

Las Vegas Caters to Asia's High Rollers

Las Vegas – Without the dreamy postcard views of the neon-pulsing Strip, visitors to the V.I.P. lounge at the top of the Venetian hotel and casino here might think they had taken an elevator to someplace in Hong Kong or Shanghai.

The televisions in this sanctuary reserved for the wealthiest high rollers are tuned to Chinese stations. The newspapers use Chinese characters. The plinking tones wafting through the sprawling lounge are distinctly Chinese and many of the lounge's supremely solicitous, perpetually bowing staff members come from one Asian country or another. Its head chef is a dim sum master recently imported from Hong Kong.

Then there are the special accommodations offered to gamblers willing to wager several hundred thousand dollars or more: four 8,000-square-foot suites heavy on black lacquer furniture, bronze dragons, jade and appliances imported from China.

Casino operators have long recognized that a large number of Asians, especially Chinese and Chinese-Americans, are avid gamblers. For years, casinos have dispatched special buses to any Chinatown within a day's drive.

Recently, though, casinos have become much more aggressive in wooing Asians both domestically and abroad. They are aiming not just at the newly wealthy from China, who in recent years have emerged as Las Vegas's best customers, but also Asian-Americans and recent immigrants from the Pacific Rim.

The vigor of their efforts is stirring the ire of some Asian activists and others. "If the casinos singled out African-Americans and marketed to them as heavily as they do Asians, I'd imagine there'd be this huge political outcry," said

Timothy W. Fong, co-director of the Gambling Studies Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. "The marketing has been so aggressive, and the penetration so deep, we're starting to see alarming increases in the rates of problem gambling among Asians."

These efforts include redesigning large portions of a casino floor to cater to the tastes of Asian guests; advertisements written in Asian dialects and placed in community newspapers in nearby cities; and mailers written in a recipient's native language. The impact has been especially heavy among recent immigrants, Dr. Fong said.

One trend-setter has been Harrah's Entertainment, which operates two dozen casinos across the United States, including the Caesars Palaces in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. At the start of 2006, Harrah's opened a gambling and dining area inspired by the Ming- and Song-dynasty architectural elements at the Showboat in Atlantic City, in what Gary Loveman, its chief executive, described as "the country's first authentic Asian gaming pit."

The company imported carved woods from China to house a dozen baccarat tables – the preferred game among many Asian players – and several more for pai gow poker, which is based on an ancient Chinese dominoes game.

Over all, table game revenue at Showboat increased 35 percent last year, to USD 63 million, up from USD 46 million, and the casino more than doubled its business among Asian players. Table games include baccarat and pai gow but also craps, blackjack and roulette.

When the installation of an Asian gambling pit caused a similar increase in the table game winnings at Caesars Atlantic City, Mr. Loveman ordered similar changes at casinos across the country.

"There's this interest in gambling among the Chinese that

transcends anything you see in any other socioeconomic or ethnic group," he said.

Experts are inclined to agree. "Ours is a culture that believes a lot in numbers and superstition and places a large focus on money," said Dr. Fong, whose parents were born in mainland China. "So much revolves around fortune and fate and testing whether the ancestors have blessed you with a good life."

Other casinos have followed Harrah's lead, including the Trump Taj Mahal in Atlantic City, which created its own Asian gambling pit last July, and the Mohegan Sun in eastern Connecticut, which is building an all-Asian gambling hall complete with a Hong Kong-style food court.

Las Vegas has been undergoing a similar makeover. Asian-themed baccarat salons and noodle bars are now as standard as scantily clad cocktail waitresses, and baccarat generates far more revenue than roulette or craps.

The spread of baccarat, said William P. Weidner, the president of Las Vegas Sands, the parent company of the Venetian, is "entirely a function of its popularity among the Chinese."

It is also a function, Mr. Weidner said, of a small group of high rollers sometimes called whales – or those Mr. Weidner dubbed the "V-V.I.P.s" – who are willing to wager \$ 50,000 or more on a single hand or roll of the dice and risk several million dollars over a weekend.

About 80 percent of Las Vegas's biggest whales are from Asia, he said, echoing the estimates of other casino executives. Most of them are baccarat players from China and Hong Kong.

"One difference between our domestic and Asian guests are that our Asian guests spend much more time gambling," said Mike Zanolli, manager of the 50 butlers the Venetian places at the service of its high rollers. "We see our Asian guest mainly in

the baccarat salon," Mr. Zanolli said, adding that they even take all or most of their meals there.

"The Asian customer on average uses a significantly larger share of their disposable income to game with," said Mr. Weidner, who so prizes these high rollers that several times he has traveled with an interpreter to Hong Kong to run his casino designs by a feng shui master.

Mark Juliano, the former president of Caesars Las Vegas, says Asians account for even more than 80 percent of the city's gambling whales.

"The big change I started noticing in 2004, 2005, were the Asians coming from mainland China," said Mr. Juliano, now the chief operating officer of Trump Entertainment Resorts. Customers from Shanghai, Beijing and Guangdong are "becoming more and more dominant."

Casino companies are not just pulling out the stops to attract Asian high rollers to America, they are also going to where the customers are. Several years ago, the Sands and Wynn Resorts opened large Las Vegas-style casinos in Macao, the former Portuguese colony that is the only place in China where gambling is legal. The Sands is aggressively seeking to expand elsewhere in Asia.

Last year, Macao surpassed the Las Vegas Strip to become the world's largest gambling center.

"We view Asia as a critical growth area for our company," Mr. Weidner said.

The wooing of newly rich high rollers from China is of little concern to critics but the broader focus on less-affluent Asian-Americans is a growing worry.

"Gambling has been a part of Asian culture going back thousands of years," said Kent Woo, the executive director of

the NICOS Chinese Health Coalition in San Francisco. "People grew up with gambling in their households. It was part of celebrations, it was part of everyday life. But there's also a feeling that the casinos are exploiting our culture."

The reactions among Asian activists to the aggressive marketing by casino companies, Mr. Woo said, "range from concern, to upset, to extreme anger."

Studies suggest higher rates of problem gambling among Asians than other groups. Several recent studies in New Zealand and Australia have found that Asians living there had higher rates of addiction than non-Asians. Studies of Southeast Asian refugees living in Connecticut and Chinese waiters working in Montreal reached similar findings.

One long-term study under way in California, Dr. Fong of U.C.L.A. said, suggests that Asians are three times as likely as other groups to develop a serious gambling problem. He cautions, though, that the study is based on only a small sample of gamblers in the Los Angeles area.

Still, the evidence in California has been alarming enough to get the state government in 2004 to create an Asian Pacific Islander Problem Gambling Task Force, which is focused on starting treatment and prevention programs catering to those who speak only Chinese and other Asian languages.

"If there's this hidden problem of addiction that's not being addressed, and that's what we think is happening," Dr. Fong said, "it will slowly eat away at the fabric of the community."