

Popularity, Negative Impacts, and Public Policies of Mahjong Game in Japanese Colonial Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

The Chinese parlor game of Mahjong, first invented in the late 19th century, was introduced into Taiwan in the 1920s and had made a far-reaching impact on society. This paper will explore the extent to which the game affected people from different walks of life.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Japanese government imposed a special consumption tax (骨牌稅) on Chinese card (四色牌) and enacted legislations prohibiting gambling of any form. However, as the game of Mahjong gained its popularity throughout Asia and the western world in the first half of the 1920s, it was brought into Taiwan from Japan and soon became an indispensable traveling companion for entertainment. Moreover, newly established Mahjong clubs also contributed to its wide popularity.

The craze for Mahjong among the general mass, regardless of class, race, region, or gender, reached its peak in the 1920s, making it a kind of ‘national pastime’. While Mahjong was often closely associated with gambling, different camps held rather contradictory opinions on how to curb gambling and prevent youngsters from indulgence in this harmful game. The colonial elites (殖民政府) on the one hand permitted Japanese residents in Taiwan to run Mahjong clubs; but had on the other hand serious concerns about the problem of gambling among Taiwanese. Likewise, the anti-colonial elites, though criticized the colonial government’s laissez-faire attitude towards Mahjong, were themselves addicted to it. Consequently, enforcement tactics in response to the Mahjong issue were not only controversial but also relatively ineffective.

Changes in the role of women in both public and private spheres as a result of the popularity of Mahjong game is also worth noting. Women engaged in Mahjong game earned equal status with men in family and social lives. By the early 1930s, their work in Mahjong clubs were taken as a cutting-edge career and won them the title “Mahjong Girl”.

Keywords: Japanese Colonial Era, Mahjong Game, Mahjong Girl, Indoor Social Recreation, Gambling