

# Everything to lose

Students, farmers and even party cadres across the mainland are falling victim to the craze of gambling on Hong Kong's Mark Six. They believe the lottery is rigged, writes **Simon Parry**, and clues to the winning numbers can be found everywhere – even in children's television shows. Illustration by **Julien Lallemand**.

**B**ehind drawn curtains, an 18-year-old who spends his daylight hours hiding from loan sharks paces nervously back and forth in his shabby rented room in Zhenxiong, in Yunnan province. He is contemplating one last, desperate gamble.

"If I can just make one more winning bet, I can turn my fortunes around," Gu Yungui said, a note of optimism at first rising in his voice and then dying away almost immediately as he contemplated the extent of his losses. "I've lost almost 60,000 yuan (HK\$68,000). This is my last chance."

Gu – whose misery was laid bare as a cautionary tale in a popular mainland newspaper – is the victim of a phenomenon that began in the southern provinces in the late 1990s: underground bets on the outcome of Hong Kong's Mark Six lottery. To the alarm of officials, the craze has spread to almost every corner of the nation and involves such huge sums that Communist Party officials have labelled it a social plague that must be confronted and eradicated.

Every week, millions of yuan are staked upon whether the bonus ball drawn in Hong Kong's lottery will be odd or even or, for those willing to try for potentially huge payouts, what the exact number will be. From Zhenxiong in the southwest to the central provinces of Hubei and Hunan to coastal cities, towns and villages in Fujian, tens of thousands of people pore over mass-produced prediction sheets trying to figure out what will be drawn out of the lottery machine.

The extent of the mania was illustrated starkly here when, at 5am on January 7, marine police intercepted a high-speed smuggling boat loaded with 45,000 copies of a magazine called *King of Mark Six* in waters off Sai Kung Country Park as it prepared to sail for Guangdong.

It was just one of what police believe are regular shipments of the magazine – which is legally

published in Hong Kong and filled with superstitious speculation on which numbers will be drawn – being smuggled to the mainland, where the publication of anything promoting illicit gambling carries severe penalties.

Gu caught the Mark Six bug as he began his high school studies and a fellow student gave him a locally produced version of *King of Mark Six* – a photocopied A4 sheet with clues and codes to help him pick the winning number. He heard stories of people amassing fortunes and of a farmer who bet all his assets on a number and won, becoming enormously and improbably rich. To Gu, who was struggling on a student allowance of 200 yuan a month, it made perfect sense.

"You can bet 100 yuan and make 4,000 yuan," he reasoned. "You can bet 1,000 yuan and you can make 40,000 yuan. Who wouldn't want to try it? I knew that if I could win just once, I would solve my problems for years to come."

Instead, one big win turned out to be the beginning of Gu's problems. After a handful of failed attempts, Gu successfully chose the winning number, "using" a code based on animals, and picked up a 3,000 yuan jackpot. He celebrated by taking some fellow students out for a lavish dinner and became an instant celebrity – someone who had actually unlocked the lottery-winning code.

Buoyed by his success, he placed bigger bets, borrowing money to chase after every losing gamble. In just over a week, he lost 9,000 yuan. All the tuition money sent to him by his parents was squandered on Mark Six bets. His sources of credit dried up and he found himself facing huge debts he had no way of repaying. Grim stories of the violent retribution meted out to non-payers by loan sharks haunted him and he went into hiding.

"I owe so much," he told the *Southern Weekend* newspaper. "What will they do to me?"

Gu's salvation lay in one final gamble, he believed. For the past six draws, the bonus ball had been an even number. Trusting his instincts and

his meticulous study of the way the bonus ball was drawn, he was certain that the next one would be green and an odd number. Now all he needed to do was find someone to lend him enough money to gamble so he could wipe out his debts.

**AN OFFICIAL SURVEY** in Hunan province in 2003 estimated that more than 1 million bets were placed through underground lotteries for each Mark Six draw, with participants ranging from farmers and factory workers to teachers and party cadres and bets ranging from 5 yuan to 10,000 yuan per person. In Pingjian county, in Yunnan province, alone, 400,000 people from 11 towns were believed to be placing bets, splurging out a huge 20 million yuan over the course of a year. Ahead of a particularly eagerly awaited draw, villagers queued up one morning to withdraw more than 320,000 yuan from the Hongqiao Town Credit Union to bet with underground syndicates.

Big winners acquire mythical status and their stories inspire gamblers to carry on placing bets. The losers are spoken of in hushed tones – people such as farmer Chen Changren from Miaogeng village in Zhenxiong county, who committed suicide by swallowing rat poison after running up debts of 70,000 yuan by gambling on the Mark Six. Before his death, according to neighbours quoted in mainland newspapers, he had spoken of ending his problems with one last gamble.

"If you rear chickens and ducks, you will be poor forever," the 55-year-old reportedly said. "But you can reverse your fortune and change your life with one special number."

It is easy to see why the trend has officials worried. Some village heads complain that people are so obsessed with the lottery that they have time for little else. "When you meet, you don't tell each other how things are," one of them was quoted as saying. "You talk about animals. Last time it was a cow. This time it should be a horse.

"Look at the fallow farmland. People have gone >>



Below: Hong Kong marine police officers hold up copies of the *King of Mark Six* publication, which were intercepted en route to the mainland.



crazy. They don't farm the land anymore. They don't feed the pigs. They are counting on buying the special number to reverse their fortunes."

The phenomenon has been draining millions of yuan from the official economy, diverting it into the bank accounts of underground syndicates suspected of fuelling the craze with urban myths about lucky winners and mysterious patterns in the winning numbers. Official state lotteries launched to combat the trend cannot compete.

So why did the craze begin and why are so many people willing to stake large sums on the outcome of a lottery run in Hong Kong? These

## "People seek key signs from dreams, the murmurings of people with psychological disorders and even shamans"

are questions anthropologist Joseph Bosco and a team of researchers from the Chinese University of Hong Kong have spent the past six years trying to answer. Bosco spent a week in a village in northern Guangdong that has been caught up in the Mark Six fever. He found that the craze is driven by a potent mix of traditional Confucian beliefs and distrust towards the government married to an unshakeable conviction that the Hong Kong draw is somehow rigged.

The numbers, mainland gamblers believe, are drawn up to a year in advance and the televised draw – which they learn of through newspapers or word of mouth, usually the following day – is a charade. A privileged few know what the numbers will be and send out coded messages to be picked up by the clever, the alert and the intuitive. They will even leak clues through television programmes and newspaper "cheat sheets", gamblers believe.

"In one area, when the children's show *Teletubbies* came on TV, everyone would stop what they were doing and watch it because they were convinced the show held clues to the winning number if only they could spot the clue," Bosco says. "In other places, a popular cookery show and a Chinese children's TV programme were believed to contain clues."

In their report, Bosco and his colleagues write about an obsession of tracing "deep hints" hidden in television programmes. "An example from *Teletubbies* illustrates what informants mean by 'deep hints'," the report says. "One episode

revolved around bathing. The *Teletubbies* repeated the phrase 'use soap to wash the body clean' [*yong fei zao xi gan jing*].

"In the past, another common name for soap [*fei zao*] was *yang zao* [western soap]. As 'western' and 'goat' are pronounced the same, this was interpreted as a sign to bet on the [number of the] goat [as based on the Chinese zodiac].

"The numbers are not viewed as random. Picking the correct number is thought to require intelligence and cleverness. In addition to television programmes and newspaper sheets, people seek key signs from dreams, the murmurings of people with psychological disorders and even shamans."

The extraordinary conviction that the rich and powerful feed out clues to the winning lottery numbers is rooted in the Confucian belief that "the world is always knowable", the university team concluded. That thinking makes betting on the Mark Six less of an irrational gamble and more of a speculative investment based upon educated guesses and inside information.

"It's not really that different from the way people invest in stocks in Hong Kong," Bosco says. "People always expect someone to have inside information so rumours get spread about this or that company and buying and selling is based on those tips. People believe they are going to get information that no one else has.

"Of course, a lot of what people hear is false. It's just as irrational as in the villages in China where people think that lottery tips are being sent out through children's cartoons. But in China and Hong Kong there is a common belief that there is some order to it and if you can figure out the order, you can make a lot of money. If you're smart enough, you can figure anything out."

Bosco calls the village where he did the research Zhong, shielding its real name to avoid any trouble for the people taking part in what is, after all, a criminal activity. Not that the arrest of anyone in Zhong would be likely – unless the majority of its 2,000 residents were to be taken into custody.

"We walked into a room to interview people and we found all these government officials who were there to collect the tax for the rice," Bosco recalls. "They were on their lunch breaks and they had all these cheat sheets spread out in front of them. It was obvious they were trying to figure out what the numbers were going to be, too."

As in Zhenxiong, the craze for underground lotteries in Zhong – which affects more than 80 per cent of residents – appears to have started with possibly apocryphal stories of a big winner. "Locals said the lottery became a craze in October 2001, when a villager won 110,000 yuan," Bosco and his colleagues say.

"We calculate that it would have taken a bet of [4,000 yuan] on one number to win so much. Other villagers took to buying lottery numbers with alacrity, even while the first winner proceeded to gamble and lose all the winnings."

"People who play don't expect to win – but they always think they are very close to winning," Bosco says. "It was just bad luck that they hadn't quite figured out what the hints were.

"There's a general feeling that life is unfair, that everything is rigged. On one level, it is an indictment of the system in China – that it's corrupt and the cadres and the government are taking advantage.

"But there is also the fundamental idea that

your success in life is determined by luck, so even though it's a zero-sum game – and maybe less than a zero-sum game – it doesn't dissuade people from playing. They are convinced it takes luck to be successful and, yes, the odds are against you but if you are lucky you will win and if you don't play you're never going to win. From a certain funny logic, it makes total sense to gamble."

As an outsider Bosco – being from the home of Mark Six – found himself the object of some suspicion and was approached by people in Zhong asking if he had any inside information to share.

"They assumed I was holding back information on what the winning numbers were in Hong Kong. One guy refused to believe that I wasn't," Bosco says. "I didn't dare place a bet myself because I was worried that if I did, I would cause a stampede, with everyone rushing to bet on that number."

In 2004, in Yueyang city, Hunan province, a group of lottery players staged a sit-in in front of the municipal offices, demanding that officials there tell them the winning numbers for the forthcoming draw. The sit-in was in response to a rumour that the city government had assembled a team of experts to hit back at the underground syndicates by decoding the lottery numbers.

"The government officials didn't know whether to laugh or cry but eventually managed to persuade the crowd to disperse," a mainland report of the incident said.

Stories like these might seem to portray an unsophisticated and naive society but Bosco doesn't see it that way.

"I don't look at the people in Zhong village and say, 'Look how stupid they are'," he says. "This might all look irrational to us but it's really no different to the irrationality we see in our own advanced capitalist economy.

"It's funny that this comes after the [Bernard] Madoff case. In the heart of New York, among the supposedly most sophisticated in the world, we have people who convinced themselves that a guy who doesn't even give information about what he's buying or selling and gives 12 per cent returns every year is actually legitimate. That's pretty irrational. We tend to think of Americans as being very sophisticated and yet you have a whole society that just stopped being rational because they were making so much money and it was in everyone's interests to temporarily suspend rational judgment."

In the wake of what has been called the world's biggest confidence trick, it seems unlikely that people in the west will hand over their money for the likes of Madoff to gamble away again in a hurry. But the underground lotteries taking bets on the outcome of the Mark Six are still raking in millions.

**NOT FROM GU**, in Zhenxiong, however, who remains in hiding and in an unending dilemma over his unpaid debts. In the week that he was interviewed, an odd ball – green in colour – was drawn just as Gu had anticipated. But he had been unable to get a cash advance from any of his creditors before the draw took place.

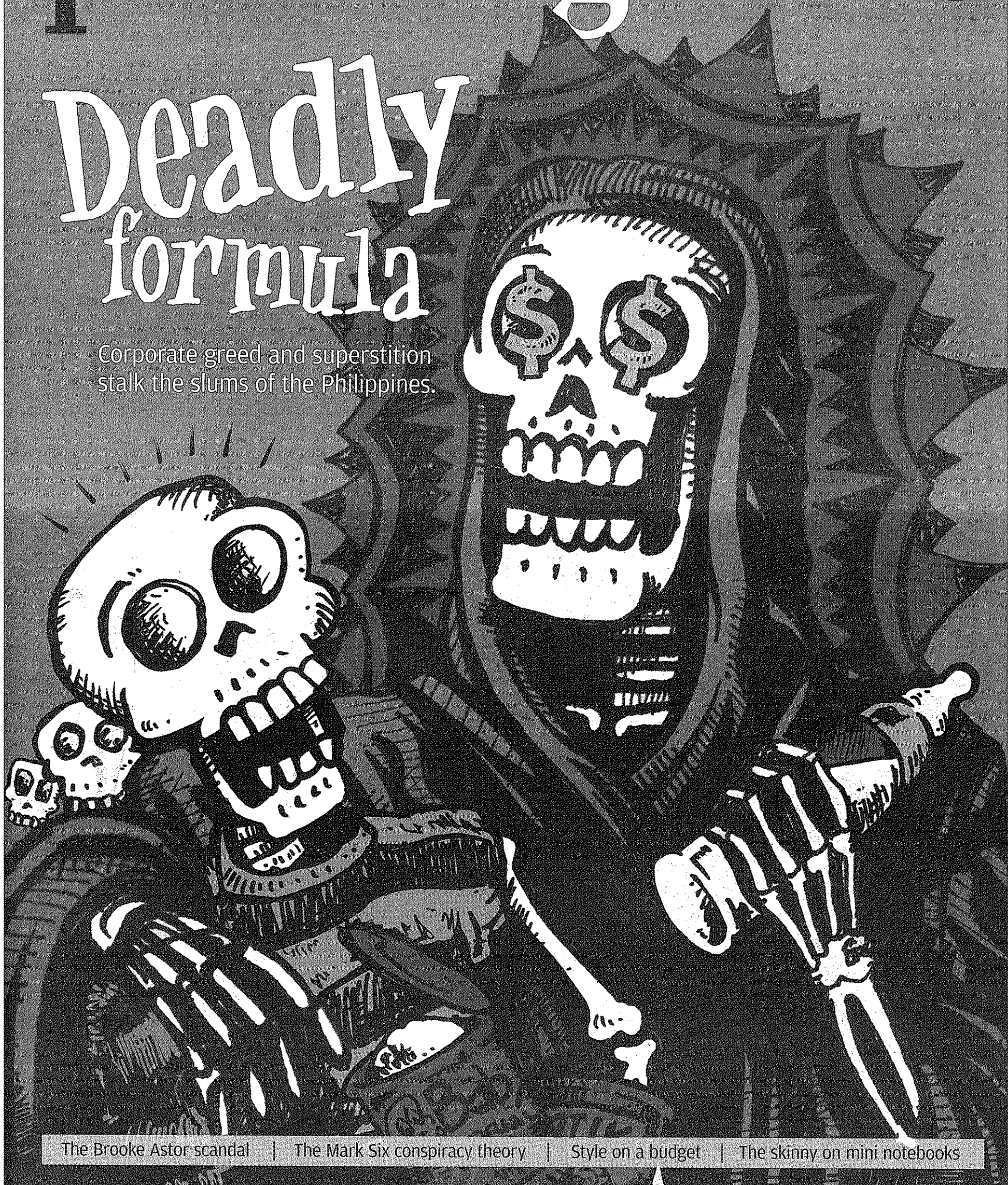
Along with tens of thousands of other chronic gamblers on the mainland, Gu lives on in a twilight world as he waits for the opportunity to play that one last winning hand that will turn his fortunes – and his life – around. ■

February 1, 2009

# postmagazine

## Deadly formula

Corporate greed and superstition stalk the slums of the Philippines.



The Brooke Astor scandal | The Mark Six conspiracy theory | Style on a budget | The skinny on mini notebooks