

Trainee croupiers hope to hit the big time in Macau

A new class of hopeful croupiers has just walked through the door of the Lucky Gaming Training Centre in Macau and already they are being put through their paces.

Dotted around rows of green baize gaming tables, the new recruits giggle nervously as they try to shuffle and deal the cards under the watchful eye of their instructors.

In three months' time these cooks, drivers and shop assistants hope to be employed in one of Macau's many casinos. They will almost certainly succeed – the city already has a serious shortage of skilled casino workers, even before the opening in August of the Venetian Macau, a resort so huge it will house more than 30 restaurants and boast the world's biggest casino.

The Lucky Gaming school is part of a government scheme launched four years ago in response to a shortage of skilled card dealers in Macau, where there are restrictions on casinos hiring foreigners.

In its first year, the school took 80 students for five months and taught them a handful of the most popular games as well as basic English and Mandarin.

Since then, the Macau gaming industry has exploded and the school has more than doubled in size.

These days it takes on 100 students at a time and, under pressure from the casinos to get trainees through their doors as quickly as possible, churns them out after just three months of training in the most popular game at the tables here, baccarat.

„There are over 20,000 dealers working in Macau now but by

2009-10 the government believes more than 50,000 will be needed," says Joao Bosco Cheang, chairman of the Macau Gaming Industry Labourers' Association, which runs the school.

„The requirements for becoming a dealer are very low, you just have to be over 18 and have completed secondary school. There's no upper age limit and there are about 250,000 workers in Macau. So one fifth of the population could be working as croupiers.“

Unsurprisingly, the Lucky Gaming Centre's courses are massively oversubscribed. For most people, winning a job in a casino is life-changing, offering steady work, good conditions and a salary three times the local average.

Kuan Tit Chu got a job at the Babylon casino, owned by Hong Kong tycoon Stanley Ho, after taking the course last year.

He now earns several times as much as in his previous job as a bus driver and has returned to the school to learn new games including roulette, one of the most difficult for a croupier because of the complexity of the calculations.

„My relationship with my family is much better now. I have a stable job with a big company and I can buy my daughter nice things, give my parents money and take my wife out for meals,“ says a beaming Kuan as he practises the surprisingly complicated art of spinning the roulette wheel.

Popularity of casino work cutting into other professions

New recruit Chan Kin Tong hopes to emulate Kuan's success. Chan, whose wife is already working as a croupier, is currently employed as a chef, but his ambition is to get a job at the Venetian Macau once it opens because it is „famous in the US“.

„The casino industry is very popular and growing in Macau and I want to be part of that,“ he says. „It looks a bit

difficult, but I will try my best to learn.“

The government's ultimate goal is for one member of every Macau family to be working in a casino, and with the unemployment rate at 3.2 percent, casinos are pulling out all the stops to lure local workers.

Staff at the Venetian will enjoy medical cover, a fully-equipped gym and club room, and a „gourmet“ staff canteen open 24 hours a day.

Senior gaming industry executives believe the ban on bringing in foreign staff will ultimately have to be relaxed if the growing demand for skilled workers is to be met.

The casino boom is already putting a strain on the local community, with a shortage of people prepared to train for vital jobs such as nursing when they can earn so much more after a three-month dealing course.

And not everyone has benefited from the boom that has seen Macau's gambling wealth outstrip that of Las Vegas.

Low-income workers say cheap and sometimes illegal labour brought over the border from China has pushed down wages and they are struggling to contend with vastly inflated property prices.

On May 1 the dissatisfaction brought thousands onto the streets in the biggest public demonstration since Macau's return to Chinese rule, after 400 years as a Portuguese enclave, in 1999.

But Greg Hawkins, chief executive of Crown Macau, believes that for Macau's casinos to continue to deliver a world-class service, „some adjustment to the foreign labour quotas“ will be needed.

„The government has done a fantastic job to date of balancing the needs of an exploding service sector with the important

need of maintaining and taking care of the local community," he says.

„As we progress, we know there's going to be many tens of thousands more roles required by the service sector. So the challenge now is for the operators and the government to work together to come up with a plan to make sure the local community is protected.“