

Hong Kong Hold'em

A grey area in the law has allowed poker houses to operate in Hong Kong for years, but a recent police raid has raised the stakes for players and their hosts. **Ben Sin** talks to insiders to find out what went down, what the future holds for the city's burgeoning poker scene, and just who's holding the aces



THE RAID

It is 2am on a Saturday morning in Central, and Stanley Street is unusually quiet. On the second floor of a commercial building nearly 40 people are gathered together in a dimly lit, windowless space. Known as The Blue Room, the former office no longer houses computer terminals or printers. The coffee machine and the fax have long been switched off and rehoused, while the day slaves have been replaced by night owls. And instead of functional desks and chairs, six oval-shaped tables with blue felt are spread across the floor, each one guarded by an attractive girl holding a deck of cards in finely manicured hands. Money is still being won and lost, and deals struck – but no-holds barred gaming has replaced rigid commerce. And tonight, the stakes are about to get even higher.

The game on hand is No Limit Texas Hold'em, and one of the hottest players of the night is 29-year-old investment banker Patrick Chan, who sat down three hours earlier with HK\$3,000 in chips and by this stage has more than tripled his stack. Of course, with the mercurial nature of the no limit game, a bad

turn of a card can make or break fortunes. But Chan, a skilled player who studies the game, is well aware of this. He has made all the right moves: a few timely bluffs here, a big lay-down there. *I've got this table under control*, he thinks to himself as he sits in front of his chips.

“Most successful poker players are smart. They've got MBAs and went to Ivy League schools”

Chan then hears a commotion at the other end of the room, in the high-stakes corner, where minimum opening bets (called “blinds”) are set at HK\$100 and most players have chip stacks worth tens of thousands. He dismisses the brouhaha as a regular tantrum thrown by a sore loser. But the rumblings grow louder – enough to stop the action on all tables.

Before he knows it there is a pounding at the door, and six uniformed police officers have barged through. Chan recognises immediately

that it's a police raid, not unlike the ones he's seen in local 1990s gambling movies. But he doesn't panic. *What we're doing isn't illegal.*

As the bartenders and manager feverishly talk to one officer, the others approach the tables. “Stand up and away from the tables,” yells one officer in Cantonese. He repeats the order again, this time in English. Chan stands up, still confident that he's on the right side of the law. From the looks on the other players' faces, it seems most feel the same way.

Then it happens. A player in the high stakes corner walks over to the huddle of officers and begins to talk to them intently. Something's not right. Conspiracy hangs in the air like a nasty fog. *What the hell is this guy doing?* Chan thinks. *Wait, is he one of them?*

THE AFTERMATH

By Saturday afternoon, news of what happened earlier had spread like wildfire through the local poker playing circles – a mostly English-speaking professional crowd. People were shocked.

“An undercover cop posed as a player at The Blue Room?” was the astonished response ►





occasion or B: the game is not played by any person in charge of, managing or involved in the operation.”

Without getting embroiled in the legal jargon, poker houses operate in Hong Kong under a grey area of the law – they bill themselves as private member’s clubs where customers gather for social activities like eating, drinking... and poker. “These places

operate under the same concept as mahjong houses,” says a lawyer – and frequent player at the Hong Kong Poker House – who requested anonymity. “These venues can fit into legal parameters if they’re operating as a food and beverage venue that makes no profit from the games.”

So why was The Blue Room raided? Most seem to agree that they strayed too far towards the black end of the grey area. “The Blue Room wasn’t raided because of poker not being allowed,” says 29-year-old Sailesh Verma, a local resident who gave up his job teaching English several years ago to become a professional poker player. “It’s because they didn’t follow private club protocols. They had no club license, they didn’t have a strict members-only rule, which only bit them in the ass because the undercover cop was able to just walk in and play.”

Verma offers perhaps the most important clue of all. “The biggest thing is that the law states that any person running the games cannot make profits off of them, and the owners of The Blue Room were regular players themselves.”

Scott, who plays at both the HKPH and Blue Room has a similar take: “The Blue Room simply wasn’t following the rules.”

THE HISTORY

Texas Hold’em is a big deal. This particular form of poker – where players try to make the best five-card hand by using a combination of their two hole cards (cards that are face-down) and five community cards (cards that are opened face-up in

the middle of the table for all to see) – has been around since the early years of the 20th century. To succeed in this game, players must have strong mathematical and analytical skills, along with discipline, patience, guts and, of course, luck. The relatively high skill level required to win consistently has propelled Hold’em to revered status in gaming circles – for the past 40 years, it’s been the “main event” of the biggest and most famous poker tournament in the world, the World Series of Poker. The Las Vegas-based annual tournament had a total prize pool of US\$61 million last year, with the winner taking home over US\$8.5 million alone. This year, the WSOP is expecting over 8,000 players with a prize pool of over US\$80 million – the biggest payout in any single event.

It wasn’t always this way. In the 1990s the game was as niche and secretive as the silver screen portrayed. But over the past decade, due to expanded television coverage of the WSOP, the public became aware that poker is a game of high skill and unlike other casino games. This helped poker find its place among western mainstream culture. Today, poker programmes air on primetime television in the US and Europe, and professional ►

from most who heard the news. What was more surprising, to everyone, is that a few blocks away on Hollywood Road, a more famous venue known as Hong Kong Poker House survived the night undisturbed.

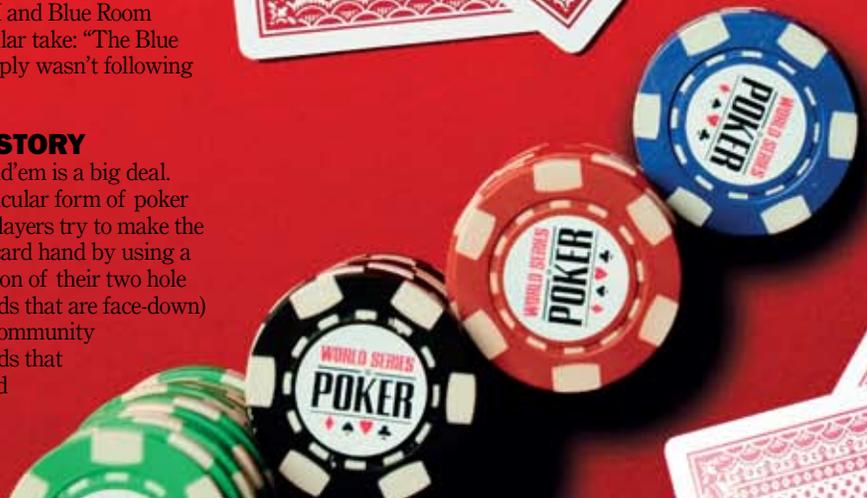
Chan’s phone rang nonstop throughout the afternoon and he hadn’t slept. He was still bothered by what had happened. His entire stack of chips, worth over HK\$10,000, had been confiscated and he faced potential further questioning; police took his contact details and said they would be in touch. But he knew he couldn’t complain. At least he was allowed to go home, while over a dozen other players and staff were taken into custody. Still, he was unsure what exactly had happened that night.

THE CAUSE

The Hong Kong Police declined to comment on the case in detail to *Time Out Hong Kong*, instead offering this official statement: “On March 13, Central Police squad arrested 15 men and nine women, aged 21 to 53, at a commercial building on Stanley Street. Of those arrested, 13 men and two women have been charged with violating laws of the Hong Kong Gambling Ordinance.”

Many believe the raid was an isolated incident and wouldn’t affect the poker scene in Hong Kong. Kelly Flynn, Managing Director of the Hong Kong Poker House, says the raid initially scared players for a few days, but now things are back to normal. “Poker in Hong Kong isn’t illegal,” says Andrew Scott, CEO of Macau-based *World Gaming Magazine*. “I have read and reread through the Hong Kong Gambling Ordinance many times over and there are allowances for poker to happen in certain situations.”

Indeed, the Hong Kong Gambling Ordinance clearly states: “Gaming is lawful if the game is one in which dice, dominoes, mahjong, tin kau tiles, or playing cards are used and A: the game is played on a social



WORLD CUP 2010

One pint & a trip to the World Cup finals could be yours! From Now Until 21 June

Yes, a companion and the World Cup 2010 Finals in South Africa - make it happen at RED SoHo & RED Bar + Restaurant!

World Cup 2010 Raffle Draw

• For every pint of Stella Artois that you purchase, receive 2 raffle tickets

• For purchase of other beverage items including champagne, house spirits, house wine, other beer brands, receive 1 raffle ticket

GRAND PRIZE // 2 x ticket to World Cup Finals + Business Class round-trip flight from Hong Kong to Johannesburg

and 3-star hotel accommodation in Johannesburg from 9-14 July (inclusive of round-trip airport to hotel transfers for 2) (valued at HK\$110,000)

2ND PRIZE // One framed & autographed Cristiano Ronaldo Real Madrid FC shirt (valued at HK\$2,000)

3RD PRIZE // One framed & autographed Fernando Torres Liverpool FC shirt (valued at HK\$2,000)

4TH PRIZE // One framed & autographed John Terry England shirt (valued at HK\$1,000)

5TH PRIZE // One framed & autographed Champions League winner photo of Leo Messi of FC Barcelona (valued at HK\$1,000)

Catch live broadcasts of selected World Cup 2010 matches and a special World Cup 2010 show every night from 11:30pm-1:00am on TV and RED Bar + Restaurant



Call us at **8199 8189** or **8129 8882** for reservations to get in on World Cup fever!

Terms and Conditions: Please visit our website for details.
RED SoHo: 211 Queen's Road East, Redwood Road, Central, HONG KONG. www.pure-redsoho.com
RED Bar + Restaurant: 111 Bay Street, Redwood Street, Central, HONG KONG. www.pure-red.com
Stella Artois Champagne: www.stella.com



nicols inc

RED
S O H O

RED

BAR + RESTAURANT

players have become household names. And with the emergence of Macau as one of the world's top gambling spots, it was only a matter of time before the most celebrated card game of all made its way here. The first Macau poker room opened in 2007 at the Grand Waldo casino (it has since moved to the Grand Lisboa), and several more poker rooms at the Wynn, Venetian, and StarWorld, have since opened.

Ironically, the game made its way to Hong Kong before Macau. "Because of Hong Kong's high expat community, the game actually reached here first, before all of Asia," says Mike Jones, an expat who was part of a Hong Kong poker meet-up group – one that has been around years before Macau opened their poker room doors. "Initially, the games were played by mostly expats at mahjong houses in Causeway Bay," Jones explains. "The game has really grown in recent years, spreading to the local audience." Jones never thought about the possibility of a police raid on the meets. "Why would I?" he says. "We were at a big mahjong house with other locals, only instead of playing mahjong we were playing cards. Hell, the local tai tais play much higher stakes than us." Jones feels that the emergence of dedicated poker venues such as HKPH and The Blue Room have helped to spread the game to a wider audience.

THE GROWTH

The Hong Kong Jockey Club has a monopoly on all gambling in the city. Supposedly. The reality is that gambling takes place all over the city every single night. These poker games are no different from the mahjong games at Chinese restaurants, dice games at bars, bets made at billiard venues, or other card games that take place inside private clubs.

Chris Lee, a 40-year-old who learned the game last year on trips to Macau, reckons the police are unfairly singling out poker due to their unfamiliarity with the game. "I know for a fact they play card games, including poker, at private expat clubs like the American Club. Hell, the Hong Kong club has a 'bridge room' that's strictly for gambling," says Lee. "You think the police care about that?" He says the rules The Blue Room broke were "minor" and the raid was "excessive." He adds: "We have people trying to legitimatise the game and they're

being tracked. People ain't going to stop, they'll just turn underground."

Scott concurs with the sentiment. "Trying to stamp out poker completely will just lead to illegal underground games," he says. A poker player of 23 years, Scott says lack of understanding of the game in the local culture for has led to the stigma. "The reality is poker is a socialised form of entertainment for people all around the world," he says. "We are not talking backroom gambling with seedy characters like in the movies. The players that play nightly in Hong Kong are investment bankers and lawyers and educated professionals. It is a safe, controlled environment, where players want to get together for a game."

"In five years the biggest poker tournaments will be in Macau, not Vegas"

Verma, who claims to make HK\$300,000 a month from poker winnings, says despite his success he can't tell his family back in India what he really does for a living. "They wouldn't understand," he says. "It's a shame. Poker is a sport everywhere except here." But if Macau has its way, that will soon change.

THE MACAU SCENE

According to David Jung, Regional Director of the Asia Pacific Poker Tour, poker in Hong Kong is still a niche game. For it to be accepted in mainstream society it must be promoted and advertised, an area in which Macau poker rooms have the upper hand.

Jung and the APPT have been attempting to work out deals which would televise the tournaments. "The poker craze in the US was almost exclusively linked to TV coverage," he says. Although getting poker on Hong Kong or Macau television

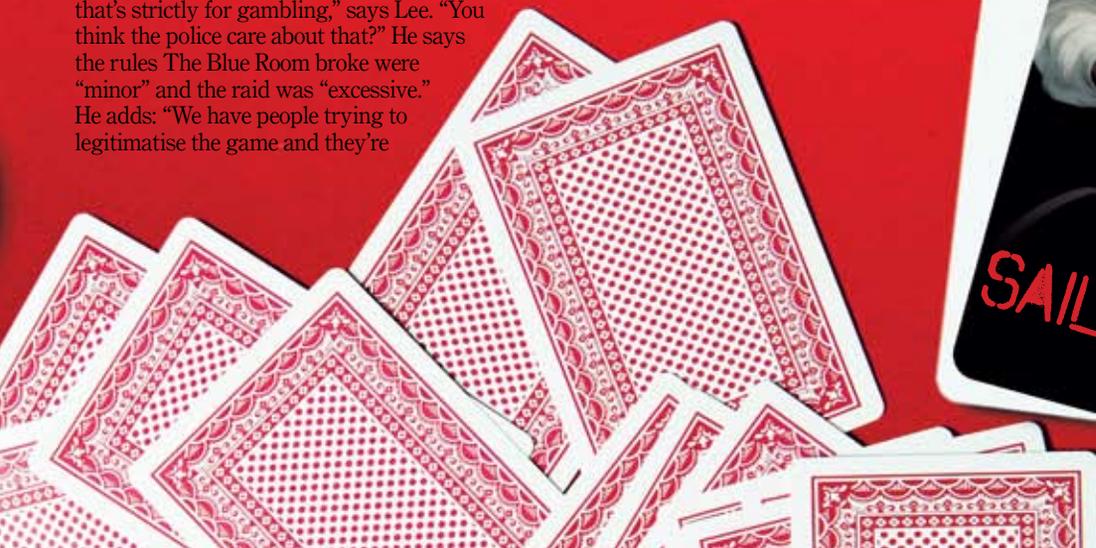
may prove to be a daunting task, there is some precedent. "Taiwan is broadcasting poker in primetime already," he says. "So we've got people there being exposed to the game. We're not just looking at Macau, but all of Asia."

Elly Lai, publisher of newly launched Macau magazine *Poker King*, agrees that promoting poker is necessary to get "mainstream acceptance". She says the process has already made big progress. "Our magazine is named after a Hong Kong movie of the same name," says Lai. "Both the movie and the magazine are sponsored by StarWorld casino as a way of raising awareness for the game."

Poker King, a star-studded comedy revolving around the lives of two professional poker players in Macau, was unlike the previous gambling films that were so popular during the 90s. Director Ching Hing-ka said in a press conference last year that he took away the fantastical elements that were so prominent in the older Chow Yun-fat and Stephen Chow films because he wanted to stress the skill factor of poker. Despite a critical mauling, the movie was a moderate box office hit, and seemed to have accomplished the goal of introducing the game to local players. A karaoke lounge in Causeway Bay known as Miusik started holding poker nights last year – even going as far as naming poker tournaments after the movie.

Macau's poker rooms are seeing increased traffic and interest. Last September, the APPT Macau Summer Poker Festival at the Grand Lisboa attracted 426 players from 46 countries.

With each player forking out over HK\$40,000 to enter ▶





Sheraton
Shenzhen

HOTEL
FUTIAN

深圳吉来住酒店



Businesses are Better when Shared

Sheraton is where colleagues gather. Bring the best minds together with special EXPO package rates that include free breakfast, set lunch and late checkout.

EXPO package
rmb 1528 up per room
per night

Book at sheraton.com/shenzhen or call 86.755. 8383 8888

spg.
Starwood
俱乐部
Preferred
Guest

MERIDIEN
艾美

loft
乐尔轩

THE LUXURY COLLECTION
奢华精选

WESTIN
威斯汀

FOURPOINTS
福朋

WYNDHAM
温德姆

Sheraton
喜来登

ST REGIS
瑞吉

W
W酒店

©2010 Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. All rights reserved. Sheraton and its logo are the trademarks of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, Inc. or its affiliates.

Sheraton Shenzhen Futian Hotel
Great China International Exchange Square, Fuhua Road, Futian, Shenzhen, P.R.China



the tournament, the combined HK\$16 million prize pool was the largest for a poker game in the history of Asia. It's a figure that still pales in comparison to poker tournaments in Las Vegas, but many insiders believe it's just a matter of time before these figures swell to US proportions.

"I think in five years the biggest poker tournaments will be in Macau, not Vegas," says Mike Kim, a Korean-American who was responsible for opening the first legalised poker room in Seoul in 2008. Dubbed "the Godfather of Hold'em" in Korea, Kim now makes frequent trips to Macau to check out the poker scene.

THE PROFESSIONALS

Although the game is mostly played on social occasions, a small group of poker players in Hong Kong and Macau are considered professionals. These players make most, if not all, of their income from poker winnings. Unlike the stereotype professional gamblers portrayed in local movies such as *God of Gamblers*, it's not all flash and glory. Poker is a grind.

In North America, professional poker players such as Phil Ivey, Phil Hellmuth, Doyle Brunson, and a group of Asian Americans such as Johnny Chan and Liz Lieu have achieved celebrity status. The local ones are, slowly, catching up in fame.

It's easy to spot poker pro Bryan Huang in Macau. For one, he's always there. The 25-year-old plays eight to 12 hours a day, six nights a week at the Grand Lisboa poker room. But the main reason people can identify him is because his face is plastered on banners in the room – a celebration of his achievement after winning over HK\$1 million in poker tournaments last year.

He says the long hours he puts in are required to minimise the variance. "There is an element of luck to the game, meaning if two players sit down and play ten hands, anyone can beat anyone due to luck of the draw," says Huang, who turned down an accountancy job after graduation when he realised he could put his strong analytical and mathematical skills to more exciting use. "But if you play 100 hands, or 1,000 hands, then the more skillful player will win most of the time." Basically, Huang is saying this: the longer you sit at the poker table with him, the more likely he's going to take your money.

If there's one stereotype to poker players that is spot on, it's that they are night owls. Here in Hong Kong, Verma sleeps in until late afternoon each day, and by the time he has

his first meal, most Hongkongers are getting ready to leave work. At 8pm, he heads to one of the various poker venues in the city and begins his day. He says the local game is more for socialising and practice though, since he considers the stakes – he plays the HK\$50-\$100 game, which requires a minimum buy-in of HK\$5,000 and can see swings in the tens of thousands – to be low.

"The real money is in Macau," he says. Each weekend, he brings HK\$200,000 in cash over and plays at the big game – one in which players sit down with over HK\$50,000 in chips – at the Lisboa.

"We have people trying to legitimatise the game and they're being tracked. People ain't going to stop, they'll just turn underground"

But if Verma and Huang's winning ways give the impression that anyone can win at poker, in reality this couldn't be further from the truth. The fact is Verma and Huang are highly educated and intelligent guys who would be making good money even if they were working a nine to five. "Most successful poker players are smart," says Flynn, a US native who specialised in sports

marketing. "The players who play regularly at the HKPH are all successful professionals. They've got MBAs and went to Ivy League schools."

But not everyone is created equal, and for these skilled professionals to continue making their kind of dough, there must be losers. Joey Lam is one. A 26-year-old Chinese-American who moved to Hong Kong last year, he started frequenting the poker venues to satisfy his itch. "I used to play in home games with my friends back in San Francisco," he says. "I didn't have any friends here who played so I went to the poker houses."

Only Lam, perhaps foolishly, doesn't calculate the fact that the stakes at the poker houses are considerably higher. "I am a loose player who bets and calls a lot," he says, explaining his style of play ("loose player" in poker terms means one who rarely folds and plays every hand until the end). "When I was playing with friends over US\$40, I didn't feel the financial hit. But at the poker house, I started noticing the hit in my bank account weeks later."

But Lam is already one of the better "losers", he says there is many a night when he sees players lose over HK\$10,000 – and that's at the low stakes table. One of these players is his friend. "Sometimes, the ugly side of gambling addiction pops up," he says, recounting a time when his friend asked him to borrow money to last him the rest of the month after losing over HK\$10,000 in two hours. "But in the end, we're grown ▶



Souk in the City

THE ULTIMATE GIRLS'
SHOPPING NIGHT!

FREE ADMISSION,
WELCOME DRINK &
HAPPY HOUR PRICES

Wednesday 19th May 6.30-10pm
at The Langham Hotel TST

- ★ UP-AND-COMING DESIGNERS ★ PRIZE GIVEAWAYS ★
- ★ EXCLUSIVE DISCOUNTS ★ FAB GOODIE BAGS ★
- ★ MAKE UP ARTISTS ★ YUMMY CANAPES ★



THE LANGHAM
Hong Kong

SASSY hong
kong

FOR MORE DETAILS AND TO RSVP GO TO WWW.SASSYHONGKONG.COM

adults," says Lam. "I don't blame anyone when I lose. I can stop playing, get better at the game, or not care about losing."

Ultimately, though, these professional players who win regularly and players who lose uncontrollably only make up a small percentage of the poker scene. Most players, like Chan and the others who had their night interrupted by the police raid, are just looking for the occasional, casual game.

THE FUTURE

Flynn, who has worked with a bunch of lawyers to ensure the HKPH fits within the legal parameters doesn't feel easy about the recent raid, but nor is he losing sleep over it. "I'm ready to defend myself against the law," he says. "But make no mistake – I don't want to. I want to give face and respect everybody. We're just holding a venue that makes it legit and safe for players to play cards, we're not a casino. We make zero profits from the poker."

The biggest misconception, according to HKPH's Flynn, is that the game is "seedy and dark, like in the movies." Indeed, on any given night at the HKPH, a diverse crowd that includes women and university students can be found at the tables.

For new and casual players, Flynn and partners have organised the Hong Kong Poker League, which hosts weekly free poker tournaments at Philia, Privé and other nightspots around Central. Managing Director Jeffrey Ng says the league offers a zero-risk environment for players who want to play the game for fun.

Where to play

HONG KONG POKER HOUSE

1/F, 49 Hollywood Road, Central, 2850 8833

Professionally trained dealers and top-of-the-line poker tables, chips, and cards make this private member's club the premiere place to play. Stakes can vary depending on night. Membership fee required.

MIUSIK MEMBER'S CLUB

13/F, Ying Kong Mansion, 2-6 Yee Wo Street, Causeway Bay, 9198 4005

www.facebook.com/miusikpokerclub
This private member's club offers many forms of entertainment for members, there's a stage for live music performances,

Of course, these players eventually develop into avid players. "What I love about poker is that you are not playing against the house, in games like blackjack and craps, you're mathematically proven to lose," says Lee, an investment banker. "Poker is about risk-management and calculations, like my job."

It doesn't look like the raid has affected other venues as well. When *Time Out* contacted Miusik lounge about their poker games, a staff member said they were only a private club and what the customers do there is

a corner for DJs, karaoke and dart machines, and plenty of alcohol. But the biggest draw is the nightly poker games. With cheaper membership and entry fees, Miusik has proved popular for the mid-stakes players.

HONG KONG POKER MEETUP

www.meetup.com/geo-poker-hk

This is better for beginners, as the stakes are low (\$1-2 blinds). Fellow players are friendly and are there for socialising and networking as much as betting. No membership fee required.

none of their business. The Hong Kong poker meet-up group also continues to organise games, although they now put the words "social gathering" in big bold capital letters on their webpage.

Meanwhile, rumours in the poker circles are swirling that the guys behind

The Blue Room have already set up a weekly high stakes private game at a Causeway Bay hotel.

The only thing that matters, according to Flynn, is for the scene to grow. "Hell, if the Jockey Club wants to organise poker in Hong Kong, if they want in, I'd welcome them."

Whether the stakes be high or low, the games casual or serious, there is no shortage of poker action going on nightly in the city. And if Western trends are anything to go by, the game is here to stay. The question is, can the police do anything about it?

Before poker...

Quasi-legal gambling is of course nothing new in Hong Kong, and mahjong houses have treaded the same territory for years. **Grace Tsoi** investigates the history and current state of these betting bolt-holes

As far as poker has come in Hong Kong, it still has a long way to go before it rivals mahjong, the city's most popular gambling game. Played with four people (called "legs" in Cantonese), it's a game that is very much like poker: a good combination of skill and luck is required to be successful. But for those with no legs of their own, mahjong houses provide the option of playing with strangers. Despite being typically housed in enclosed spaces with tinted windows, mahjong houses are easily identified by the clicking and clacking sound

of tiles being shuffled together within, not to mention the occasional cry of "pong!" or "kong!" (shouted when three identical tiles are matched).

These houses generally rely on "commissions" as their income, meaning they take a cut like casinos (poker houses, conversely, take no commissions and make nothing off poker games). So the question is, how can this be legal? Doesn't the Jockey Club have a monopoly on all forms of gambling here? Well, mahjong is the exception, thanks to a law passed by the colonial government in 1871 legitimising the game if played under a valid licence.

There are regulations, though. The government has a limit on the amount of mahjong house licences it can grant (just 144 licenses

have been issued since 1871). It's widely believed that mahjong was given de facto immunity from the gambling laws because the colonial government feared a widespread backlash if it took away the beloved game of the Chinese.

If you've seen your fair share of Hong Kong movies, you may believe that mahjong houses are gathering grounds for tattooed triad members. In reality, mahjong houses abide by strict rules. For example, mahjong houses can only open from noon to midnight, while they need to seek approval from the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority when they want to hire staff. Every staff member must pass a background check.

In recent years such stringent regulations, along with negative stereotypes and the rising popularity of other forms of gambling, has led to a decline in the number of mahjong houses. Today, only about 60 remain in the city.

