

Credit and Gambling Relations: The Articulation of Different Rationalities between Tahiti Chinese and Raiatean Tahitians

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Drawn from a study of the Chinese community in French Polynesia, this paper explores the structure of interactions around cockfights held on the island of Raiatea. These contests typically pit a Chinese player, nearly always assured of victory, against a Raiatean contestant, whose chances of winning are minimal. Chinese players routinely propose uneven bets to their opponents: they play with a handicap, theoretically equalizing both sides' chances of winning. The structure of the bets concluded in these encounters reflects the historical structuring of inter-ethnic relations between the Chinese and the Polynesians. Credit, a common focus of interaction between these groups, contributes to the maintenance of their separation. The continuation of the credit relationship is less due to a reciprocal understanding of mutually shared interests than to a misunderstanding. I will show in this paper that the gambling relation presents a structural homology to the credit relation. The paradoxical success of these inter-ethnic encounters is based in the different rationalities that allow each party to save face in its own way.

Keywords: interactionism, games, ethnic groups, face

Introduction

On November 11 at the annual inter-island gathering of all the Society Islands cockfighters in Raiatea, the most dramatic fight pitted the champion of the main island, Tahiti, against the champion of Tahaa, a little island next to Raiatea.¹ The latter was smaller, and had very little chance to escape unharmed. But his strategy of circling his opponent while he recovered breath and gathered momentum made the outcome far from predictable. The Tahaa associates (they numbered nearly twenty) simmered with excitement, and the shouting was aggressive: “*Kill the Tinito!*” (“Chinese” in the Tahitian language).² This fight did indeed have an inter-ethnic dimension: the champion of Tahiti had been brought by Chinese cockfighters, while the Tahaa champion belonged to native Tahitians. Raiateans define themselves as *ta’ata Tahiti* (Tahitians) in terms of blood (*toto*), whereby they differentiate themselves from *Tinito* and *Popaa* (Whites). “Tahitian” designates the indigenous inhabitants of the Society Islands, in contrast to the other archipelagos of French Polynesia (Gambier, Australs, Tuamotu, and Marquesas). The bulk of the Chinese community settled on Tahiti, mainly in French Polynesia’s administrative capital, Papeete. This explains why cockfighters from Tahiti are called “*Tinito*” by the cockfighters from other islands, who call themselves Tahitians. It should be explained that all are French nationals. In 1945 the French put an end to the “Indigenat regime,” by which the Tahitians, classified as “Indigenes,” were “subjects” of the French colonial Empire: all subjects were granted formal French citizenship. The children of first-generation Chinese immigrants, through non-application of *jus soli*, which confers (French) citizenship to every child born on French soil, in the colonies remained nationals of the Republic of China until 1973 when they were granted French citizenship en masse. Since the end of the 1950s, following the decision to transfer its nuclear testing infrastructure from

¹ The word “champion” is used by the players themselves in its double sense of outstanding animal competitor and representative of a group of players.

² French Polynesia’s population (around 220,000) is concentrated on the Society archipelago (86%). Within the archipelago, the distribution is highly unbalanced in favor of the urban agglomeration around Papeete on the island of Tahiti (more than 100,000 inhabitants). Raiatea is the second most populated island in French Polynesia (around 10,000). The Society Islands, although they share a common culture, language, and history, are divided into two distinct clusters of islands: the Windward Islands (mainly Tahiti and Moorea), and to the west the Leeward Islands (Maupiti, Bora Bora, Tahaa, Huahine around the main island Raiatea). Uturoa, the main city on Uturoa, administrative center of the Leeward Islands, has the second largest Chinese community after Papeete. The Raiatea Chinese, allied to the Tahiti Chinese by commercial and kinship ties, usually wager against the Raiatea or the Tahaa Tahitians.

the Sahara to the Pacific, France has tightened its control over what had become a so-called autonomous territory, and implemented vigorous assimilation policies. Thereafter both Chinese and Tahitians under age 50 were educated in the French school system, the consequences of which will be reflected in the mix of languages used in the cockfights.

Cockfighting conforms to Bateson's notion "this is play" (1972:182), but it is hard to draw a neat line between the sport and the everyday occupations of the players. Games of chance appear to be rooted in the continuum of everyday means of subsistence—cash crops and fishing—that are speculative and hazardous, yet generate the earnings of most Tahitians. Similarly, the Chinese players do not come from Papeete's urban commercial bourgeoisie; they are vanilla and black pearl traders and speculators.³ The distinctive feature of cockfights is not their chancy aspect (as opposed to the predictability of daily activities), so much as the higher degree of risk and hazard to which the participants, birds and player alike, are exposed.

Goffman's and Barth's interactionist approaches constitute my starting point for analyzing relations between Chinese and Tahitians. In Raiatea the cockfights often take on an inter-ethnic character when Chinese contestants travel from Tahiti to challenge local players. The structure of the bets wagered in these encounters reflects the historic structure of inter-ethnic relations. The Chinese, upon their arrival, inserted themselves into Polynesian society by carving out an economic niche—petty trade—that had developed little locally at the turn of the twentieth century. The economy was only partly monetarized and mainly relied on the self-sufficiency of local communities. Tahitians eventually got into debt by promising a part of their future crop in exchange for imported goods. Credit extended and taken, while a focus of interaction between ethnic groups, contributed as well to ensuring their

³ The Chinese from Tahiti are essentially part of the middle class in the Chinese community. They do not belong to Papeete's well-established third- and fourth-generation bourgeoisie, since they do not own supermarkets, luxury shops, and/or import-export firms. Their parents run modest district shops and sell baked goods door-to-door; they are often engaged in highly speculative activities—pearl production, the vanilla trade, etc. Some of them have made quick fortunes. By comparison, the Raiatea Chinese pursue more "solid" activities, and on a much smaller scale than the Papeete Chinese: they own shops and small restaurants in Uturoa. But they also enter into speculative activities (pearls, vanilla, tuna fishing). They distinguish themselves from the Tahitians only by the higher income they draw from their main activity. Having been born in Raiatea where their grandparents or great-grandparents settled, they often declare that they could not live anywhere but in French Polynesia and some allow they could not even move away from Raiatea. They are much more localized than the Tahiti Chinese, but they view themselves as belonging to the Chinese ethnic group, and are classified as such by their Tahitian circle of friends and colleagues.

continued separation. If we follow Barth's reasoning, this meant that "differences in criteria for judgment of value and performance" (1998[1969]:15) were thereby consolidated: Tahitians considered demonstrations of generosity important to increasing their status and that of their district community; for sojourning Chinese, money should only be invested locally in a new remunerative activity; otherwise it should be saved with the prospect of increasing one's status in the native community.

"The dichotomization of others as strangers to the group implies a recognition of limitations on shared understandings" and "a restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest" (ibid.). But from the economic standpoint, if credit constitutes a relationship between debtor and creditor, this tie is not necessarily perceived in the same way by both parties. Outside observers agree that the attitude of Tahitian clients toward Chinese shopkeepers approximates one that would be adopted by a lord towards his vassal. "The client likes to treat 'his Chinese' sometimes with arrogance, sometimes with familiarity. Who hasn't observed the way in which some clients throw their banknotes or coins onto the counter?" (Coppensrath 1967:86). In interviews Chinese shopkeepers confirmed this cultural misunderstanding about the relationship instituted by credit. One of them cried out with a gesture of helplessness, "Sometimes I get the impression that it's me who's indebted—it's the world upside-down!!"

How may this inversion of the objective terms of the credit relationship be explained? One answer can be found in Jean-François Baré's article on Tahitian economic categories. The idea of reciprocity is implicit in most terms used by the Tahitians. The rhetoric of exchange functions, for instance, in the word *tarahu*, which means "debt," "to borrow from," "to rent," "to rent out," and "to hire (somebody)." Where there are different terms for these different notions in French, English, and Chinese, there is only one in Tahitian. This conflation implies reciprocity: whatever losses are suffered by one who, in such a context, may not be considered a "creditor" are either immediately compensated (which makes it exchange rather than credit) or deferred to an undetermined deadline. According to Baré, in a finite social sphere, if everyone has debts; nobody has, and it is impossible to determine what should be called a debt (1992). I will develop the Chinese conception of debt in relation to face below.

The cockfights usually pit a Chinese player, nearly always assured of victory, against a Raiatean contestant, whose chances of winning are minimal. How can this ongoing engagement be explained in light of its structural asymmetry? It appears that the asymmetry of the interaction, which accounts for the maintenance of ethnic boundaries (Barth 1998[1969]), is compensated in the

short-term by the practice of handicapping. The Chinese players who fly in once a week from the main island Tahiti routinely propose uneven bets to their opponents; they play with a handicap. The handicap, because it equalizes chances of winning, can be viewed as one of those “social arrangements” that allows players of unequal capacities to persist in their interactions (Goffman 1967).

I will show here how the betting relation is not entirely understandable in terms of “mutual interest,” because Tahitian players accept some bets even though they are almost sure to lose. This deviates from the fundamental postulate of Game Theory, a shared rationality between the players: “Rationality produces its effects if and only if everyone follows exclusively his own interests and maximizes his profit, and if everyone behaves in the same way while knowing that everybody does so” (my translation, Menger 2001:137). The interactionist approach, centered on individual interrelations and behavior adjustment mechanisms that set the basis for collective action, here comes up against an irreducible obstacle inconsistent with its main theoretical premises: namely the divergent conceptions different players have of the “same” game. The Raiatean players claim to lose money, in the long run, to their Chinese adversaries, so why do they continue to engage in these fights knowing they will most probably lose both the fight and their bet? This continued interaction can only be explained by recognizing that the players have different stakes in the game. These different conceptions are manifest in the “face-work” in which the two groups engage. Goffman’s analysis of social interactions brings out the central notion of “face”—“the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself, [...] an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share” (1967:5). The ways in which face is “saved” is related to the stakes each side has in the game.

Following Goffman, I use the tension that lies at the heart of his *Interaction Ritual*, between the rational-utilitarian paradigm from which interactionist theory takes off, and Durkheimian concepts. This tension, which he seems to have been aware of, will be highlighted in the conclusion of this paper. I do not consider the Polynesian cockfight a text in which players devoid of subjectivity can “read” what their culture looks like. Nor do I think that the game can be seen as the result of an aggregation of individual subjectivities. Following Barth’s example, I operate with the assumption that we need to focus on boundaries to avoid culturalist reductionism. However, I will stress the limits of the interactionist approach and argue for a broader comprehension of differing cultural and social identifications.

Inter-Ethnic Relations between Cockfighters

The Tahitians claim that *faatitoraamoa*, literally, “causing fighting among fowls” (*faa*, to make; *tito*, to fight) has existed in Raiatea for generations and generations. Indeed, Ellis mentioned the *faatitoraamoa* among the “games and sports of the inhabitants of Tahiti,” and he described it as “the most ancient, but certainly not the most innocent, game among the Tahitians” (1833:176). According to Ellis’s observations, the cockfights were embedded in a territorial framework (the districts and islands) as well as in a religious tradition (the fights were wagered under the patronage of a cockfighting god). While the Christianization of the Society Islands by the London Missionary Society (LMS) has led to the disappearance of cockfighting’s religious dimension, the territorial framework remains a key element in current cockfighting. Ellis’s annotation, “The inhabitants of one district often match their birds against those of another, or those of one division of a district against those of another,” still stands today. He also made the following interesting remark:

The Tahitians do not appear to have staked any property, or laid any bets, on their favourite birds, but to have trained and fought them for the sake of the gratification they derived from beholding them destroy each other. Long before the first foreign vessel was seen off their shores, they were accustomed to train and to fight their birds. . . . The inhabitants of one district often match their birds against those of another, or those of one division of a district against those of another. [Ellis 1833:176]

In China, the cockfight (*douji* 鬥雞) has a long history: according to Cutter the first mention of it in written documents dates back to 517 B.C. But the cockfight has never occupied a position as important in China as in Southeast Asia. “In China the sport is unlikely ever to have preoccupied as large a segment of the population . . . neither does it seem to have been as intimately associated with religious festivals as in Bali” (Cutter 1989:10–12). In a society where aggressive behavior has traditionally been disesteemed, cockfighting was frequently associated with wild youths and knights-errant who had little regard for social conventions. Therefore it has never had a prominent place in Chinese society and cannot be taken “as anything quite profound as a Chinese reading of Chinese experience” (ibid.:4–6).

The Tahiti Chinese categorically state that their ascendants of the first-generation immigrants were totally ignorant in the matter of cockfighting upon their arrival—it was not practiced at their native place in Southern Guangdong—and they had no time to breed roosters once settled in Tahiti.

They started, however, to bet on the fights, thus introducing money into the cockfight. The contemporary aspect of the cockfight therefore results from the encounter of two originally distinct practices: competition between localities through the medium of cocks and gambling. The genesis of the game in its present-day form rests on the structure of social and inter-ethnic relations in French Polynesia, and the way it is performed brings this structure into relief.

The Raiatean Cockfighters

I shall start with a general description of the local players. A Raiatean cockfighter has adversaries who are always the same and associates he never plays against. His associates are usually friends with whom he "shares the roosters." Bets and benefits are individual, and no more than two players are ever involved. The fight opposes two fowls and their owners but it requires at least four betters, at least two on each "list." The owner of the fighter supplies the major part of the central bet known as "list bet" (*pari de liste*), but his associates always contribute to the "list" (without betting too small an amount lest the main bettor take offence).

The associates are typically kin and friends living in the same district (the pre-European territorial subdivisions lasted until their official suppression in 1971, but they still prevail in local usage).⁴ The individual character of bets does not impede the expression of solidarity at the level of the district, or even the entire island, especially when it comes to challenging an adversary from another district or island. Highly charged inter-district or inter-islands fights occur on Sundays, when cockfighters from the nearby Leeward Islands head to Raiatea. There are also a dozen cockfighters who travel from Tahiti and back every Sunday (a forty-minute flight). And, as the season draws to a close in November, all Society Islands cockfighters gather for the annual three-day meeting held in Raiatea.

"Small" cockfighters usually refers to those of the same locality or district. This structure along territorial lines becomes clear in the way players estimate the number of teams (*ecuries*) by mentally circling clockwise around the island: "In Uturoa seven to eight; in Avera also seven to eight; in Opoa . . . less, perhaps five; in Fetuna five; in Vaiao and Tevaitoa a dozen."

⁴ The island of Raiatea was divided into nine districts before the arrival of the Europeans. The city of Uturoa, created by the colonizers, became the tenth district. Polynesians continue to refer to districts even though the districts were reorganized into three "communes" by the French state in 1971.

The higher status “big” cockfighters are most often entrepreneurs and shopkeepers, or bank and administration employees. They live near the main “city,” Uturoa, and associate less on the basis of locality than according to affinities linked to business or leisure.

The hierarchy of cockfighters is based on two interrelated criteria: the quality of the birds and the amount of money one can bet. One can be a “big better” but not a “big cockfighter,” a “big cockfighter” but bet only small amounts, and at the very top, a big cockfighter and a big better; this means, of course, that one is a frequent winner. This hierarchy is inversely reflected in the organization of the arena, which has four tiers. The lowest is occupied by some twenty “great cockfighters” (*grands coqueleurs*), who are for the most part Chinese shopkeepers and entrepreneurs as well as Tahitian employees of Uturoa’s administrations. On the two intermediary tiers one can find the “small cockfighters,” and on the highest sit the beer-drinking spectators—mostly young men and a few women. Cockfighters know each other at least by reputation. The face-to-face character of the game is intensified by the arena’s circular structure, which allows players to call to each other to contract bets. Exchanges take place in French, considered the language of convenience, during the matches, and in a mixture of languages around the gallery. During a match, all sums are announced in French (it is faster that way: for instance, *quinze* [fifteen] is faster than *ahuru ma pae* in Tahitian).

Fluctuating Rules

The cockfights are held in a remote part of the island—some 20 kilometers from the center of Uturoa. They are illegal in French law, but tolerated under a decree signed in the 1960s by Prime Minister Pompidou. The “gendarmerie” (French military police) only rarely shows up, when a fight flares out of control or when a indignant wife files suits against the organizers after having found out that her husband has been fleeced. The Polynesian cockfight is a far cry from the Balinese institution described by Geertz, that is, “a corpus of extraordinarily elaborate and precise rules” (1973:423). My informants agreed that within some limits—rather blurry and not unanimously agreed upon, as we shall see later—all tricks and blows are allowed. The practice of diverse techniques of bluff and deceit are, if not universally accepted, at least acknowledged: deceiving an opponent by disguising one’s seasoned winner as a beginner (by dyeing its feathers, for instance) or under-the-table arrangements made between a well-known and an unknown cockfighter are among the most widespread tricks. I will return to this point below.

When attending a cockfight, it is at first extremely difficult to find coherence beneath the apparent chaos. It would be too simplistic to oppose the period of preparation outside the arena to the climax of the fight; during the preparatory phase as well as when adversaries wage their bloody fight, an atmosphere of anarchy prevails because nothing is determined in advance; everything is negotiated. During a fight, when tension is high, the shouting creates an atmosphere very similar to a stock market as bets are called and called out again. But when a fight is unexciting, the public adopts a passive, apathetic posture of outward indifference (but inward alertness) to what is going on in the ring. If the match lasts too long, spectators might call for the umpire to put an end to it, legitimizing their claim by this or that “rule.”⁵ First and foremost, it is important to remember that there are no written rulings, and the rules vary across umpires’ policies, time, and even place—in Tahaa, a match will not be shortened in the same circumstances and manner as in Raiatea.

“And yet,” commented one of my informants, “now it has evolved. Before, the fowls just fought to death, so this could take a long time.” There may be a bit of retrospective exaggeration in this remark, but it is indeed likely that new rules have been imposed over the last decades. The impression that prevails is one of constant negotiation, rules constantly on the move, still waiting to be fixed. Certainly the rules nowadays are different from those that framed the game in the pre-European period. All I can suggest is that they must have been redefined with the introduction of money bets, to allow those bets to be held. Though it would be impossible to write a “book of rulings” (and in any case this is not my purpose), I can sketch four types of situation from the matches I assisted with in Raiatea. The first two, the simplest, include that where one fowl is put to death by the other, or where one bird “refuses the combat” (*refuse le combat*) and steps out of the ring. When a fowl approaches the exit, the audience starts to scream “*Horo!*” (He quits!). The last two are more complex and most subject to dispute: first, where after a lapse of time—in Raiatea, when the birds do not fight for more than a minute—both contestants are *tapiri*, brought together. Second, the umpire either decides to cancel a fight if two exhausted fowl do not spring at each other’s throats,

⁵ “At a fight, the umpire . . . is in charge of their [the rules’] application and his authority is absolute. I have never seen an umpire’s judgment questioned on any subject, even by the more despondent losers, nor have I ever heard, even in private, a charge of unfairness directed against one” (Geertz 1973:422). It is the absolute reverse in Raiatea, where I heard several grumbles about the dubious integrity of the umpire, and charges of partiality were sometimes even stated openly. In this matter, there is no difference between the Tahitian and Chinese players.

or declares loser the one who refuses combat (this judgment being of course highly subjective).

Whatever the outcome of the contest, in the space of a few minutes, the winner holds his fowl aloft like a trophy and circles around the audience to gather his money, while the loser grabs his, or what is left of it, and departs. The birds are then nursed if their wounds are not too deep. If a second combat does not follow immediately, the spectators leave their places and resume their nonchalant mingling. Outside the ring, the seeming chaos resumes. The cockfighters arrive randomly during the morning or in the early afternoon, on no precise time schedule. Apart from the board where the name of each owner is inscribed next to his rooster's weight and number, everything else is dealt with orally. There is no predetermined schedule of fights; a fight starts once two owners have agreed on a sum and gathered the money on the "list." Just like the succession of apathetic and frenetic phases within the arena, here phases of concentration and dispersion follow one another. The apparent tranquility of isolated small groups just chatting is suddenly broken by moments of excitement when players crowd around two owners who have started a negotiation. The circle rapidly dissolves if no "list" is made, or thickens if they have come to an agreement: the time has then come for peripheral bets to be placed.

List Bets and Counter Bets

Though they share a common basic dichotomy between the even bet or "list," in the center, made at the moment when two antagonists agree to engage in a fight, and the uneven bets or "counter" bets, practiced at the periphery, after the fight has begun, in Bali this dichotomy matches a distinction between high status and low status players and spectators, while in Raiatea it does not.⁶

In Raiatea, the "list" bet involves sums ranging from 10,000 to one million Pacific Francs (800 to 8,000 US\$). Each side, the owner and his associates, bet the same amount of money. The number of participants, and thus the sum each participant bets, can vary on each side, as long as the total amount of the bet is the same in each list. In contrast, "counter" bets (*les contre*) imply that one of the players starts with a handicap, in other words, proposes a greater benefit in the case of a victory of his adversary. (For example, he proposes ten

⁶ "There is the single axial bet in the center between the principals (*toh ketengah*), and there is the cloud of peripheral ones around the ring between members of the audience (*toh kesasi*). The first is typically large; the second typically small. The first is collective, involving coalitions of bettors clustering around the owner; the second is individual, man to man" (Geertz 1973:425).

to five, if he wins the fight, his opponent owes him 5,000, but if he loses, he owes his opponent 10,000.) Counter bets start at seven to five or eight to five, jump to ten to five, and then, more infrequently go to twelve to five or fifteen to five ("if one of the roosters is really dominated"), and lastly, the extremely rare odds of ten to one. Once the fighting has begun and one of the birds emerges as clearly dominant, more counter bets are contracted, and the gap widens.

In Raiatea, the boundary between the set of players who participate in the initial list—the cockfighters and their associates—and those who can only bet on the outside—other cockfighters or spectators who do not own birds is not as neat as in Bali. Indeed, the members of a list, the cockfighter as well as his associates, will sometimes propose counter bets either to members of the opposing list in the center and/or to spectators at the periphery; they wager *na rapae* "the outside." This happens when a player is convinced of the greater quality of his bird and so considers the sum engaged in the list to be insufficient. More precisely, it occurs when his opponent cannot stake enough simply because he does not have that much money, or when he himself has deliberately underestimated the value of his fowl to deceive his opponent. He will then try to make some "extra" by also placing counter bets. I will later explore the motives for this kind behavior. Let us note here that whereas in Bali, the distinction between those who practice even bets and those who practice uneven bets clearly reflects the hierarchy between "solid citizens" in the center and the small peripheral players, in Raiatea the even/uneven dichotomy does not match a clear hierarchy.

Locals and "the Outside"

One of Raiatea's most knowledgeable cockfighters categorically stated that the practice of counter betting had been "brought from outside. Here, we always play even money from the start [of the fight]. When those from Tahiti come to play, they always propose a counter bet from the start. It is only the exterior that opened this up." Other informants make similar statements:

Those from Tahiti, when they have good roosters, before the match even begins, they can bet 50,000. . . . If they think they have a good rooster, they will even counter him fifteen to ten. Of course, it's interesting: if you lose, you lose 10,000, but if you win, you win 15,000. . . . If they say "ten times" it means 100,000 . . . it can go up to 100 times. Especially with those from Tahiti, the shopkeepers.

Those who propose counter bets come from "the outside;" those who accept or refuse them are the "locals." But this not merely a question, as in

football, of the home team and the visiting team. According to my informants, even when—on rare occasions—a team of cockfighters travels to Tahiti to challenge the “locals” there (but this term is never employed in such a context) they will be “countered.” So although “locality” is partly a question of territory, as I employ it here it does not merely indicate relative places, but the critical structural position presumed in the counter bet. A distinctive feature of Tahiti Chinese is their practice of countering even before a match has started. The “locals” are then in a position to accept or decline these offers. “Some people cannot resist, even when the domination is really obvious, because it’s just too tempting,” remarked one informant, a high status player from Raiatea.

Bettors who offer counter bets are consistently those “who come from Tahiti,” “the Chinese.” This was the uniform response made spontaneously by all informants in the course of my interviews, though they most often used the phrase “those from the outside” to refer to them. *Tinito* or *Chinois* is used as shorthand on occasions, for instance, during a match or in a tense context. *Tinito* is in such cases pronounced with a hint of deprecation, although this is not the case in everyday life, where *Tinito* is generally a neutral term. Explanations for this practice are always the same: “If they come all the way through here, it’s necessarily because they have a good rooster.” “They come with a champion (a cock that has won several fights in Tahiti) because they come to win.” “They come to win, because what interests them is money.”

Cockfighters from Raiatea clearly differentiate themselves from the Tahiti cockfighters, some of whom own industrial operations where they breed hundreds of fighters. The Raiateans scorn those who “do not even raise their roosters themselves” or “who pay people to take care of them.” On the matter of crossbreeding, the same opposition between local/outside arises. To get the best possible fighter, one must mix a *shamo* fowl (from Japan) with a *martini-quais* (from the Antillas) because the local birds (in Hakka, the language spoken by the Tahiti Chinese, *punsang kai* or indigenous fowl; in Tahitian, *moa oviri* “wild” fowl) are “brisk, but not very resistant.” In Hakka, the cockfighters refer to purebred fowls by simply mentioning their geographic origin: a *tangsang kai* (Asian), a *fakhi kai* (American). Whereas local “small cockfighters” often use wild birds, the “great cockfighters” based on Tahiti import purebred roosters from Southeast Asia or the United States. (The Chinese diasporic commercial networks play an important role here.)

Interaction between Unequal Players

These inter-ethnic fights in Raiatea therefore usually feature a “great cock-

fighter" with a superior bird and a "small cockfighter" whose chances of losing are very high. Why should the locals wish to engage in these contests in the face of this structural asymmetry? According to Goffman, the practice of handicapping is the hook: "This device ensures that however badly matched the contestants may be, each will have about the same chance of winning or losing A handicap contest, then, is an arrangement nicely calculated to transform two individuals into fields of action for each other, with the additional bite that one person's success must be balanced by the other person's failure" (1967:208). The handicap equalizes chances of winning or losing money, and the counter bet is its vehicle. For example, if a Chinese cockfighter plays ten to five against a Tahitian adversary because he judges his rooster to be twice as good as the local rooster, then if he wins twenty times ($20 \times 5,000$) he will earn 100,000 Pacific francs, as much as his adversary will earn should he win ten times ($10 \times 10,000$). This model, inherited from Game Theory, suggests why these Chinese and Tahitian players persist in these contests and how cockfighting continues to structure their relations, or in Barth's terms, the "articulation" of the inter-ethnic boundary.

Since this interactionist model seems to account for the perpetuation of engagement between Chinese and Tahitian players, the analysis might end here, with the exposure of the role played by handicapping. Ethnographic facts, though, suggest the analysis should be carried further. The deeper I got in the interviews—after the initial phase of trying to understand the rules and acquire the cockfighting vocabulary—the more evident it became that Tahitians consistently lose money while the Chinese players consistently win. The estimates given by my informants of their "assets and liabilities" (mere estimates because the Tahitian players never keep accounts) indicate that not only do the "small" Tahitian cockfighters lose matches more often because of the poor quality of their birds, but the counters they accept are not sufficient to balance their budgets. This is in a sense confirmed by the striking way the verb "to lose" predominates in the Tahitian cockfighting language. And it is further confirmed by the claim, made by the Chinese players from Tahiti, that they manage to balance their accounts when they play in Tahiti, but they earn money when they go to the islands. This is a serious obstacle for any Game Theory—inspired explanation.

From the standpoint of Game Theory, the Raiatean players' behavior is irrational if, knowing the feeble probability of victory of the local cock, they accept bets that do not sufficiently reward them for the level of risk they take on by playing.⁷ But the players in these contests do not

⁷ I am not sure they indulge in such complicated calculations.

share a common rationality, and there is no “reciprocal understanding” of shared interests. The explanation of why the cockfights continue must therefore besought outside Game Theory, which relies on the postulate of shared rationality among players, or “perfectly interchangeable” viewpoints (Menger 2001:133).

A Double-Sided Game

The cockpit is less a locus of “mutual considerateness,” where persons treat face-work as something they must be prepared to perform, than the site of a contest, a match, whose purpose is “to preserve everybody’s line from an inexcusable contradiction, while scoring as many points as possible against one’s adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself” (Goffman 1967:24). But in fact the situation is even more difficult because “preserving everybody’s line” again requires mutual understanding (shared rationality) between the players, and what we have here is an aggressive situation without mutual understanding because, as we shall see, the players disagree on the point of the game. Still, the players seem able to return to ritual equilibrium in spite of (or paradoxically because of) this disagreement. I will show below how despite the different rationalities of the Chinese and Tahitians, “face” is safeguarded on both sides.

While social code in all societies requires individuals to maintain face in the course of interacting, the ways in which they do this varies across cultures. As Goffman puts it, “By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract ‘incidents’—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face. . . . Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices. It is to this repertoire that people partly refer when they ask what a person or culture is ‘really’ like” (ibid.:13).

The Chinese Players’ Notion of Face

Those who come from the island Tahiti to propose counter bets risk their face in quite a spectacular way. To understand how face is at stake when one engages in the highly risky act of offering a big amount in order to earn a smaller one, I draw on Hu Hsien-chin’s analysis of “the Chinese concept of face” (1944). Hu explained the difference between two notions the Chinese language has to express the notion of face, “*mian* 面” and “*lian* 臉.” Although both refer to the face in its physical sense, and may be substitute for each

other in some contexts, they differ to the extent that with *mian* the emphasis is on social prestige, whereas *lian* refers to one's moral reputation. "Face" in its *mian* aspect may be borrowed, acquired, and increased in the course of social interaction, while *lian* refers to an absolute moral code. When I asked the Hakka-speaking French Polynesian Chinese how they translated "face," they responded that they have two words, *men* (same as *mian*) and *miangzhi* 面子. These terms appear to form a very similar pair: the distinction between them is analogous to that between *mian* and *lian*.

My tai-chi teacher, who also gave Hakka classes on Saturday mornings in Papeete's Kuomintang headquarters and was my principal informant in linguistic matters, gave me a detailed explanation:⁸

Mao miangzhi 沒面子 [to lose moral face] is very strong: it's to be dishonored, to lose one's reputation. It's when you have lost everything, for example, like the "supermen" in Macao, who throw themselves through windows after having lost everything—house, money, wife. [I asked if you can lose your *miangzhi* when you're caught cheating.] That depends on whether you bet big or not. To lose *miangzhi* you have to play big amounts . . . but actually if you're caught cheating, it is more a matter of *xinyung* 信用 [trustworthiness]; you lose your partner's trust. *Miangzhi* is also the dishonor of a family, for example, if one of its sons is a thief or a killer.⁹

Thus *lian* and *miangzhi* are a matter of moral reputation, their loss can even lead to suicide, and they are absolute (indeed my teacher referred to an absolute moral code when choosing her examples). *Mian* and *men* are much more proportional: they can be lost but also regained in the course of social interaction.

How does this second aspect of face come into play in the counter bet offered by Chinese cockfighters to their Tahitian opponents. How can face be lost or gained? In the Chinese gift economy, "The donor becomes the moral and symbolic superior of the recipient, and can thus subject the latter to his or her will" for "gift giving serves to incorporate within the recipient a part of the donor's person," the effect being that "one can in turn take the other's face and add it to one's own" (Yang 1989:43). This was particularly manifest in the attitude of a Chinese cockfighter, Ako, whom I met at the November festival. I asked Ako if he knew his opponents: "I do not know them very well, but they

⁸ The Kuomintang (KMT), a political party, was founded by Dr. Sun Yat-sen in August 1912.

⁹ *Miangzhi*, which is closer the notion of honor than "*men*," could stem from (this is a hypothesis that could not be confirmed, for most informants could not write Chinese) the phoneme *ming* 命 (life, destiny, order).

know me, and I know they like me, because when they recognize me, I buy them drinks.” It is clear here that Ako gains face from these mates, first by offering them counter bets, and second by buying them drinks.

When I asked my Chinese informants how they played the game in Tahiti it became clear how the moral aspect of face came into account. Raiatean cockfighters always bet even money; but among the Chinese in Tahiti, their interest lies exclusively in the counter bets. In this small circle where everyone knows that each adversary potentially has very good birds, the most widespread tactic is to make one's birds look inferior to those of one's adversary. Ako was kind enough to outline the routine reasoning of a Tahiti Chinese cockfighter:

You make up a budget. For example, you decide to put 500,000 on a match: you put 200 on the list, and for the remaining 300, you wait for counter bets. This is much better than putting everything on the list. . . . If you bring in a new rooster, you put up a list, but you wait for counters. On the list, you try not to play too big, you put up 200,000. And you wait for the counters to come: if you're offered eight to five, ten times, then you win 30,000 more, [an amount] that you wouldn't have if you had put the 50,000 [staked in the counter bet] on the list.

The idea of an inverted bluff, of underestimation aimed at saving money for the counter bet, surfaced several times during this interview, as well as during shorter interviews with other Chinese players. This is the formula they use when visiting “the islands” or after having been there: “With a very good fowl that has fought in the islands, and that you've trained at home, you say 70 to 80 [70,000 or 80,000 on the list] and you wait for counters.”

Unlike the Raiatea or Tahaa players, who, when they share a similar status, only fight against even bets, the Chinese from Tahiti will tend to avoid these in preference for counter bets. My hypothesis is that it is here that the first aspect of Chinese face, that of *lian* or *miangzhi* that enters into play. When I asked Ako whether it was more a matter of social or moral face he opted for the second without hesitation. This might be related to the importance of amounts at stake, for this, as my tai-chi teacher emphasized, is an important criteria in matters of *miangzhi*. But there might be an even stronger connection between the counter bet and *miangzhi*. The general tactic that amounts to underestimating one's fowl might be related to the negative judgment Chinese society passes on “the over-estimation of one's ability” (Hu 1944: 49). This is why moral face can be lost when, after having criticized someone else's mistake, one commits the same error. We could say Chinese cockfighters behave according to this principle when they try to make a bird appear inferior to that of their opponent.

It must be stressed that the Chinese players' notion of face, in both its aspects, informs the attitude of the individual in betting. This coincides with the lesser interest they have in the cockfighting per se. The Chinese bet *on* fights rather than feeling personally involved *in* the fight. Loosing a rooster is not so important—"you always have others ready to fight." This preference for the game of money rather than the combat is reflected in the structure of their budget: the Chinese cockfighters spend more money on the higher risk counter bets than on the list, while the Tahitians spend more money, or even all their money, on the even bet. A Chinese player will not hesitate to minimize the value of his fowl, because the whole point of the game for him is to win money through the bet. The loss or increase of face is less linked to the fowl's defeat or victory than to losing or winning the bet. When the Chinese show reluctance to invest too much money in the list, this is interpreted by Tahitian players as a lack of confidence in their fowl's value.¹⁰

The Tahitian Players' Notion of Face

The Chinese strategy of undervaluing their birds is in direct contradiction to the Tahitian player's vision of the game's principles. While Chinese cockfighters consider it a mere tactic, the Tahitians consider it cheating. If such a trick is discovered, a general fight may break out, and so Chinese players are careful not to attempt it too often, or at least not get caught.

The following quotation from an interview with a Raiatean cockfighter evokes the hostility such cheating triggers:

During the fight, when nobody's watching, someone goes out to give the bird a sleeping pill . . . after this the owner can't recognize his fowl anymore. . . . Or they put irritating products on the wings, or poison on the *tara* [the bill]. It's risky, because if he gets caught, especially if it's some Chinese guy from Tahiti, the whole island of Raiatea assaults him. . . . Once there was a huge fight. . . . The small teams aren't cheaters, it's the big ones, those who have loads of dough, because all that matters to them is to make dough. They don't even nurse their own birds, they pay people to do that.

¹⁰ This is also why Ako, when asked about "honor" (the question is left "open") correlates this notion more to the bets, and especially to the crucial post-combat moment when it comes to "cash" (collect) the gambling money than to the cockfight. It is at that moment, when you can see who is a bad player and who is a good one. Ako does not distinguish (as my tai-chi teacher did) the notions of *miangzhi* and *xinyung*. The bad payers (thus the bad losers) *mao miangzhi* (lose face) and *mao xinyung* (lose trustworthiness). This topic will not be further developed because it might take us too far from our purpose.

[I asked him if this was in the spirit of the sport:] Well, it's like when you see the Real Madrid team; you can't speak about the "spirit of sport" when it's like this. You don't even ask who is going to win or to lose, but how you will be eaten up. [If this is the case, does he still accept counter bets from Tahiti?] It's rare. There are always some who are taken in, because it's attractive; they offer 10,000 against 5,000. . . . Whereas between us, it's always 10,000 to 10,000. It is only when we [the associates] have a very good cock, then it is a matter of honor, especially if they bring a champion.

What ensures the continued interaction, continued inter-ethnic contests between the Tahitian and Chinese cockfighters is not only the handicap device and the possibility of winning money, but also in many cases the will to defend the local honor. A "small cockfighter" wants to challenge (they use the "Frenglish" word *challenger*) the "big cockfighter" from Tahiti, because it is a matter of honor—the honor of the team, of the district, and sometimes even of the whole island.¹¹ In such cases all the cockfighters from a given island will form a united front against those of other islands.

The way Tahitian cockfighters defend their "face" is revealed here: the participant always tries to interact in a way that allows him to maintain face; interaction is therefore a ritual. He can do this primarily out of a sense duty to himself, in which case one speaks of pride; if he "does so because of duty to wider social units and receives support from those units in doing so," then it is a matter of honor (Goffman 1967:9). If this idea of the collective defense of face is absent among the Chinese cockfighters, they know for a fact that their local adversaries have embraced it, and so they will be able to profit by traveling to Raiatea.

Avoiding counter bets and gathering a large amount of money on their list against a champion from Tahiti having only one or two associates is not only a privilege of "great cockfighters" like the one quoted above. The "small cockfighters" will also try to defend their honor by forming coalitions of ten to more than thirty associates, perhaps representing a whole district or island. One of the most dramatic fights I witnessed involved such a coalition (cf. the

¹¹ The Tahitian players use the French word *honneur*. There are, as far as I know, no studies of the Tahitian notions of face and honor. Even Levy in his extensive study *Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (1973) makes no mention of it. He insists, though, on the importance Tahitians placed on attractiveness and cleanliness in the presentation of self, which he links to the central notion of shame, *ha'ama* (to make clean). In a more thoroughgoing analysis of the inter-ethnic games in Raiatea (an English version of the monograph is in process) I explore the link between *ha'ama*, honor, and the vanishing of subjectivity in the Tahitian apprehension of the game. In the space of this paper I restrict the analysis to Goffman's definition of "honor," which suits particularly well what my informants emphasized is at stake for them in these contests.

opening vignette). If a “small cockfighter” from the district of Opoa on Raiatea challenges an outside cockfighter, he will not do so in his own name, but in the name of the Opoa district or the island of Raiatea. All cockfighters from the district or the island will contribute to the bet if they judge this fight to be a matter of honor, that is, if the fowl is the district or island champion. Symmetrically, a high status cockfighter, for example, a “demi” (half-European, half-Tahitian) cockfighter from Uturoa will tend to avoid counter bets, which he knows are a waste of money; but if one of the “smaller” players challenges a champion from Tahiti, he will feel obliged to contribute to that bet even if he knows he will probably lose money. It becomes a question of honor.

What sustains interpersonal engagement is not only the mechanism of the handicap, but also the determination of the local cockfighters from Raiatea, Tahaa, and other small islands to defend their honor. Only this can explain why they continue to play in the face of losing money. For Tahitians honor can only be defended through an important amount staked by the community in an even bet. I do not mean to imply that there is no notion of honor among Chinese, nor that Tahitians have no interest in earning money through games. My purpose is to highlight the different ways of saving face, one where the emphasis is on communal “honor,” the other where it is on moral “character.” These in turn are linked to the different meanings the players confer upon the game. There are, in fact, not two ways of playing the same game, but two games juxtaposed.

Conclusion

Goffman pointed out that “an embarrassment of game analysis is that different persons can have quite different feelings about the same bet or the same prize. . . . When attention must be given to variations in meaning that different persons give to the same bet (or the same prize), or that the same individual gives over time or over varying conditions, one speaks of subjective value or utility. . . . Objective standards can be used in getting at the meaning of bets, but we must use the murky notion of utility to get at the meaning of betting” (ibid.:157). It may be added that if difficulties appear when players have different ideas of utility, they may be insurmountable when there are two games and two stakes, as seems to be the case in Raiatea: one is the *victory* of one’s favorite, the other is to *gain* the bet.

Instead of comparing the social rationality of Tahitians with the economic rationality of Chinese, it must be stressed that both groups pursue different ends, that is, the behaviors adopted by the players are a function of

what is at stake for them in the game.¹² If the situation becomes aggressive, then the aim on each side is certainly not saving the other's face; still, the effective result is not necessarily the loss of face. Because the odds are in their favor, but also because they generally judge the amounts at stake to be insufficient, the Tahiti Chinese cockfighters offer counter bets that flaunt the creditor-debtor relationship, through which they gain their adversaries' face. But the Tahitians do not only defend their face when they unite to confront the champions from Tahiti. They also "immunize" it in a way, by repeating endlessly that they lose more money than they earn. The ability to "waste" money is highly regarded in Tahitian society as a way to increase one's status. We thus arrive at a structural homology between the betting relation and the credit relation. But this relation in practice does not rely on a "shared rationality," any more than the credit relation where the creditor-debtor tie of classic economic theory is perceived differently by the involved parties. This is the same misunderstanding we encounter in the betting relationship.

Goffman noted in his introduction to the idea of face: "Following Chinese usage, one can say that 'to give face' is to arrange for another to take a better line than he might otherwise have been able to take, the other thereby gets face given him, this being one way in which he can gain face" (ibid.:9). In the case of credit or gambling during a cockfight, we may argue that both parties mutually give each other face, though not on purpose. The paradoxical success (in terms of longevity) of cockfighting is less due to the two sides reaching of a "reciprocal understanding" of their common interest than to the confrontation of different rationalities that allows each party to save face in its own way. This explains why, in nine cases out of ten, tranquility is restored very soon after a fight, as if no violent outburst ever took place. Thanks to reciprocal incomprehension, face can be saved on both sides. "Just as a move is subject to interpretation, so a characterological outcome may be differently read by different participants. . . . Scoring in some cases may be so flexible that each side can maintain its own view of the final outcome" (ibid.:247).

¹² Classical economic theory adopts a substantial view of rationality (obedient to rational motives) and would thus consider the Tahitian players' behavior irrational. Game Theory uses a formal definition (where behavior is consistent with a goal, it is rational) that leaves a greater room for interpretation. However, since its goal is to account for the players' behavior, it still must postulate that they share one and the same rationality.

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信貸與賭博關係： 大溪地華人與瑞阿提亞(Raiatea)大溪地人之間 不同理性的勾連

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本文旨在透過法屬波里尼西亞華人社群的研究，說明瑞阿提亞(Raiatea)島上鬥雞賽的互動結構。鬥雞賽通常是由勝券在握的華人玩家與勝算渺茫的瑞阿提亞當地參賽者對抗。華人玩家經常在與對手賭博時，以不等的賠率下注：他們其實是以讓步，在理論上平衡了比賽雙方得勝的機會。從這些鬥雞賽中所呈現的賭注結構，反映出華人與波里尼西亞人之間族群關係在歷史上的結構運作。此外「信貸關係」這個在兩個族群互動時常見的焦點，卻無形中維持了族群間的區隔。這種信貸關係的持續，並非肇因於雙方對於共同利益有對應的理解，反而是肇因於誤解。作者將在文中指出賭博關係與信貸關係在結構上具有同質性。這種看來成功又矛盾的族群交往形式，是建立在雙方可以各自使用他們認定的解釋方式來保住顏面。

關鍵詞：互動理論，競技，族群，面子
