or something when you bet a lot of money." After Khong saw others winning \$30,000 a day, he was hooked. The high was short lived, however, and soon Khong was in serious trouble.

Khong was a business owner, a wholesaler of ceramic tiles and construction materials. Sitting in the GA meeting, his eyes fill with tears as he describes what he calls his "worst day." One of his best customers entrusted him with what he refers to as a "large amount of cash" to purchase construction materials for use the following day. Khong is not sure why, maybe he felt lucky, but he took the cash to Garden City, a San Jose card room. He played Pai Gow Poker and his luck didn't hold. Within a matter of hours, he lost all the cash. He panicked. His customer was expecting the materials the following day, so he pawned his watch, but it was not enough. He was scared and nervous and turned to his family. His brother agreed to help, but Khong had to promise his family that he would stop gambling.

Khong didn't stop though, and his family began avoiding him. "They didn't believe me anymore," he says.

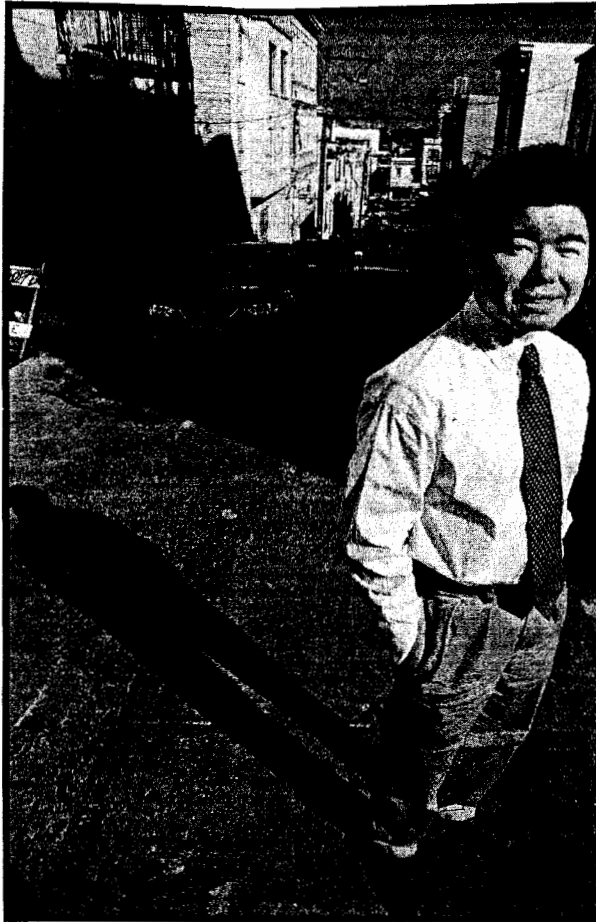
Khong says he spent most of his time at Garden City wandering around like a homeless person. In six months, Khong lost his business, his house, his car, his family, and his girlfriend. The day he sold his house, Khong says, he lost \$65,000 in a gambling binge.

José Liu is leading the Gambler's Anonymous meeting and trying to overcome his own gambling problems. Liu, whose name has been changed here at his request, immigrated to San Jose from the Philippines in 1969, found a good job as an electrical engineer, and he and his wife started a family. But something was missing, he said. He wanted lots of money, quick money. He wanted the American dream. He had played cards and Mah Jong since he was eight years old and gambling came naturally. Soon, he was frequenting area casinos.

Liu made up excuses to get out of work. He stayed up all night gambling. He spent all his money at cards and had to walk the seven or eight miles home in the early morning. He spent what he called his "support money," his money for food, rent, and clothing. "I juggled between family life and gambling," Liu says. And more often than not, he says he neglected his family responsibilities. Within two years, Liu too had gambled away his house, his job, his car, and his family.

In response to public concerns over the gaming industry's rapid growth, the United States Congress created the National Gambling Impact Study Commission in 1996 to study the social and economic impacts of gambling. Among its findings, the commission recommended that gambling operations voluntarily adopt and enforce set advertising guidelines, stating, "These guidelines should avoid explicit or implicit appeals to vulnerable populations..."

Governor Gray Davis appointed the first California State Gambling Commission in September 2000. In addition to approving or disapproving card club work permits and ownership licenses, the Commission was saddled with regulating California's gaming industry. In California's "Gambling Control Act," the state Legislature granted the Commission, "Regulation of advertising for the purpose of limiting exposure of children to materials promoting gambling," but made no mention of advertising targeting California's specific ethnic groups.



Kent Woo, director of the Chinese Health Coalition, has been involved in a gambling prevention outreach program for five years. The outreach program offers numerous prevention services including workshops and a gambling addiction hotline. Photo by Jack Bland

Though the California Gambling Control Commission is aware of gambling problems within California's Asian communities, "We really haven't studied it yet," says J.K. Sasaki, gambling control commissioner. "This is something we may want to look into," she said, but the commission is understaffed and underfunded and the regulatory wheels are just starting to turn.

Putting the relatively new commission's position in perspective, Sasaki said, New Jersey's state gambling commission has a staff of 350 and oversees only 12 casinos in a three-square-mile area, the California Gambling Commission has a staff of 35 and regulates the hundreds of Native American casinos and card rooms in the state. Furthermore, the California State Gambling Commission's budget is \$4.7 million while New Jersey's budget is \$25 million, according to Sasaki.

Those who call for change in gambling industry marketing policies are growing impatient.

"There's no real commitment on the part of the governor or anybody on his staff to address problem gambling," says Tom Tucker, executive director of the California Council on Problem Gambling and a member of the Gaming Policy Advisory Committee. Tucker stressed the need for a gambling prevalence study conducted in the Asian communities. "It's hard to get your hands on a problem if you don't know the extent of the problem," he says.

Kent Woo, executive director of NICOS Chinese Health Coalition and a founder of the Chinese Community Problem Gambling Project, would like to see the gambling industry step up. "I feel that the gaming industry should take some responsibility for the problem that they're causing," Woo says, "The alcohol industry has done it.

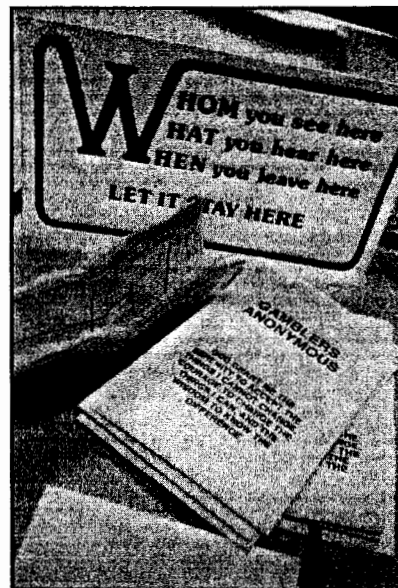
The gaming industry has done it in some countries, but they're not doing it here in the U.S." Woo recently returned from a problem gambling conference in Toronto, Canada where the Canadians, he says, are addressing their problem gambling. Two percent of the gross revenue from gambling in Canada goes to the organizations that treat problem gamblers, he said. Woo would like to see that happen here.

Woo thinks the gambling industry might find itself in trouble if it doesn't address problem gambling issues. Casino dealers could be held accountable for those with gambling problems just as bartenders are liable for letting someone leave their bar and drive home drunk, Woo says.

For the time being, however, casinos continue to attract individuals like José Liu, whose family eventually left him in 1976 as a result of his problem gambling.

Today, Liu attends his regular Gamblers Anonymous meeting "religiously." Asian-American students caught playing poker at school have to attend the meeting, Liu tells them that they have a choice, they don't have to gamble.

The youngsters grin and brush him off. "We only play for fun," they say. [X]



The Asian Pacific Resource Center in San Jose offers a gamblers anonymous meeting every Monday to try to help the gambling problem within the Asian community. Photo by Jack Bland