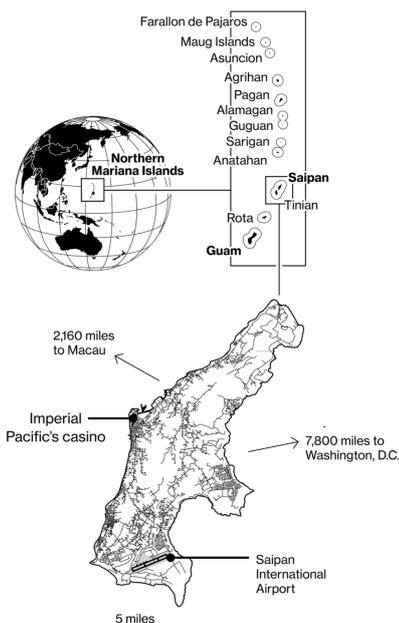


A Chinese Casino Has Conquered a Piece of America

By Matthew Campbell
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► Construction workers maimed and killed. Millions paid to the governor's family. An impossibly lucrative gambling operation. And all on U.S. soil.

America, But Way Over There



GRAPHIC BY BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK. DATA: OPENSTREETMAP

Dr. Marty Rohringer was ending a graveyard shift at the lone hospital on Saipan, the exceptionally remote U.S. island, when four Chinese men arrived with a body.

The figure they had with them—a middle-aged man, also Chinese, naked but for his underwear—was unresponsive, and had clearly suffered severe trauma. As an orderly lifted him onto a gurney, the four men indicated in broken English that he had fallen from a hotel-room balcony.

Rohringer began to evaluate the man under the ER's harsh fluorescent lights. His skin was pallid and turning blue, and it was obvious that he could not be revived. One of the men who'd arrived with the body started to mime chest compressions: Was there really nothing to be done? Rohringer pronounced the man dead just before 8 a.m. on March 22, 2017. Already, the medical staff suspected that the story of his fall was a lie.

The hospital had been inundated with patients from a construction site a few blocks away on this speck of rock among the Northern Mariana Islands, in the deepest part of the Pacific. To get a sense of Saipan's isolation from the Lower 48, imagine flying from Denver to Honolulu. Then fly that far again. Then go

farther still. Saipan (population 48,000) is nevertheless American soil, with U.S. dollars, U.S. mail, and U.S. laws. But the place has seemed less and less like America since 2014, when a Chinese casino operator arrived and—with near-total impunity—turned Saipan into a back door to the U.S. financial system.

At a temporary storefront, the company, Imperial Pacific International Holdings Ltd., was somehow handling more than \$2 billion a month in VIP bets. And at the construction site, it was building a gargantuan casino with a crew of hundreds of Chinese, scores of them working illegally on tourist visas. So many laborers were getting hurt that Rohringer's colleagues began keeping an unofficial spreadsheet, separate from standard hospital records: a grim catalog of broken bones, lacerations, puncture wounds, dislocated limbs, and eyes penetrated by flying metal. The dead man Rohringer saw was not, of course, a tourist who'd stumbled over a railing—he was a builder named Hu Yuanyou, and he'd plummeted from a scaffold. His colleagues hadn't called 911; instead, they'd pulled the work clothes off his broken body in a clumsy attempt to obscure his identity. The less that outsiders learned about the casino, the better.

Hu died building what's become, on paper, the most successful gambling operation in history. In the first half of 2017, table for table, Imperial Pacific turned over nearly six times more cash than the fanciest gaming facilities in Macau, which themselves dwarf the activity in Las Vegas. And that was before Imperial Pacific opened its lavish megacasino in July.

Given Macau's status as a hub for industrial-scale money laundering, the Saipan figures have left gaming veterans astonished that they could be generated on U.S. soil, under Washington's ostensible oversight. Eight casino executives and analysts interviewed for this story, all with extensive experience of the Asian gaming trade, said they saw no way such volumes could be generated legitimately. Asked if there could be a benign explanation for such instantaneous success at a casino more than three hours' flight from any major city, on a drowsy island where the best hotel is a 1970s-era Hyatt, one of the executives burst out laughing.

“If the casino didn't want illegal workers, how can so many of us be here?”

Per capita, there's almost certainly more Chinese money moving through Saipan than anywhere else in the world. The unprecedented flow of capital has allowed Imperial Pacific to operate in ways that would be unthinkable within the 50 states. When laws have become inconvenient to the company, they've been flouted; when the requirements of its contract with the government have become onerous, they've been removed; when legislators have tried to interfere, they've been ignored. Imperial Pacific has made millions of dollars in payments to family members of the territory's governor, Ralph DeLeon Guerrero Torres. Remarkably, the company has also enjoyed the support of a gold-plated roster of American politicians. Its advisers and board of directors have included former directors of the CIA and FBI and former governors of Mississippi, New York, and Pennsylvania.

In a written response to questions from *Bloomberg Businessweek*, Imperial Pacific said it has “strived and [is] committed to comply with local and federal laws” and that it “categorically denies” impropriety in its dealings with the government. Torres's office said that all changes to laws or policies

were undertaken “with the intent of achieving economic growth within the boundaries of the law.”

Imperial Pacific’s overnight domination of Saipan has generated deep unease among the island’s citizens, many of whom are convinced that their home has been bought. The company, they believe, set out to take over a little piece of America, politicians and all. Given the billions of dollars at stake, it’s not surprising someone would try. What’s shocking is that, so far, it seems to be working.

I landed in Saipan in September, well after midnight and thoroughly disoriented. Just a few hours earlier, I’d flown out of Hong Kong on a vector southeast over the Pacific; now I was disembarking into tropical warmth and the familiar scene of a U.S. Customs and Border Protection checkpoint. Many of my fellow passengers were Chinese, and as they waited for immigration agents to arrive, I went to swipe my passport at one of the automated entry kiosks. Three of the government machines had been paid for by Imperial Pacific.

In my rental car, I circled the airport parking lot, searching in the darkness for the road into town. On the periphery, I could just make out a series of squat concrete structures—Japanese bunkers from World War II. In 1944, American forces sweeping the Pacific identified Saipan as an essential conquest: From its runways, bombers could reach Tokyo. The battle for the island was ferocious, and at its conclusion, rather than surrender, thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians hurled themselves from a promontory that’s been known ever since as Suicide Cliff.

In the morning, Saipan revealed itself in some of the most blinding sunlight I’ve ever experienced. At 46.5 square miles, the island is just smaller than San Francisco, a dot in the semicircle of undersea mountains that stretches from Indonesia to Japan. Inland Saipan is verdant, with thickets of coconut and papaya trees climbing limestone hills. But most locals live along the flat western coast, amid scruffy strip malls and car dealerships. The population is a mix of old-stock Chamorros, as most native islanders are known, and migrants from the mainland U.S., many of them the sort of amiable oddballs who might otherwise move to Key West. For visitors, Saipan’s chief charm is the combination of Americana and the exotic, such as Little League games with snack stations of taro and breadfruit. “Exotic” cuts both ways, of course, and several businesses offer Asian tourists access to American eccentricities, like assault rifles. “Experience the thrill of firing a real gun,” reads an advertisement for a local shooting range. “In Saipan, it’s legal and is guaranteed by the United States Constitutions 3rd Amendment.”

After World War II, the U.S. claimed Saipan and its sisters, eventually forming the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. But the place had little economic purpose. In the 1970s, to encourage development, Washington exempted the CNMI from minimum wage and immigration laws, and major retailers rushed into Saipan, eager to label as “Made in U.S.A.” clothing sewn by workers making \$2.15 an hour. The industry eventually collapsed, taking with it Saipan’s tax base. A 2011 cash shortage was so severe that the hospital ran out of bedsheets.

**Imperial’s billions flowed over fewer than
20 tables. Wynn Macau had 192**



The lights of Garapan from a hill near Suicide Cliff.
PHOTOGRAPHER: MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM
PHOTOS FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

Isolated, out-of-options municipalities have often turned to casinos for economic salvation, but Saipan's heavily Catholic voters had long opposed the idea at the ballot box. Structurally, the CNMI government resembles an American state: bicameral legislature, supreme court, branches of the Democratic and Republican parties. But in practice, politics is dominated by two prominent families, one of them the Deleon Guerreros. Ralph Deleon Guerrero Torres was among those who voted against a casino proposal in 2013, when he was president of the senate.

Not long after the vote, with money stresses intensifying, Torres and several other politicians flew to Hong Kong and Macau for what they called a fact-finding trip to reconsider the casino option. Whatever facts they found changed their minds. They returned to Saipan, introduced a bill authorizing a casino concession, and passed it with little debate. When a local activist gathered signatures for a repeal, the legislature passed the measure again under a different name, rendering the petition meaningless.

Two companies bid for the project. The first proposal was from a group connected to a facility on a nearby island. The second was from Imperial Pacific, and it seemed too good to be true. Despite having no experience in casino operation or construction, the company offered to spend \$3 billion on a megaresort out of all proportion to Saipan's economy—Macau on the Mariana Trench.

Saipan's elected officials subjected the bids to only glancing due diligence. They hired a group of experts to scrutinize the proposals, but when one of them, a gaming executive named Shaun McCamley, found a major red flag—that people listed as consultants had not had serious discussions with the company—the government seemed untroubled. (Imperial Pacific disputed this.) In August 2014, the company won the bid in exchange for a \$15 million annual fee and other fixed payments—enough revenue to pull Saipan back from the economic brink. For the lifeline, Imperial Pacific extracted extraordinary terms: a 25-year monopoly on the casino trade and a deal to pay no gambling-specific taxes. Virtually whatever money the Chinese generated at their tables, they could keep.



Chinese workers protested at the casino site last July.
PHOTOGRAPHER: DAN LIN

The strongest desire among China's wealthy is to get their money—ill-gotten or otherwise—out of the country, safe from the threat of government seizure. One prevalent method for magicking money across the border, in defiance of strict capital controls, begins with companies called junkets. They bring wealthy clients from the mainland, where gambling is illegal, to the VIP rooms of casinos in Macau. There, the junkets extend the clients credit to play baccarat, a game of luck at which they're likely to win or lose a negligible amount. At the end of play, clients cash out their balance in the currency of their choice. The debt is collected in yuan, in China. Everybody wins: The clients have converted yuan into dollars or euros or sterling, and the middlemen get a cut.

In 2011 a mother and son from Harbin, a hardscrabble city in China's northeast, became involved with a junket called Hang Seng. Cui Lijie (then about 52) and Ji Xiaobo (about 32) had grown wealthy through investments in real estate, lending, and pawnshops, and despite being newcomers to Macau, they tripled the new venture's client list in a year—from 200 high rollers to 650, according to filings. Macau gaming experts told me that Hang Seng offered far more generous credit than its competitors, making it a go-to junket for moving large amounts of capital. In 2013 the company's betting volume reached more than \$4 billion a month—easily among the largest operations in the city. But then, in 2014, China's government cracked down on the Macau laundromat, and Hang Seng's volume dropped by two-thirds. Cui had recently taken control of a company called First Natural Foods Holdings Ltd. As the action in Macau tanked, First Natural announced it was changing its name to Imperial Pacific and would seek to build a casino on Saipan.

For an American face to lead the development, the company hired Mark Brown, an Atlantic City native who'd run Donald Trump's casino empire. Brown was so revered by his Trump colleagues that some executives grew mustaches to mimic his own, and in 2004 he appeared at the future president's side on *The Apprentice*. But after Trump's company declared bankruptcy, his star fell. In 2009 he was fired from an executive role at Las Vegas Sands' Macau operations, and a subsequent move to Sydney was blocked by Australian regulators. When Imperial Pacific approached Brown in 2014, he was working at a casino in Cambodia.



Despite welcoming high rollers since July, Imperial Pacific's casino is half-finished—with no functioning sprinkler system. PHOTOGRAPHER: MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

Imperial Pacific also hired Shen Yan, a Chinese banker who'd held senior positions at Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse, as president. Yan had suffered an alarming career setback in 2011—he was arrested at Hong Kong International Airport for carrying a gun in his backpack—but he had connections, including to David Paterson, the blind former governor of New York, whom Yan had once helped navigate a menu at a Shanghai luncheon. In 2015, Yan persuaded Paterson to join an Imperial Pacific advisory board and make introductions to other political figures.

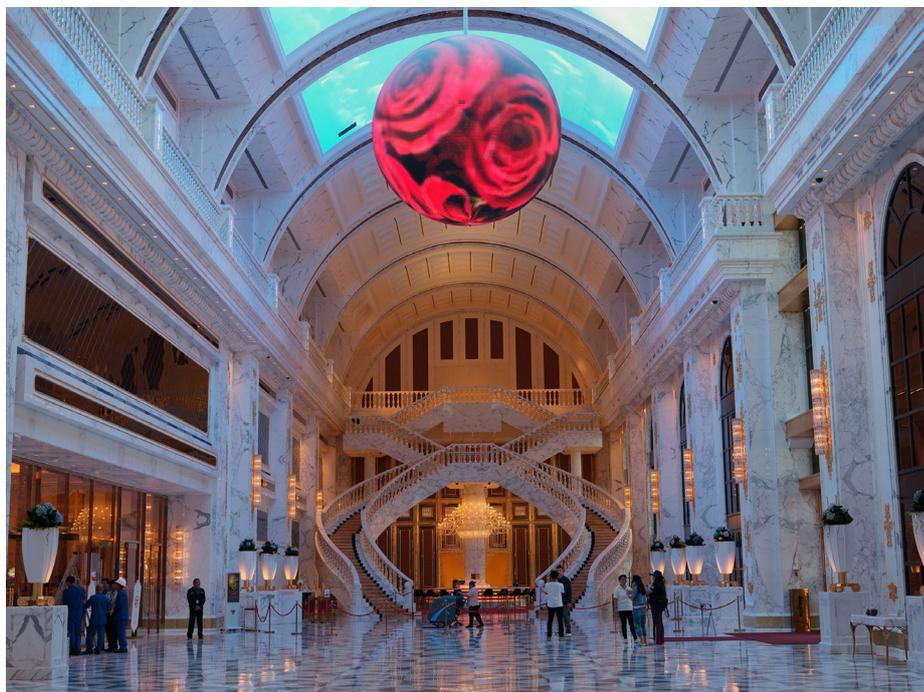
Paterson delivered, demonstrating just how easy it is to get prominent American government figures to work for an opaque, year-old Chinese casino developer. He quickly got in touch with Ed Rendell, the ex-governor of Pennsylvania. “They wanted some Americans involved in case anything came up with the regulation or legalities,” Rendell told Bloomberg in a 2016 interview. “One of my assistants and I did some research on the internet.” He signed on for \$5,000 a month and persuaded Haley Barbour, the former Mississippi governor, to take the same gig. Louis Freeh, the former FBI director, also became an adviser. Eugene Sullivan, a retired military judge, and James Woolsey, the former CIA director, joined Imperial Pacific's board of directors.

(Barbour resigned on Feb. 8 in response to questions for this article. Paterson and Rendell, who stepped down earlier, told me they had no knowledge of improper activities by the company. Freeh, who is no longer on the advisory board, and Sullivan, who last year reduced his role from director to adviser, didn't respond to requests for comment. Brown, who left in December, declined to comment. Woolsey told me: “I have not been made aware of any issues of safety or improper relationships with politicians. If impropriety is proven, I will not be comfortable staying on the board.”)

With a celebrity cast on the payroll, Imperial Pacific turned to bringing in money—immediately. Even before ground was broken at the construction site, it got permission to open a temporary casino across the street, in a duty-free mall. It was a ho-hum space, the size of a suburban Olive Garden. Yet in its first three months after opening in November 2015, VIP bets totaled \$5.3 billion, across fewer than 20 tables. That was more than a third of the action at Wynn Macau—a lush resort with 192 tables, Michelin-starred restaurants, excellent airport access, and global name recognition.

The trajectory was unprecedented, verging on impossible, or at least not legally possible. A year later a former casino worker, Danny Ewing, sued Imperial Pacific for wrongful termination. He claimed that one executive, a board member, was “allowing, if not encouraging,” her workers “to submit incomplete and misleading” know-your-customer declarations, which casinos must collect to document the source of bettors' funds. Ewing also alleged that Imperial Pacific helped players structure transactions to avoid reporting requirements and that he'd been fired after he complained. (Imperial Pacific denied the allegations, and the suit was settled; in its statement, the company said it doesn't believe its betting volumes are excessive.) Imperial Pacific kept dealing in stupefying amounts of cash, and extending credit accordingly. At the end of 2016, filings show, one client alone owed it \$96 million.

If the sums were bewildering, one thing became clear: the nature of lawmakers' fact-finding trip to Macau. Torres, who became governor in 2015, claimed at the time that it was paid for by a company with no connection to the bid process, called Esteem Capital. But in early 2017, a judgment in an unrelated Hong Kong case revealed that Ji had presented himself in the past as an agent of Esteem—and that its Hong Kong address was identical to that of Imperial Pacific.



Imperial Pacific's opulent lobby. The massive casino is out of all proportion to the economy of Saipan, which has a population of just 48,000 and a small airport.
PHOTOGRAPHER: MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

On my third night on Saipan, Yan consented to meet at a cafe in town. I didn't know what to expect of a banker-turned-casino-boss with a concealed-firearm rap, but Yan arrived looking stylishly prosperous, in a fitted T-shirt, jeans, and red slip-ons. On the condition that I not quote him, Yan agreed to lead me on a tour of the permanent casino, which had opened a couple of months before, ending the temporary site's lucrative run.

The new facility was just around the corner, towering at cartoonish scale over the tourist district's shabby low-rises—a palatial mashup of Mediterranean opulence and nautical icons. Its ivory-colored facade was festooned with gilt mermaids, dolphins, and clamshells, accented by blood-red spotlights. (Locals call the building Satan's Palace.) Yan and I passed between two brawny, trident-wielding Poseidon statues to reach the triple-height lobby, beyond which lay the clanging expanse of the main casino floor, where a rowdy Chinese clientele crowded around baccarat tables. The big money, of course, was flowing off to the side, in a series of VIP rooms. Yan took me into an empty one, as if to make a what's-the-big-fuss kind of point: traditional Chinese décor, heavy carpeting, leather chairs. VIPs themselves were off-limits. When a portly one approached, Yan abruptly handed me off to an aide and made the universal gesture for “shoo.”

To leave required navigating a maze of active construction equipment. While the casino has been welcoming high rollers since July, it's unsettlingly half-finished. The sprinkler system isn't functional, and three firefighters have to be posted inside at all times. The attached hotel, which is supposed to open later

this year, is still a skeleton, and the casino basement has repeatedly flooded with sewage. In one case, according to a person who experienced it, the result was an ankle-deep sludge of human waste in a locker room.

“I believe that Imperial Pacific runs this government”

Last May, after Imperial Pacific requested permission for its “soft opening,” a special body appointed to supervise the development delivered a scathing private report to Governor Torres. According to a person who saw the document, it warned about metal debris scattered on the casino roof, which could turn into deadly projectiles in one of the typhoons that regularly batter the island; structural steel that appeared to be missing bolts; and columns with kinks that could indicate a risk of catastrophic collapse. The report urged Torres to keep the public out until Imperial Pacific could guarantee safety. But the governor rejected the advice, according to the person familiar with the report. The government later removed the supervisory body’s oversight. (The governor’s office told *Bloomberg Businessweek* it was assured by engineers the site was safe; Imperial Pacific said it complied with all building regulations.)

To understand Torres’s willingness to accommodate Imperial Pacific, it helps to consider his family. Torres, 38, has three brothers, all lawyers at a family firm called Torres Brothers LLC. The governor worked there himself until 2008. In the first eight months of 2017, according to regulators’ records, Imperial Pacific paid Torres Brothers \$126,000.

The company has also been an active acquirer of long-term land leases on Saipan. (Only native islanders can purchase land.) During my time there, I received a list of transactions that illustrates how some of the leases benefited Torres’s relatives. The details are on record at the island courthouse. Imperial Pacific has operated via a blizzard of limited liability companies with generic titles. And in November 2015, one such entity bought a land lease from Torres’s sister-in-law, Rowina, for \$667,000. She almost quadrupled her investment, having purchased the land about five months earlier for \$180,000. The lease documents bear the signature of her husband, Torres’s eldest brother, Vincent—widely considered the alpha male of the family—and that of Cai Lingli, a member of Imperial Pacific’s board.

Another series of transactions, the largest worth about \$4 million, have been a windfall for a man named Serafin Camacho. The governor is first cousin to Camacho’s wife, Lillian, and godfather to his adult son, Joel, who’s a member of the Saipan zoning board, which will rule on Imperial Pacific’s future development. Serafin’s sale documents also show Cai’s signature; the deals paid out immediately, even though the lease for one doesn’t begin until 2042.

Imperial Pacific said its land deals were in “full compliance” with the law. Vincent Torres and Joel Camacho both said they saw nothing improper in their families’ dealings with the company. The governor’s office said that any implication the land deals are improper “lacks an understanding of the size” of Saipan and the governor’s sprawling family. As for Imperial Pacific’s choice of legal representation, Torres said he has “no involvement in [his siblings’] business transactions ... and no direct financial stake in their company.”

Life is leaner outside the circle of Imperial Pacific's patronage. At the center of the island, the CNMI legislature meets in a one-story building that could pass for an elementary school. I found Representative Ed Propst's office deep inside, cramped and windowless, with a beat-up plaid couch and a narrow desk piled high with binders. "Minority," he shrugged by way of apology. An independent, Propst is one of the most outspoken opposition members of a Republican-dominated legislature and a vociferous critic of the casino.

"I believe that Imperial Pacific runs this government," he said. "Any legislation they've ever wanted goes their way 100 percent of the time. Not 99 percent of the time. One hundred." Propst has tried repeatedly to impose greater scrutiny on the casino and raise its taxes, to no avail. "Where are the feds in all this?" he asked, his voice rising with exasperation.



Representative Ed Propst in the legislative chambers' room on Saipan's Capitol Hill.
PHOTOGRAPHER: MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

So far, only labor conditions have attracted the attention of Washington. Following the fatal fall of Hu, federal prosecutors acting on FBI investigations charged several employees of the contracting companies building the casino with immigration violations; some pleaded guilty. Separately, a U.S. Department of Labor inspector said in a court declaration that the rate of injuries on the site "greatly exceeds the national average." The inspector described one worker arriving at the ER with a broken back and a doctor advising immediate hospitalization. But someone intervened. "The injured person was not allowed to be admitted, and was promptly transported" to China.

Imperial Pacific has said that it had no knowledge of safety violations or workers being employed illegally and that both were the responsibility of its contractors. But these claims don't withstand much scrutiny. The contractors' office was rented by Imperial Pacific and, according to a former employee who worked there, shared with its staff. Additionally, a safety expert who worked on the construction site told me that Imperial Pacific was deeply involved with selecting and supervising contractors.

The expert described the job as one of the most challenging of his career, with widespread dangers. Generators weren't properly grounded, workers were missing basic equipment such as safety glasses and correct footwear, and

welders lacked anything like the necessary training to handle torches. Once, he said, he was forced to compress a three-hour safety briefing into one hour. His job included ensuring compliance with U.S. regulations, and he said Imperial Pacific ignored three written pleas to stop work. (The company disputed this.) Eventually he quit.

Imperial Pacific has said it's now confident that construction workers are legally employed and that its site is complying with safety rules. Yet gruesome injuries continued after the FBI action. In late September a worker received a severe electric shock, almost losing a limb. A video of the aftermath shows him writhing on the ground next to the casino, screaming.

Although most of the undocumented workers were flown home after the FBI arrests, a group of about 35 initially refused to leave, saying they hadn't been paid as promised. I visited some of them in a dilapidated four-story apartment block where Imperial Pacific was providing housing until a deal could be reached. Zhang Chunfeng, a slim 41-year-old who wore a blue golf shirt over gray sweatpants and plastic clogs, showed me where they were sleeping: on filthy mattresses in small, bare rooms whose walls and ceilings were streaked with brown and black stains. "If the casino didn't want illegal workers," Zhang asked, "how can so many of us be here?" As he spoke, another worker jostled toward me, pulling up his T-shirt to reveal a baseball-size welt on his shoulder—the result, he said, of an on-site accident. "Why," Zhang continued, "did so many of us become victims?"



After the FBI arrests, laborers stayed at this dingy apartment block.
PHOTOGRAPHER: MOISES SAMAN/MAGNUM PHOTOS FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK

Imperial Pacific's activities in Saipan are overseen by the Commonwealth Casino Commission—a body funded by a \$3 million annual payment from the company. It holds meetings in a backroom at the public library, just past a rack of atlases. At the session I attended, questions that might otherwise be red-alert items were dispensed with briefly. The Marianas are in an active seismic zone—2016 saw a 7.7 magnitude earthquake—and one commissioner asked Imperial Pacific's representatives if they'd installed seismic bracing on the still-not-functioning sprinkler system. The answer: Only in the basement; the other floors were getting worked on. The discussion moved on after less than two minutes. Outside the door, a red flag with Imperial Pacific's logo was hanging from the ceiling.

Later, I went to the CCC's offices, inside a strip mall, to meet its executive director, Edward Deleon Guerrero—the governor's uncle and the father of his chief of staff. In a bare room kept at a chilly 62F by a wheezing air conditioner, Deleon Guerrero disputed the idea that a regulator with only one company to regulate faces an inherent conflict of interest. "If you shut down this particular operator, it doesn't mean we stop," he said. "We can probably look for another operator.... I don't think we would lose our jobs."

Virtually none of the CCC's employees have significant experience in casino oversight, and Deleon Guerrero noted that they were making periodic trips to Las Vegas to bone up at seminars. "We're building up our own intelligence," he said. "We're tracking who these VIP players are... we're on the lookout." His staff also monitors Imperial Pacific's "key employees," he added. Their knowledge is still incomplete. When I made a reference to Yan's arrest, an aide jotted on his legal pad: "gun charge? find out."

The last time I saw Yan, he was eager to emphasize that Imperial Pacific had bona fide amenities to offer beyond a U.S. address. We drove to two high-elevation villas that are maintained for guests. They were luxurious, in a South Beach mode: white leather sofas, contemporary chandelier, lounge chairs overlooking the Pacific. A menu listed Chinese dishes said to have aphrodisiac powers: duck with deer antler and a chicken stew containing cordyceps, a coveted fungus. Down in Saipan harbor, Yan took me aboard one of the yachts the casino makes available to elites—the 144-foot *Grand Mariana*, whose bedrooms wouldn't be out of place in a recently renovated Ritz-Carlton.

Dig deeper, and even the yachts take on an alarming sheen. In June, acting through a company called Pride Keen Ltd., Imperial Pacific hired Michael Netto, a 40-year-old Singaporean maritime consultant, to move another of its yachts from Saipan to Hong Kong. At a cafe in Singapore's financial district, Netto told me how the trip went horribly wrong. As the 121-foot *Grand Mariana III* entered Philippine waters, it experienced mechanical trouble, and Netto slowed down to seek help. According to Philippine coast guard reports, Imperial Pacific reported the vessel stolen. "They must have thought I was trying to take it," he told me. Soon, Philippine authorities arrived and detained him aboard the ship.

After a couple of days' confinement, Netto said, three white men claiming to work for Pride Keen boarded the *Grand Mariana III*. Netto was in a room that allowed him to observe their movements via the ship's surveillance cameras. He watched the men fill a brown duffel bag with bricks of U.S. dollars that, unbeknownst to him, had been hidden around the vessel. He reviewed the footage a few times to be sure. I asked Netto in a subsequent conversation if he was absolutely certain the bag was being loaded with cash. "I am very, very certain," he replied. "I know it may be hard for you to believe, but it is what I saw." (Imperial Pacific said the vessel was not being used to store cash and that it had been "hijacked by pirates.")

Saipan's citizens share a weary understanding that their home is a soft target for hucksters of all kinds—out-of-town charismatics have peddled cure-all economic schemes for decades. In a case of life imitating *The Simpsons*, someone recently tried to sell the island a monorail. All around, the relics of failed promises are being slowly reclaimed by the land. Dozens of garment factories sit abandoned, with caved-in roofs and vines climbing the walls.

By the airport, the gray concrete husk of a grand, aborted hotel perches on a hillside. It's easy to picture Imperial Pacific's casino meeting a similar end.

For now, though, work on the resort continues, albeit at a far slower pace than before the FBI sent its undocumented workforce home. In September the company reached a deal with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to pay for private inspections of passengers it brings in on corporate jets, bypassing airport queues. Meanwhile, it's becoming more and more difficult to see daylight between Imperial Pacific's agenda and that of Torres's administration. Both company and government in 2017 used the same lobbying firm: Avenue Strategies, the D.C. influence shop co-founded by former Trump adviser Corey Lewandowski. And in October a man named Changwei Xu was detained at Saipan airport because of a Nevada arrest warrant, with bail there set at \$7 million. But Imperial Pacific didn't want him locked up. The Torres Brothers law firm quickly informed the CNMI Department of Corrections that Xu was its client and, remarkably, requested that he be released on medical grounds to house arrest, under Imperial Pacific's supervision. The government agreed.

Toward the end of my time in Saipan, I went to see Juan Babauta, the governor of the CNMI from 2002 to 2006, for a coffee near the casino. He spoke at first with diplomatic reserve, pausing to check who might be in earshot; Saipan is a small place, and Governor Torres is his brother-in-law, married to his wife's sister. But as our discussion went on, he grew animated and angry.

"People need to realize this place is as corrupt as it could have ever been," Babauta said. "It's pathetic. I'm pissed," he continued, almost spitting out his words. "Because we are destroying a beautiful paradise."