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### Visiting the "Golden God": Roundtrip from Chinatown to the Blackjack Tables

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## Visiting the "Golden God": Roundtrip from Chinatown to the Blackjack Tables

By Katherine Fung

Tun Vin Ng sat at one of Fleet Bakery's tables in Manhattan's Chinatown, waiting. He held a Chinese-language newspaper and scanned the front page, peering over his gold-rimmed glasses. When news flashed on the television mounted on the wall, he craned his bald head for a better view. But mostly, he was just waiting.

A woman appeared out front at 10:30 a.m., punctual as always, clipboard in hand. Mr. Ng handed her \$20 and she gave him change and a ticket. By the time a coach bus pulled up to the curb, a small group had formed on the sidewalk. Mr. Ng greeted some other regulars in Cantonese: a retired postal worker, an elderly man with whom he sometimes shared newspapers, a grandmother who liked to play pai gow poker. He then boarded the bus with them to Mohegan Sun, the third largest casino in the United States, as he has done almost every day for the past 13 years.

I met Mr. Ng in the fall on my first trip on a Chinese casino bus.

Like most Chinese New Yorkers, I grew up knowing about the buses, despite never having taken one. They are fixtures: more than a hundred ferry immigrants from New York City's Chinese neighborhoods to casinos throughout the Northeast every day. They stop in Chinatown almost 20 times a day, picking up passengers as late as 1 a.m. The last passengers of the day wait in the vestibule of a Bank of America, a refuge from the elements.

For decades, the fleet of buses has linked Chinese immigrants, many of whom gamble casually with friends and family, to the casinos that vie for their dollars. The bus lines are as old as the casinos themselves, having arrived in Manhattan's Chinatown soon after the first casino opened in Atlantic City in 1978. May Chow, the owner of a travel agency and one of the first to operate buses along the route, said in an interview that she came up with the idea because she frequently played at Atlantic City's tables herself.

These days, mega-casinos like Mohegan Sun contract with Chinese-owned bus companies like VMC East: the casino pays the company for each trip, plus extra for every so-called VIP passenger; the bus company transports the passengers, and employs a Chinese-speaking tour guide to accompany them during the trip.

An "Asian bus program" is a necessity for any casino that wants to lure Chinese customers. Casino executives know that, like most other New Yorkers, many Chinese immigrants in the city do not own cars.

The casinos employ entire "Asian marketing" departments to cater to their Chinese -- and to a lesser extent Korean and Vietnamese -- customers. They rebrand themselves for that audience:

Mohegan Sun is known as the “Golden God Casino” in Cantonese and Mandarin, Foxwoods is “Great Happiness,” and Resorts World “Top of the Clouds.” Mohegan Sun has a website in Chinese -- and no other language besides English. It flies in pop stars from Asia for concerts, hosts “Miss NY Chinese” beauty pageants, advertises in Chinese-language newspapers and TV channels, and enlists feng shui consultants.

I wanted to see the phenomenon for myself, which is how on a recent Saturday, I handed over \$13 to the woman outside Fleet Bakery who was corralling passengers for the 11:30 a.m. bus to Mohegan Sun. The tour guide -- who later told me her name was Judy -- wore black from head to toe. She fielded phone calls and looked expectantly down the street for customers.

They filed onto the bus and sank into musty blue seats. VIP players with deep pockets — people who have gambled enough so that the casino gives them free bus rides and meals to keep them coming — sat up front. I learned this when Judy shooed me out of their seats to one further back, next to Mr. Ng, who is a regular but not a high-roller. The tour guide saves the same bus seat for him every day, provided that he is there by 11 a.m.

As the storefronts of East Broadway rolled past the window, I turned to him and, hoping to break the ice, asked in Cantonese when we might expect to arrive at Mohegan Sun. His answer was inflected with a twang I immediately recognized. He and my grandmother were both from the city of Enping in Guangdong province in southern China.

Mr. Ng’s face lit up at this revelation. Soon I learned that he had fled China in 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, by swimming to Macau. Like many from his hometown, he ended up joining relatives in Latin America, thanks to a \$700 loan from an uncle in the Dominican Republic. Mr. Ng started his immigrant life in Santo Domingo, where he worked in restaurant kitchens for three years to pay off his debt.

Then there was a year-long stint as a cook in St. Martin, during which he received a message from a relative in Hong Kong about a neighbor he should meet. Was he interested in getting married?

Mr. Ng traveled to Hong Kong and married the neighbor, Lai Sheung. He and his wife emigrated to New York in 1975. Over the next 20 years, they had five daughters and Mr. Ng continued to work in restaurants. After he found himself out of a job at 57, he found a Chinese restaurant owner in Puerto Rico willing to give him a tryout in the kitchen. Mr. Ng stayed in San Juan for nine years, returning to New York for good after the restaurant closed in 2004.

Now 80, he travels the six hours round-trip between Chinatown and Mohegan Sun in Uncasville, Ct., almost every day. He wakes up at 7 and eats oatmeal. Then it’s out the door to take the subway from Inwood down to Chinatown. He spends some time at Columbus Park -- where elderly people congregate to exercise, sing, read newspapers and place bets -- and at the bakery before catching the casino bus.

In between snippets of conversation on the bus, he focused on the historical drama playing on a TV screen overhead, as one palace servant in an elaborate period costume glared at another.

"Staying home all day is boring," he said, as the bus continued north on the I-95. "You can only sleep so much."

## **A Cultural Phenomenon**

Gambling is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Its history in China stretches back over 3,000 years. In New York's Chinatown, immigrants, usually elderly men, have been playing games of chance in family associations and local parks for decades.

It's a familiar scene for Dr. Timothy Fong, the head of UCLA's Gambling Studies Institute. As a Chinese-American kid in the Midwest, he used to watch the grownups play Mahjong at family gatherings. Gambling was a common social activity.

"Gambling in front my parents was perfectly acceptable, whereas if I were drinking or smoking, they'd slap me silly," he said.

Dr. Fong said he believes Chinese beliefs about controlling one's own luck help drive its popularity. Wearing the color red and seeing the number 8 symbolize good fortune -- in life and at the casino.

"And if you lose, it's not your fault," Dr. Fong said. Instead, it's fate, predetermined by some unlucky factor.

For immigrants who have already taken the biggest gamble of all by leaving their home countries in order to better provide for their families, the prospect of winning money quickly is especially appealing, he added.

Casinos have long been keenly aware of which groups drop more money into their coffers than others.

"The Chinese, for example, are rabid gamblers," H. Steven Norton, Resort International's executive vice president told the New York Times in 1982. A spokesperson for another casino told the newspaper that Asian customers spent more than average, and some were known to be high-rollers.

Back then, companies responded by sending representatives to Hong Kong and to Chinatowns across the U.S. to generate business, and hiring Chinese-owned agencies to create newspaper ads. They planned extravaganzas for the Chinese New Year, which has become one of their

most profitable days of the year, and arranged for greeters to pick up guests from Asia at airports in New York and Philadelphia.

Mohegan Sun, a private company run by the Mohegan Tribe, does not provide data on its earnings from Asian clientele. But in recent years, officials at the casino [have told reporters](#) that [Asian gamblers account for a quarter of their business](#).

Community leaders, however, believe there's a sinister side to casinos' fixation on their Chinese customers. They say the casinos prey on vulnerable people with little disposable income.

At Hamilton-Madison House in Manhattan, social worker Joy Luangphaxay oversees Chinese-language programs to prevent and treat gambling addiction. She has met people who lost their homes after running up hundreds of thousands of dollars of debts, and whose relatives no longer speak to them. Her clients struggle with different kinds of gambling, but she says that casinos stand out for their targeted marketing efforts.

"I think casinos are most predatory," she said. "Because they offer free food and free hotels and other incentives to Chinese immigrants to hook them." Years ago, Mohegan Sun provided a one-time grant to fund treatment services at Hamilton-Madison House. No other casino has worked with the organization since.

"They're absolutely aware that this is a social problem in Chinese communities," Luangphaxay said. "Do I think they care? No."

Most casino bus passengers are Chinese immigrants who, like Mr. Ng, don't gamble much. But going to casinos is a social activity that doesn't require English, a rarity when Chinese movie theaters and concerts can be hard to find even in their own communities.

That raises other issues for Dr. Fong.

"We've set up a world where casino gambling is more accessible, easy and affordable than other types of entertainment," he said.

"What's the reason we don't have other alternative forms of social and civic engagement? What is it about the senior center that's not nearly as interesting?"

The questions are non-starters for Mr. Ng. "When would I have time to go to the senior center?" he said. "I go to the casino every day."

That Saturday, his wife had ventured off with one of their daughters on her own gambling trip to Atlantic City. But he preferred Mohegan Sun out of sheer habit.

## Welcome to Sunrise Square

It was 2:30 p.m. by the time the bus turned off the highway and came to a stop in hulking gray parking garage. There was no glitzy welcome – just a non-descript back entrance, the smell of exhaust, and a Mohegan Sun employee waiting with yet another clipboard.

“ID please,” she said, holding a sheaf of vouchers.

Every passenger receives coupons for a free meal at the casino’s buffet restaurant, which as far Mr. Ng is concerned makes the trip a net profit for him. “The meal is already worth \$20,” he said. “Even if you don’t win anything, that’s already a benefit for you.”

Gambling isn’t a big priority for Mr. Ng. He described it as a losing proposition for most people. After all, how would the casino be able to pay all its workers if gamblers won big? he said.

Rather, the trip serves to fill his day. Mr. Ng lives alone, an almost two-hour train ride from the rest of his family in Brooklyn. He said he hasn’t kept in touch with many friends; some have died, and others don’t go out as much in their old age. He lost contact with his former co-workers after leaving San Juan.

Inside the casino, Mr. Ng cut through row after row of slot machines. Years of visiting the casino had made the smell of cigarette smoke mingled with cologne barely perceptible to him. He didn’t seem to seem to register the din of the casino floor -- the simulated clinking of coins -- or the relentlessly flashing lights, either.

The machines soon gave way to tables filled with gamblers chatting away in Mandarin and Cantonese.

Mr. Ng had entered Sunrise Square, its red carpeting, gold décor and dark wood paneling designed and feng shui-ed according to Chinese themes.

It is the only area of the casino dedicated to a specific ethnic group. At one table, six elderly men watched the dealer’s hands intently as he shuffled black domino tiles. They were playing “pai gow,” the name emblazoned on a sign post in English but in a brushstroke font that has come to represent “Asianness” in the Western world.

In the corner, players gathered around a table for “sic bo,” a Chinese dice game. Several feet away, a food court offered noodles, roasted meat, dim sum and congee, each station with an awning made to look like the tiled roof of a pagoda. A sign at a nearby customer service kiosk read “Mohegan Sun Player’s Club” in Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean.

But Mr. Ng didn’t stop in Sunrise Square. “I don’t like playing with Chinese people,” he said later. “It’s too messy.” He declined to elaborate.

Mr. Ng didn't seem one for superstitions, either. He placed a voucher and a \$20 bill on a blackjack table at the other side of the casino. Ten minutes later, he rose from his seat a few dollars richer. Even though he was winning, he cut his betting short.

"You can't sit there for long periods of time," he said. "No matter how much you win, you will lose it back."

Mr. Ng has seen what happens when people violate this fundamental rule. He once knew a Foxwoods bus driver who couldn't stay away from the tables. The man won upwards of \$10,000 in the beginning, but then he started losing. He fell behind on his phone bill and asked Mr. Ng to borrow \$200. Eventually, Mr. Ng said, the man lost his house.

The smartest people simply eat for free at the casino buffet and don't gamble at all, Mr. Ng said.

At the cavernous Seasons Buffet restaurant, the hostess recognized him and greeted him with the familiarity of a longtime neighbor. He asked for his regular server Qui, whom he had befriended over the years.

Qui lives near the casino, and returns to Brooklyn, where her husband lives, on her days off. She was [one of thousands of immigrant employees](#) hired by Mohegan Sun to serve the casino's Chinese customers. After September 11th, over 200 garment factories in Chinatown closed. Many of those workers ended up at Mohegan Sun, which was expanding at the time. The influx transformed the suburbs of Connecticut into a Chinatown.

The changes haven't been without friction. Residents complained as growing English classes at schools cut funding for other programs, and property buyers transformed single-family homes into boarding houses for casino workers. Town planners have learned how to accommodate some of the needs of new arrivals.

Mr. Ng usually ate alone, but that day, his relative Ms. Fung – no relation to me -- joined us. Unlike Mr. Ng, Ms. Fung traveled to the Mohegan Sun only once a month for what she described as a mini-vacation. They heaped their plates with rice noodles, bok choy and ribs from a long line of silver serving stations. Ms. Fung laughed as she said that she knew little about gambling and had already lost \$100 playing slots.

After lunch, I headed back to Sunrise Square for a closer look. At the "sic bo" table, one woman said that people have stressful jobs and a little gambling was one way to relax. She and her husband had taken the bus from Flushing and she was waiting for him to realize that their bus was leaving soon. She said she was terrible at gambling, while her husband pumped his fist a few feet away. A Laotian worker said gambling is part of Chinese culture. Another woman watching a game of pai gow scoffed at the idea that Chinese people gamble more than anyone else.

“People want to win money,” she said. “Everyone likes to gamble.”

When it was time to leave, the passengers emerged from the depths of the casino and shuffled back onto the bus.

“Did you play at the \$25 or \$50 or \$100 tables?” Mr. Ng asked the retired postal worker.

“There were all kinds of tables,” the retired postal worker said.

As the bus made its way south on I-95, most passengers fell asleep, their faces aglow with the light of TV screens playing another episode of the Chinese drama.

It was 9:30 p.m. when the bus rumbled across the Williamsburg Bridge and turned into the traffic and lights of Chinatown. It came to a halt in front of the Grand Street subway station. Mr. Ng disembarked with a goodbye to me, and instructions to get off at the next stop. He descended the stairs to take the train back to his apartment in northern Manhattan, where he would listen to the local Chinese radio broadcast before falling asleep. In the morning, he would wake up to do it all again.