

An Li. *Betting on the Civil Service Examinations: The Lottery in Late Qing China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023 xxi+348 pages. Paperback, \$34.95.

In this book, An Li tries to explore the relationship between the development of the Weixing lottery in late Qing China and its social impacts. She is particularly interested in three impacts: creating a new community, increasing people's understanding of the civil service examination, and changing government practices.

The book is divided into seven chapters. In Chapter 1, Li illustrates the historical evolution of gaming and gambling in China. First, she reviews the development of gaming, gambling, and lottery in Chinese history. She argues that gaming was encouraged in China as a way to learn and cultivate a strategic mindset gaming and was approved by Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Chinese scholars in general. Second, she illustrates how games and gambling have evolved from casual into standardized bets, from single players to multiple players, from individual gamblers to professional organizers, from counting dots or holes to printed games, and from elites to masses. Third, she points out that a lottery was permitted and licensed in Guangdong in the late nineteenth century, although gambling was illegal throughout Chinese history. She concludes that those changes built a solid foundation for the lottery.

Chapter 2 discusses the community that the lottery made historically. Using the White Pigeon Tickets and the Mountain Lottery as examples, Li first shows how the lottery community was built composed of players and organizers before the Weixing lottery was developed. Then, Li provides a brief introduction to the Weixing lottery and its development in Guangdong, including a brief history, betting targets, making bets, receipts of betting, proofreading, prize lists, prizes and profits, etc. The main purpose of such a description is to demonstrate that the Weixing lottery created not only a new entertainment but also a new community that is large-

scaled, involving many people and jobs; it is socially oriented and shares simultaneous time and space.

Li argues, in Chapter 3, that civil service examination remained a central feature of the late nineteenth century, which was the official betting source for the Weixing lottery. In addition, she argues that the Weixing lottery involves a series of rational, calculated, and interconnected activities, at least for serious players. The players need to know which examination to bet on, how to select the surnames to bet, how the candidates performed in the past, and other important factors such as title, age, family background, academic affiliation, and competitors in order to win. By analyzing other lottery games that were popular in China at the same time, Li concludes that “China shared a similar nature with the emergent betting mindset elsewhere and the acceptance of a speculative economy in the nineteenth century.”

Chapter 4 provides a historical analysis of government regulations related to the Weixing lottery from 1861 to 1884. This period can be further divided into three stages. From 1861 to 1863, Weixing was temporarily licensed for two years by the central government as the emergency response to the Taiping Rebellion in the 1850s. The second stage runs from 1863 to 1884. Although Weixing lottery was officially prohibited during this time, it still served as an ambiguous source of revenue for local government in the name of “fines” and “donations.” To respond to the increasing revenue pressure as the direct result of the Sino-French war, the Weixing lottery was once again licensed in 1884. Clearly, banning and licensing the Weixing lottery involved a long and complicated negotiation process involving not only local and central government but also Weixing merchants.

Three main issues were discussed by the author in Chapter 5. First, she reconstructs the scandal of the civil service examination in 1885 based on previous historical accounts. She

points out that although the civil examination scandal was not uncommon in history, this particular one is significant because it took place right after the government had licensed the Weixing lottery. Then, she discusses both local and central government's efforts and measures for restoring and reassuring the integrity of the civil examinations, including rectifying rumors, conducting investigations, and reprimanding the officials involved. Third, she discusses why and how the government tried to restore the legitimacy of Weixing despite the scandal. She concludes that although there were different opinions and problems, both occurring and potential, the government dedicated to keeping licensing the Weixing lottery because it was one of the major sources of revenue for the government, especially for Guangdong province.

In Chapter 6, under the title "The Crossroads of 1885," the author tries to demonstrate that "the administration of Weixing helped form new elite identities" in China. By briefly reviewing Zhang Zhidong's life and career, Li first argues that Zhang's perspective and governing style changed significantly when he was serving as the governor-general of Guangdong and Hubei from 1884 to 1889. She further argues that Zhang's governing rationales also changed. Zhang not only supported the licensing Weixing lottery to increase revenue and to fund public projects but also used many financial and commercial experts, often foreign-educated, to serve as his advisors and assistants. Lastly, Li demonstrates a few significant individuals who achieved elite status with their connections to the Weixing lottery.

Chapter 7 is the least interesting and relevant chapter to the central theme of the book. It discusses gambling and lottery practices among overseas Chinese. The author first raises the question about why Chinese migrants gambled. Then, she describes Chinese migrants' gambling practices in Southeast Asia as well as in North America. She notices the similarities and differences of gambling practices among Chinese migrants between these two major migration

destinations. She concludes that “lottery games traveled with migrants” and served as an important connection between overseas Chinese and her motherland. She also points out that widespread gambling in the USA was considered an ethnic problem.

Needless to say, the Weixing lottery is a less-known area in Chinese studies, given that licensed Weixing has only existed for around forty years in one province, namely Guangdong. Thus, this book made a significant contribution to filling the gap. It is an important issue to study because the Weixing lottery intersects with many social issues, such as civil examinations, government policies, public entertainment, and community shaping.

Second, the author provides relatively detailed descriptions and illustrations of the Weixing lottery, including its brief history, operations, people and organizations involved, and government policies. What is most interesting is the rationale and process of legalizing the Weixing lottery, which was conventionally perceived as a vice and even a criminal practice.

Third, the author tries to assess the impact of the Weixing lottery on Chinese society, including creating a new community, increasing understanding of the civil examination exam system, and the dynamic relationships between local and central government. She also extends her discussion of impact beyond domestic.

I have many concerns about this book; however, I can only address a few here due to the limited space for a book review. To begin with, it seems the author has very little understanding of ancient Chinese history and literacy. For instance, she wrote, “Qiu is a chess master in the Tong 通 Kingdom.” There was no such kingdom in Chinese history at all whatsoever. The word “Tongguo” means the whole country, not the Tong Kingdom. In addition, this is a very famous fable that Chinese parents often use to advise their children to stay concentrated and focused on studying. I am not trying to nitpick, but this is a fundamental, serious, and unacceptable error for

a Chinese historian. I am very puzzled how this error was not detected by different layers of “doorkeepers,” including the Harvard University Asia Center.

In addition, several of Li’s major conclusions are groundless. First, she concludes that the Weixing lottery helped gambling evolve from elite gaming practice to mass participation. This is simply not true. Gambling has a long history in China for over 3,000 years “persisted among people from all walks of life, from emperors, and government officials, to ordinary people.” Second, she argues that dealing with the Weixing lottery helped Zhang Zhidong change his governing perspective and style in 1885. In fact, it is well-studied and known that Zhang already changed his governing perspective and style when he served as the governor of Shanxi province from 1881 to 1884. That’s why, consequently, he supported the proposal of licensing the Weixing lottery when he became of the governor-general of Guangdong and Hubei in late 1884. Third, the author argues that elites “grew influential based on their knowledge of state finance” in 1885. This is simply not true. There were many influential elites based on their knowledge of state finance in Chinese history, including Gung Zhong of the Warring States, Sang Hongyang of the Han Dynasty, Liu Yan of the Tang Dynasty, Wang Anshi of the Song Dynasty, and Zhang Juzheng of the Min Dynasty, and Heshen of Qing Dynasty, etc. Some of them even served as prime ministers. Fourth, the author argues that perhaps “weixing played a role, if indirectly, in ending the exam system.” This is pure speculation without any either direct or indirect evidence and elaboration. In fact, it is well-studied and known that the civil service examination system was abolished mainly because the new school system based on Western educational ideas served as a substitute for the traditional civil examination system.

Last but not least, although the author cites many historical sources in the book, I am puzzled why she failed to cite some of the existing literature, including *History of Gambling in*

Modern China (Ge, 2005), Gambling operations in late Qing Guangdong (Ho, 1998) and Gambling and Gambling Taxes in Late Qing Guangdong (He 1995). These are the most recent, relevant, and important literature for studying gambling in China.

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