

A SPACE TO BE YOUR (VIRTUAL) SELF
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD OF INTERNET GAMING IN THE
URBAN CHINESE *WANGBA*

by

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ABBREVIATIONS

CCP	<i>Chinese Communist Party</i>
CNNIC	<i>China Internet Network Information Center</i>
ECNU	<i>East China Normal University</i>
FPS	<i>First Person Shooter</i>
LAN	<i>Local Area Network</i>
PK	<i>Player Killing</i>
RPG	<i>Role Playing Game</i>
RTS	<i>Real Time Strategy</i>

from the author's nostalgic reminiscences about his citizenship in *Qiji's* virtual kingdom, MU, it is clear that, for him and his colleagues, *Qiji* represented something more than just a leisurely diversion. Sleeping through work and going without food so as to extend his time in the land of MU, playing *Qiji* in the Internet café seems to have become the main subject of his existence.

Indeed, it is likely that many avid video gamers throughout the world share similar emotions as evidenced by the, some might say fanatical, devotion with which they line up to purchase the newest releases of their favorite games. Just the other day, for example, Peter Jennings reported that in the United States video games have now surpassed blockbuster movies as moneymakers.³ The same is certainly true in China where, to begin, films never grossed as much as they did in America, and, additionally, the number of online gamers is expected to surpass 23 million by the end of the year.⁴ Based upon these statistics it is imperative that scholars begin to seriously consider the influence of video games, just as they have analyzed and discussed the influence of film and literature in the past. A small group of American and European scholars have already set out with this academic mission in mind and their work is contributing to a growing body of literature on video gaming and its cultural implications.

However, the implications of video gaming here in the United States and other developed European countries are vastly different than those of video gaming in more restrictive state-led developmental regimes such as China and South Korea, and as such a

² 17173.com? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? " June 2004, *China Internet Research Center*. Available Online: <http://china.17173.com/jg9.html>

³ "Its Not Just a Game: Why a blockbuster video game can make more money than a hit movie," ABC *Word News Tonight with Peter Jennings*. Aired 8 November 2004.

⁴ Wei Wu, "Millions of Chinese to become Internet game players in 2004," *Xinhua News Agency*. 4 February 2004, *Global NewsBank* Record No. 1008E4C4D2C1EC46.

more a regionally sensitive body of scholarship may be warranted. To begin, the video games to which Peter Jennings referred are all manufactured for private home entertainment systems, such as Sony *Playstation* or *Xbox*, and are not intended to be played over the Internet or, for that matter, by more than one or two players at a time. Such a style of gaming differs greatly from standard practice in many East Asian countries, where games are played with large groups of people in public spaces, such as Internet cafés, and over Internet servers which may support over one thousand gamers at any given time. Where these games are being played and with how many other people may vary greatly from country to country. This leads me to a fundamental consideration in the study of the Chinese online gaming phenomenon and that is, quite simply, the issue of space.

In the United States space is often taken for granted. That we have our own space and have the freedom to do what we like in that space is a fact of life that is rarely questioned. The sheer availability of physical space in the United States may lead us to overlook the manner in which other, non-physical spaces are emerging. Certainly, Duke University campus, where there is nearly an acre of land for every student and faculty member is not where one feels the need to search for alternative spaces. All the more reason why, when I stepped off the plane at the Pudong International Airport in Shanghai, I was not prepared for the kind of space that I was about to enter. Even in the large expanse of this fancy airport which cost over 1 billion US dollars to create, personal space took on a new meaning as people jostled to get farther ahead in the customs lines and pushed their way past me to retrieve their bulky packages from the baggage claim conveyor belt. But the true shock came when my bus emerged from the dark highway that leads out of Pudong

and into the bright neon mass of skyscrapers that is the city of Shanghai itself. People were packed like sardines into public buses while bicycles and taxis wove their way dangerously through traffic jams. This was not my first time in China, but I believe that no matter how many times I return I will always be shocked by the spaces that Chinese people squeeze themselves into.

It is thus only natural that in this cramped environment people seek new ways in which to create personal space. It is part of human nature to desire a retreat from our restrictive public lives, a place that we can not only call our own, but in which we can be (any manifestation of) ourselves. Of course, such a space is constituted through more than its physical existence, it must also be manifest through the freedom to think and act as one likes within it, and in a politically restricted country such as China this is not always an obtainable goal.

I believe that I have always been fascinated by the search for and manipulation of space in China, though I admit that I have come to this conclusion only in the course of writing this paper. There is something inherently contradictory about this country, which takes up the third largest physical space of any nation on earth but is as yet ruled by a government that keeps its people politically, ideologically and sometimes physically confined in such a small space that it led Australian Sinologist Geramie Barme to call it a “velvet prison.”⁵ In particular, I am interested in the ways in which Chinese citizens are manipulating the space afforded them by the government and stretching its physical and ideological boundaries to the limits. It was this topic, and not the subject of Internet gaming or Internet cafés, which, I now realize, first brought me to China.

⁵ Geramie Barme, *In The Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 1-19.

First, when I was still an undergraduate, I had wanted to consider the role of the Internet as a space utilized in the promotion of Chinese political dissident movements. Following in the footsteps of political scientists such as Nina Hachigian and James Mulvenon—both researchers for the Washington-based RAND corporation—I interviewed the now-notorious editor of a US-based Chinese pro-democracy e-newsletter, Mr. Li Hongkuan. As many who have kept up with the Chinese human rights debate will know, it was involvement in his newsletter, *VIP Reference*, which landed Mr. Lin Hai in a Chinese prison. I must admit that speaking with Mr. Li was an exhilarating experience, especially for a college sophomore in the midst of my first true “primary source” reporting. Yet when I arrived in China, determined to further investigate these e-newsletters and the ways in which they were pushing the boundaries of Chinese political activism, I discovered that the subject was unapproachable. To begin, attempting to do such research under the nose of the Communist government can be a risky task. But aside from this, many of the people with whom I spoke were indifferent to such topics, dismissing these kinds of e-newsletters, which are bloated with importance in the United States, as junk mail. This is not to say that people are completely unreceptive to dissident movements or the like, but merely to note that those who are involved are in the vast minority and extremely well hidden.

During my second foray into field research, and the one which subsequently resulted in this paper, I wanted to look at the Internet as a cultural space. The intention was to go to Shanghai, the hotbed of “decadence” in China, to investigate the impact of the online publications of the Meinu Zuojia (Pretty Women Authors), a flashy group of women who published stories about sex, drugs and rock n’roll. Again, this topic may be familiar to

those who keep up to date with the American news coverage of China. Indeed, publications such as *The New York Times* have grasped hold of these women and their Internet popularity as signs of youth rebellion similar to those of the American counterculture movement in the 1960s. Charles Wilson of the *New York Times Book Review* went so far as to call one of these authors “a female Kerouac on a road of her own devising.”⁶ Yet again, my expectations were disappointed. Arriving in Shanghai I found that people generally did not relate to or care about these women and their online sex diaries/novels and, while they may have capitalized off of the initial shock value associated with anything which is banned by the government, their publications had long since ceased to impress.

Throughout these research attempts, I was cognizant of the fact that the glue which held these topics together was the Internet and the key role that this virtual space was playing in allowing the Chinese people to stretch the boundaries of their political and cultural environments. And yet, upon arriving in China, both of my selected topics proved difficult to research and of little concern to average Chinese citizens; the political dissidents and Meinu Zuoqia occupied a space to which neither I nor most Chinese people had access. It was in the course of considering this conundrum of inaccessibility, indeed, in the very process of writing a frenzied email home bemoaning my inability to do my research, that I became aware of the importance of the space in which I was sitting: the Chinese Internet Café. Smoky dens filled with people pursuing their virtual activity of choice, these spaces, often taken for granted or completely overlooked by tourists and

⁶ Charles Wilson, Review of *Shanghai Baby*, by Wei Hui, *New York Times Book Review*, 23 September 2001, Late Edition, Sec. 7, 1, pg 24.

Chinese alike, have come to occupy an important position in the social and cultural lives of many Chinese citizens.

(Re)Defining the Space of the “Internet Café” at Home and Around the World

Before entering into any meaningful discussion of Chinese Internet Cafés and Internet gaming, it is necessary to engage in a bit of cultural reconnaissance with regard to the various manifestations of these spaces throughout the world. Indeed, it is difficult to discuss the subject of Internet Cafés in the United States because they are spaces with which most Americans have little experience. While other areas of the globe developed Internet cafés to meet the population’s demand for affordable Internet connections, in America the Internet Café was a fleeting thing quickly eclipsed by the affordability of private connections as well as new technological innovations such as laptops and wireless Internet. As far as I and most other Americans can remember, the Internet has always been accessed through home, work, school or, at the very least, the public library. This fact is made clear by a survey on “Internet and Society” taken by the Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS). In the survey, the respondents are asked to answer the following question:

Do you use a computer in places other than your home?
Checkbox

- No
- Yes, at work
- Yes, in school
- Yes, in a public place such as the library⁷

The last answer comes closest to addressing the issue of accessing the Internet from a place such as an Internet café, but the fact that the researchers chose to give the example of a library and not a café as a place for public access reinforces the unimportance of this

⁷ Norman H. Nie and Lutz Erbring, “Internet and Society: A Preliminary Report,” Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society, 2000 February 17. Available Online <http://www.siqss.com>

space within the lives of average Americans. As previously noted, such an absence is explained by the United States high per capita wealth, as a result of which average citizens can either afford to pay for private connections through their home or have access to the Internet at work or school.

However, even if Internet Cafés are not an active part of American Internet culture, they certainly exist in the American imaginary. By this I mean only that when I call something an “Internet Café” it is safe to assume that we are all able to conjure some kind of mental image. So, what is that image and how does it align with the reality of Internet cafés in China? According to the *Agence France-Presse*, the world’s first “Internet Café” or “cybercafé” was created ten years ago in London, England, “the brainchild of a Polish psychology student who had the savvy—and foresight—to combine coffee and email.”⁸ Arguably, it is this manifestation of the “Internet Café” with which Americans are familiar. Many of us may have even stepped into one of these strange places back in 1990s and experienced the enjoyment of being served a latte while reading our email. At that time, many people already had access to the Internet at home, school or the office, and so the Internet Café was conceptualized largely as a space of convenience and leisure rather than necessity.

So why did these places disappear from American towns and cities? In actuality, they never did. Instead, the need for a clearly designated “Internet café” was mitigated by the fact that nearly every American café now has Internet capabilities, allowing customers to bring their own computers and access the Internet through dial-up or wireless servers. In this sense, it is not that Internet Cafés have ceased to exist but rather that almost every American café has become a kind of Internet Café.

⁸ “World’s first cybercafe looks back on a 10-year revolution,” *Agence France-Presse*, 2 September 2004.

Anyone who has been in a Chinese Internet Café, however, would be quick to point out that they have little to do with either coffee or email and thus this narrow definition does not suit our purposes. To begin, it is important to note that in China the title “Internet Café” is not used. Indeed, it seems that the English language press arbitrarily adopted this label, with articles in publications such as *The Washington Post* and *BBC Online* referring to Chinese “Internet Cafés.” But when translated into Chinese, the word café is “kafei dian” and this word has never been used to connote the kind of space with which I am concerned. Instead, Internet cafés in China are called *wangba*, literally “net bars.” Though differing only slightly from the title “Internet café,” the term *wangba* significantly disassociates us from the American/European conception of these spaces.

Similar tactics are applied by Ana Maria Fernandez-Maldonado, who writes about “Internet cafés” in Lima, Peru, but avoids using this western term to refer to these spaces. Instead, Fernandez-Maldonado refers to “*cabinas publicas de Internet*” or literally “public Internet cabins.” It is interesting that while Fernandez-Maldonado’s paper is translated into English from Spanish, the title of these spaces remains in its Spanish manifestation as “*cabinas publicas de Internet*.” The choice not to translate the name into English may be precisely because Fernandez-Maldonado does not want to confuse the reader by imposing western labels on a Peruvian space. By taking a closer look at her work, one of the few scholarly pieces written specifically about the space of the Internet Café, it is possible to further develop our understanding of how these spaces take on different meanings depending upon the country in which they are located.

Part of Fernandez-Maldonado’s drive to differentiate may understandably stem from the fact that in so-called developed nations such as the United States and England, the

concept of the Internet café was very much predicated upon the idea of combining Internet use with a leisure activity, going to a coffee shop. In contrast, one might argue that Chinese *wangba* and the Peruvian *cabinas publicas de Internet* were not designed with such a clearly designated leisure component in mind. Within her report, Fernandez-Maldonado instead argues that *cabinas publicas de Internet* have played a crucial role in making the Internet affordable for many of Lima's lower class residents. Indeed, she believes that "The model of public access to ICTs that the *cabinas* represent illustrates that the solution to the problem of access in developing countries can be overcome" and goes on to argue that "*cabinas* are effectively improving the daily life of a great part of the residents of Lima..."⁹ A similar narrative may be applied to Chinese *wangba* as they offer cheap Internet access to millions of users who would otherwise not be able to afford connections. Fernandez-Maldonado thus rightly views these spaces as economic necessities for developing countries where for billions of people public access represents the most economical way to get connected.

So far I have described two very different spaces, both of which have been misleadingly placed under the same umbrella label "Internet Café" by the English-speaking press. On a simplistic level, the distinction seems to be one predicated upon economic factors. It would be a gross oversimplification, however, to assume that simply because they were created by developing countries for economic reasons that the *wangba* and *cabinas publicas de Internet* carry no cultural significance.

⁹ Ana Maria Fernandez-Maldonado, "Diffusion and use of new information and communications technologies in Lima," *Paper for the International Research Seminar on the Social Sustainability of Technological Networks*, New York, 2001 April. Available Online: <http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/users/fernande/internet/NewYork.pdf>

Indeed, Fernandez-Maldonado's paper was written in 2001—already outdated when considering the rapid spread of Internet technology—and even at that time she noted that the *cabinas* were gaining acceptance as leisure spaces. She observed that, “Spreading to the neighborhoods, the *cabinas* have become the new and most popular places to hang around; they represent new public plazas where the youth meets [*sic*] (Toledo, 2001). Remarkably, 52% of users declared to go to the *cabinas* with a friend or relative, especially the younger users.”¹⁰ Furthermore, she notes that in the period of three years, the uses of the *cabinas* underwent an evolution. While the *cabinas* were initially used for work and school-related purposes, “During the last year the entertainment side of Internet has been explored and accepted as a new popular application, especially by the younger users.”¹¹ While the *cabinas* may have begun as spaces of economic necessity, they are quickly being discovered for their potential as leisure spaces.

The Internet is clearly advancing at an astounding pace and access to the Internet is becoming more and more affordable. As reported by the China Internet Network Information Center (hereafter CNNIC), in January 2000 approximately 50% of an estimated 8.9 million Chinese Internet users accessed the Internet at home. In contrast, as of July 2004 it was estimated that 67% of an astounding 87 million Internet users had home connections. Thus, not only did the Internet user population increase by nearly tenfold within four and a half years, but also the number of home users is on the increase.¹² Where do these statistics leave the fate of the Internet Café? Now that these cafés are in place, it is important to ask whether or not their presence has changed the

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² CNNIC July 2004 and January 2000 reports. Available Online at <http://www.cnnic.com.cn>

manner in which the Internet is perceived of and utilized. Does accessing the Internet in a public place such as an Internet Café—as opposed to accessing the Internet in a private space such as the home or office—change the nature of Internet use? At what point, if at all, does the Internet Café become *more* than an economical necessity? In other words, has the Internet Café become a space of leisure detached from socio-economic determinants?

Many would be surprised to know that just as the percentage of Chinese home users has increased so too has the number of café goers. In January 2000 only 11% of users selected the Internet Café as one of the locations in which they would access the Internet, but in July 2004 22% of users claimed to utilize Internet cafés. Anyone who doubts the accuracy of such statistics needs only to walk through the streets of Chinese urban centers to witness first-hand the great popularity of these spaces. The various factors which contributed to this increase warrant further investigation, but the overarching implication is clear: the popularity of and accessibility to Internet cafés in China is on the rise. But be warned that those nostalgic for the smell of roasting coffee and sight of businessmen checking email will certainly not find comfort here.

Constituting a third manifestation of this ubiquitous label, the “Internet cafés” of today have found their niche in the business of Internet gaming. Throughout East Asia, and particularly within China and South Korea, Internet cafés have been overrun with Internet gamers who actively seek out the café environment for their play. An article in the South Korean cultural journal *Koreana* noted that an after-work stop at a “PC Room” to play games was a typical part of the day for many citizens.¹³ The Internet gaming phenomenon has also apparently resuscitated the dying American Internet Café business.

¹³ Park Sang-woo, “The World of Internet Games,” *Koreana* 16, no.4 (Winter 2002) 39.

According to an article written in 2001 in *The Orange County Tribune*, “Internet Cafés are one of the fastest-growing businesses in Orange County,” a trend which the author claims was catalyzed by the large Korean population in the area.¹⁴ Another similar article published in *The Washington Post* last year noted that many American teenagers were heading to Internet cafés in order to play simulated war games.¹⁵ These spaces certainly constitute something different than the coffee/email posts of earlier years. So why do we persist in using the outdated and inaccurate terminology of “Internet Café” to refer to these new spaces? It is time to overhaul the image of the Internet Café and in so doing to appreciate these spaces for the new and unique phenomenon that they are. As such I will employ tactics similar to those of Fernandez-Maldonado and hereafter do my best to refer to Chinese “Internet Cafés” by their proper title, *wangba*.¹⁶

At the time I discovered the *wangba* gaming phenomenon in China I had no idea the extent to which this phenomenon did or did not exist in other countries. I only knew that sitting in that *wangba* I felt like a complete foreigner, alienated not only by the language that the players were speaking but by the environment in which they sat and the games which they played. It is with such a feeling that I set out to learn about and understand the experiences of the Chinese gamers and the manner in which their immersion in the physical space of the *wangba* as well as the virtual space of the online game was changing their lives.

¹⁴ Katherine Nguyen, “Café au play: Internet cafés cater to video gamers,” *The Orange County Register*. 26 November 2001.

¹⁵ Phuong Ly, “In Wartime, Teens Go Back to Their Quarters; More Young Video-Gamers Seek the Stimulation of Battlefield Simulation,” *The Washington Post*. 7 April 2003.

¹⁶ Some exceptions to this rule must be made, however, as many of the English-language sources quoted within this paper, including some sources which originated from within China itself, have opted to use the “café” terminology and thus the choice is out of my control.

As previously mentioned, in recent years the field of game studies has gained more attention, with numerous articles and books published on the subject each year. These studies have focused on such diverse topics as the social interactive capabilities within multiplayer games, the business and commercial side of the gaming industry and the effects of video game violence on children.¹⁷ Yet so few of these studies have pondered the implications of the space in which these Internet games are being played, and by this I am referring not only to the home, office or Internet Café setting but also to the national, political and cultural settings. Such a fusion of the physical and virtual would seem to support the creation of new spaces of leisure and social interaction. It is precisely this point which I wish to address in discussing the importance of Chinese *wangba* as both physical and virtual spaces. In this sense, we must take Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman's plea for "more integrative views of computer mediated communication" to heart and examine "how online time fits with and complements other aspects of the individual's everyday life."¹⁸

There is no question that at the nexus of China's economic and technological development new leisure/social spaces are being created. The *wangba* is one of these spaces. Within this paper I will thus examine the *wangba* phenomenon, noting the role of the Chinese government and business interests in restricting and developing them. I will look at social relations within these spaces, observing the importance of both the physical social world created within the *wangba* and the virtual social world created within the video game. In addition to promoting social relations, I also argue that these

¹⁷ For more information on Game Studies visit <http://www.knowledge.hut.fi/projects/games/gamelinks.html>

¹⁸ Caroline Haythornthwaite and Barry Wellman, "Introduction," in *The Internet in Everyday Life*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002) 9.

games magnify, distort and accelerate aspects of capitalist modernity such as consumerism, nationalism and love. In doing so, I aim to establish the manner in which online gaming and the *wangba* have become, for many urban Chinese, spaces central to the creation of their modern identity.

An American University Student in an ECNU ? ? (Wangba)

Like most major metropolises, Shanghai is a city of extremes. Certainly it is home to some of China's wealthiest citizens but it is also the destination of millions of migrant laborers in search of a livelihood. Similarly, Shanghai's technological and architectural innovations classify it as one of the most modern global cities, while other areas remain in a time warp, deteriorating and awaiting eventual bulldozing in order for the city to make room for its increasingly crowded skyline of high rises. It is precisely this diverse and unique environment which made Shanghai both an incredible field site and a very dangerous one; incredible because it afforded me the opportunity to survey a great spectrum of *wangba* in a short time and dangerous because it is easy to forget that what exists in Shanghai is quite different than what exists in the rest of China.

Thankfully, I lived near the East China Normal University (hereafter ECNU) campus in the north-western corner of the city. A healthy twenty minute cab-ride away from the blinding neon lights and beautiful department stores of Shanghai's central business district, my neighborhood was also far-removed from swarming tourist destinations such as the Bund and the French Concession. Aside from the nagging presence of McDonalds and KFC, this district seemed largely untouched by the hands of "modernization." Having previously lived near universities in Beijing and Harbin, I can state from experience that little distinguished my new location from other college neighborhoods.

Similar in layout to the areas surrounding Beijing University and Harbin Institute of Technology, the life of the district huddled around the four main gates of the university. One section in particular, known as the “back gate,” formed the epicenter of off-campus student social life and shopping. The stores and restaurants at the back gate were inexpensive, catering to the limited budgets of most students. On the hot summer evenings the air filled with the smell of kabobs and fried dough being made on outdoor grills. Restaurant hostesses lined the doors one after another, like a battalion of army cadets, shouting out “Welcome Customer” to passersby. Endless lines of open-air DVD and CD vendors filled the sidewalk stalls, hawking pirated versions of the most recent Hollywood releases and it was nearly impossible to walk down the road without being solicited to purchase an IP Card—a long distance and International calling card—at a highly discounted rate. These vendors clogged the sidewalks, often forcing pedestrian traffic to spill out into the street, much to the annoyance of cars and motorbikes trying to weave their way through the throngs of hand-holding students.

To an American University student, the back gate of ECNU seemed oddly devoid of bars, pubs, discos or movie theaters. While there were two small coffee shops, they were largely deserted. It would be impossible to try and pin down the reasons why the Chinese “college town” is so different than most American college surroundings, but suffice it to say that there are clearly a number of cultural and economic factors at play. While Chinese college students may enjoy a good movie as much as an American college student, for example, a ticket to a movie theater in China costs between 60 and 80 yuan (roughly 8-10 US dollars) and therefore is unaffordable for the majority of students. Instead, many will opt to purchase a DVD (as evidenced by the high number of DVD

vendors) at the relatively inexpensive price of 7 yuan (less than 1 US dollar). On another note, American bar/pub culture is seemingly unattractive to most Chinese college students, though precisely why this is so is far too complicated a matter to discuss within the confines of this paper.

Despite this lack of bars and movie theaters, I must admit that I felt fairly at home traversing the “back-gate” area of ECNU. Though there were marked differences in the “packaging” of these shops and restaurants, they were, essentially, the same thing I would expect to find if I were walking down M street in Georgetown or Ninth Street in Durham; the concept consumerism was certainly not lost on Chinese students. However, my cultural radar could not help but jump at the sight of a Chinese *wangba*. In the bustling environment of the ECNU back gate these places abound, hidden in narrow alleys and on the second floors of dilapidated buildings. Within a quarter-mile radius of the back gate of ECNU, I counted no less than 7 *wangba*. This came as no surprise because until recently most college campuses did not have Internet access in the dormitories. Additionally, it makes sense that the limited income of most college students resulted in a lower class of *wangba* than those which might be found in downtown or business areas.

Entering into the local “Dongfang Wangdian,” or “Eastday Internet Spot”, for the first time, I was in an immediate state of culture shock. Though the atmospheres vary, something which I will address in a later section, the vast majority of *wangba* are something akin to a dark, smoky cave. Typically, heavy dark-colored drapes cover the windows—an attempt to keep out light that would make it harder to see the computer screens—and the doors are similarly shrouded in curtains and plastic hangings. Many of these *wangba* do not even need to take such precautions as they are already located in

basements and/or hidden in back alleys which block out all natural sunlight. The air is stale, a result of immense amounts of cigarette smoke, hordes of writhing teenage boys and poor ventilation. Perhaps there is music playing in the background, but profanities and sudden shouts puncture the air as boys engaged in playing video games heckle teammates who may or may not be in the same room. Some boys are huddled over one screen, watching and critiquing the progress of their friend who is fighting an intense battle with virtual enemies. Beside this energetic crowd and seemingly unaware of their frantic surroundings, a couple cuddles together to watch the latest movies which have been downloaded (most likely illegally) onto the computer hard-drive. Though some may be checking their email or chatting, this seems to be mainly a secondary activity as most people engaged in these functions are simultaneously surfing the web or playing a game.

The layout of the *wangba* itself is simple. At the front of each there is usually a large counter, behind which stands the receptionist. In front of her is a computer screen showing the number of computers occupied and the length of time that each person has been engaged on the computer. On the counter will inevitably be a notebook registry in which each customer is supposed to record the time, date and their name and security card number. Needless to say, this practice was instituted by the Chinese government and is frequently ignored by the *wangba* owners. Similarly, numerous flyers proclaim that "Smoking is Prohibited" even though this statement is clearly negated both by the numerous smokers and the presence (in the cleaner ones) of numerous ashtrays. Behind the receptionist there is usually an array of refreshments and snacks such as sodas, candy and instant noodles.

Turning to face the vast expanse of the *wangba* itself, the eye is met by the monotonous sight of row after row of computer terminals, separated only by number and shallow partitions. The computer screens themselves are covered in a film of soot from cigarette ashes and the computer towers are often locked behind a wooden cabinet so as to prevent both the customer's ability to access the disk drives and possible theft of computer hardware. Some *wangba* have multiple rooms or even semi-private rooms where people who do not want to be spied upon are afforded slightly more privacy. In many of the *wangba*, the computer keyboards are in a state of disrepair as some of the keys have stopped functioning (I once had to compose an email to a friend without the use of the letter "v" key). With few exceptions, most of the keyboards also contained some partially melted keys, a result of people propping their cigarettes on the keyboard in place of an ashtray. These disfigured keys serve as a chilling reminder of the fire that took place in a Beijing *wangba* during the summer of 2002, an incident that incited frenzy in the Chinese government and a topic which will be dealt with subsequently.

Most of these places put little effort into decoration, although those which do certainly have an odd sense of style. Some have fake grape vines woven through lattice work on the ceiling; others hang a few pieces of tinsel or colored paper banners. The walls are plastered with various advertisements for the most recent video games, and, despite the fact that alcohol is rarely consumed in these spaces, one common poster depicts a smiling Audrey Hepburn advertising Kirin beer. Such posters and sparse decorations serve as the only element of color in the otherwise drab surroundings of the *wangba*. Also plastered on the graying walls are the yellowed and ignored flyers which proclaim the regulations for the *wangba*.

Despite the rundown appearance of many of the *wangba*, two areas in which they do not lack are (1) the technological capabilities of the computers and (2) the comfortable seating which is provided for the customers. With few exceptions, the connection speed of most of the computers is quite impressive. Additionally, many *wangba* now also have personal video cameras stationed at some of the computers, thus allowing those who are instant messaging to view and be viewed by the person with whom they are chatting. More advanced *wangba* also have LCD/flat screen monitors and additional features, though such luxuries also inevitably increased the hourly fee. Based on conversations with various owners and customers, most people spend an average of two or three hours per visit in the *wangba*. As such, it came as no surprise that most *wangba* have comfortable leather office chairs for seating. The best ones even offer a multitude of seating arrangements and options, such as couches and reclining lounge chairs.

As with most businesses in China, the *wangba* often employ a large number of seemingly peripheral actors. Aside from the clerk(s) at the desk, whose job it is to take deposits, check identification and assign computers, each *wangba* also has a business manager and an Internet manager. The business manager seems to do little other than oversee the smooth operation things, a task which he/she oftentimes accomplishes by simply sitting at a computer behind the desk and surfing the web. The Internet manager is responsible for solving technical problems with the computers and Internet server. A small force of maids and security personal may also be employed, in part to clean up after messy guests who leave instant noodle bowls, soda cans and cigarette butts strewn about, and in part to keep an eye on their online activities. As a result, there is a constant stream of employees moving up and down the aisles.

In addition to these employees, a number of *wangba* also permit vendors from area restaurants to solicit customers who might be interested in placing a take-out order for lunch, dinner or a late-night snack. At one such *wangba* the vendors perused the aisles incessantly shouting the phrase “you meiyou chifan de?” or “is there anyone who would like to eat?” The combination of these shouts and the frequency of their visits (an average of two to three different people an hour) gave the entire place the aura of a baseball game.

Adding to this carnivalesque atmosphere, *wangba* often sponsor special activities such as game promotions and competitions. Cognizant of the market potential of the *wangba* gamers, many gaming companies use these locations to test out their newest games. I attended one such event, in which a new game to be released the next day was being put through its trial run. About twenty skeptical gamers had gathered to test out the game—I say skeptical because one such gamer told me that many of the newest Internet games are made too cheaply and quickly and therefore do not match the quality of older games which are more intricately designed. Despite the small size of the crowd, the people running the promotion addressed the crowd over hand-held loudspeakers, while women walked around taking down the personal information of people in attendance. All of the gamers were then given a slip of paper with a temporary username and password that would allow them to access the game, and were instructed to fill out an online evaluation form after they were finished. Ironically, this promotion came to a jolting halt upon the discovery that the server was not functioning properly and therefore the participants could not access the Internet. Gaming competitions are also quite popular activities at *wangba*, and many of the larger competitions offer considerable monetary prizes for the winners. Smaller competitions take place on a monthly basis.

The frenzied mix of activities occurring in the *wangba* provides proof of its malleability as a leisure space. Though an American student like me might find the physical environment claustrophobic because of the oftentimes poor ventilation and crowded computer terminals, the *wangba* still represents a refuge for those seeking to relax outside of the confines of the office or home. A space in which customers may immerse themselves in virtual video game worlds, chat with friends, watch the latest Hollywood movies, and even order dinner, in the *wangba* it is easy to find your own niche. It is the combination of this wealth of options and the frenetic energy emanating from boys shouting at one another as they play video games that gives the *wangba* a true frontier feeling; not only is the environment one of experimentation with new technology but it is also one with seemingly few rules and regulations. Like early frontier towns, the *wangba* is, for the most part, a rough and unadorned setting, but it is one in which I easily imagine that people are free to pursue their desires, whatever they may be.

Chapter 2

Restricting Space: Government and Business Interests “Settle” the Wangba

I have been in Shanghai for just over one week and am still experiencing that feeling of flushed excitement that accompanies the first few days of field research in a new place. Thus far things have been progressing smoothly. It is my fourth day of observations at the local Dongfang Wangdian (Eastday Internet Spot), which is appropriately situated above a KFC and packed with young boys sporting sailor-like school uniforms of red bandanas, graying white shirts and navy blue pants. It has been like this since yesterday, the Dragon Boat Holiday, when most middle and high schools began to let out for summer vacation. Interestingly, the manager seems fairly unconcerned about the number of underage children in his wangba, despite the government-mandated sign at the entrance proclaiming “weichengnianren bude runei” (Minors are not permitted to enter)

It is safe to say that I am beginning to feel comfortable in this atmosphere. Yesterday the manager was joking with me and I struck up a conversation with one of the cleaning ladies. Today I am, as usual, recording the various activities of the customers, marking their gender and their activity of choice, be it watching movies, chatting or playing video games. Not surprisingly, my page is heavy with markings indicating that the vast majority of customers are boys playing video games. And then the manager approaches. At first I don't understand what he is saying and then he words slowly sink in: he is asking me to discontinue my research in his wangba. Although I feel my cheeks reddening with embarrassment at being asked to leave, I prod him for more explanation. “Why?” I ask. He won't say. All I get in response is “buhao yisi,” a polite expression of apology and refusal.

-6.23.04, 12:20pm

Reigning it In: Taming the Wild-Child Wangba

With this embarrassing and frustrating incident fresh in my mind, I began to wonder what had changed since the time of my first wangba research project in winter of 2002. It did not take long to find the answer. Just months before my visit to Shanghai, the Chinese government issued a document intended to “promote the healthy growth of youth in rapidly changing society.” Among other concerns, the document cited youth's growing addiction to wangba and gaming arcades as one of the problems and in response

restricted youth under the age of 18 from entering these places.¹⁹ As part of this “ideological morals campaign” the government shut down approximately 16,000 *wangba* which did not meet inspection criteria.²⁰ In this atmosphere of heightened political pressure, it was understandable that a *wangba* manager who illegally permitted underage children to enter might feel threatened by the observational stare of a graduate student, especially a laowai (foreigner) like me, who attracted attention wherever I went just by the nature of my skin color.

Suddenly my observations comparing the *wangba* to a frontier town where anything goes and anything is possible seemed foolishly naïve. However, it is clear that the *wangba* environment has not always been this tensely guarded. Inside the dark, cave-like interior of the *wangba*, I had once felt far removed from the bustling state-controlled “modernity” of Shanghai and judging from the way in which most *wangba* customers unabashedly pursued their activity of choice, so too did they. Despite the fact that by connecting to the Internet the customers are taking advantage of modern technology, the typical *wangba* is far from what one imagines when thinking of the Chinese government’s official vision for the future as indicated by the sparkling Jinmao Tower, one of the world’s tallest buildings, and the Pudong business district, both still in their glorious infancy. Instead, the *wangba* seemed to represent a type of unofficial or rogue modernity, the illegitimate child of technology which appeared on the scene before the government had mastered its planning methods, so to speak. When, for example, Shanghai’s 1st *wangba* opened in 1996 its manager acknowledged, “The policy one this

¹⁹ “China focuses on youth in fast changing society,” *Xinhua News Agency*. 25 March 2004 Global NewsBank Record Number: 10195FA159171CD6

²⁰ Robert Marquand, “A Morals Campaign in China,” *The Christian Science Monitor*. 18 June 2004. Global NewsBank Record Number: 103480A6217AA08D.

sort of thing is not yet set.”²¹ If only for a brief time, the *wangba* did represent a new frontier which developed under the radar of state control.

The impact of this fleeting instance of “unofficial” modernity was compounded by the all-encompassing nature of the *wangba*. It was anything that the customer wanted it to be—a video game arcade, movie theater, chatroom, porn-house...the *wangba* had it all and at 2 yuan an hour or 12 yuan for a full night it was both cheap and readily accessible at any time of day. Indeed, despite fact that regulations regarding permissible Internet content were quickly instituted by the government, most *wangba* managers left the customers to their own devices. Anyone could guess the activity of the middle-aged man sitting in the dark corner of the *wangba* staring intently at the screen with a cigarette hanging from his lip, but as long as he remained inconspicuous nobody dared disturb him. Similarly, managers turned a blind eye as young boys and girls who should have been at school instead played video games at the *wangba* all day. And while there were always cops on the lookout for people trying to send out political messages from the *wangba*, little attention was paid to those who used the space for entertainment and leisure purposes. Here was a child of modernity with no bedtime and few rules, a space in which people could, for hours at a time, come to melt into anonymity and have a private life without feeling that the prying eyes of the government were constantly upon them.

Clearly aggravated by the fact that the *wangba* have become bastions of unofficial culture, the Chinese government has in recent years done their best to reform this rogue child. In particular, government concerns may be separated into two different arenas: political and social. The first concern relates more to the general issue of Internet access

²¹ Graham Earnshaw, “Shanghai’s first Internet café opens,” *Reuters*. 4 October 1996. Global NewsBank Record Number: 0D6FE8AAB301F6C0.

than it does to the space of the *wangba* itself. Keeping in line with its policies of censorship, the government seeks to restrict information available over the Internet, blocking access to sites or emails which are considered politically subversive. By nature of its being a public space, the *wangba* affords its customers a relatively large degree of anonymity, sparking fears that dissidents might utilize the spaces in order to anonymously mobilize support through email newsletters and other electronic means. In response to this threat, the government quickly created a special undercover police force to patrol the *wangba*, as well as numerous recording devices which maintain logs of all Internet activity. According to one *wangba* owner with whom I spoke, every *wangba* is now required to use something called “Net 110” software. This software is distributed to the managers by the police departments, and any *wangba* found without the software is subject to government fines. “Net 110” software keeps records of the online activities within the *wangba* and this information is also accessible by the police. *Wangba* owners are required to log on to the software each day in order to update information and must save at least two months history of their activities. Aside from acting as a monitoring device, “Net 110” also provides owners with automatic updates regarding the most recent government regulations.²²

The other, perhaps more unexpected, concern, however, has to do with the plight of youth who have grown addicted to Internet gaming. In March 2002 one Party member pleaded, “Don’t let Internet ‘net’ up our children.”²³ Reports about children dropping dead after 48 or 72 hour gaming sessions began to circulate throughout media circles and

²² Interview with Jia Zhihua, 4:00pm July 17, 2004, Li Hua Qing *wangba*, Shanghai, China.

²³ “CPPCC Members Propose Intensified Management on Cyber Cafes,” *Xinhua News Agency*. 7 March 2002. Global NewsBank Record Number: 0F223D709FA395CA.

both members of the government and medical communities began to grow increasingly concerned. These concerns led to the first of many campaigns to “clean” technology’s dirty-child *wangba* in April 2001, when the government acknowledged that “some children...were so indulged in the Internet bars that parents were very worried about their psychological and physical health.”²⁴

Indeed, numerous media stories have gone so far as to compare the online gaming in the *wangba* to China’s historical battle with opium addiction and opium dens. One such article refers to China’s “Dens of Cyber Addicts” and Internet gaming itself is often called “electronic heroine.”²⁵ Like drugs, Internet addiction, according to the media, also results in death. Articles commonly site the case of a 17 year-old boy who died from “over excitement when playing games in an Internet café.”²⁶ Another case involves two middle school students who were killed when they fell asleep on railroad tracks after spending two days in a *wangba*.²⁷ Through these stories the government and media have effectively criminalized the *wangba* and the act of Internet gaming. They have also reported on the growing crime rate associated with these places, where desperate customers are taking out their rage on *wangba* managers. In one such case a group of 16

²⁴ “China Cleans Internet Cafes,” *Xinhua News Agency*. 19 July 2001. Global NewsBank Record Number: 0ED61C33D4764C3.

²⁵ Ching-Ching Ni, “Dens of Cyber Addicts,” *The Los Angeles Times*. June 28, 2002 Sec. PA pg., A-1. Global NewsBank Record Number: 0F47CAF14F3A89A7.

²⁶ “‘Internet addiction’ harming China’s young, psychologists warn,” *BBC Monitoring International Reports* 9 August 2002, *Global NewsBank* [database on-line], Record no. 0F55A5C17997BD37.

²⁷ Mark Magnier, “China’s Newest Cultural Revolution Worries Elders,” *The Los Angeles Times*, Home Edition, A-1, 3 July 2004, *Global NewsBank* [database on-line], Record no. 1039D381550C8047.

teenagers reportedly beat up *wangba* managers after being refused admittance because they were underage.²⁸

The criminalization of the *wangba* seems to have become a major goal of the media and government ever since June 16, 2002, just one month after I returned from Harbin. At approximately 2:30am on this day the Beijing-based Lanjisu *wangba* went up in flames, taking the lives of 24 people, mostly young boys. Importantly, many of the deaths occurred because the windows of the second-story café were barred and the door locked shut, an unfortunate result of the fact that the *wangba* was illegally operating without a license. Aside from a massive campaign to close these “*hei wangba*” or “black net bars,” it came as no surprise that in October of 2002 the Chinese government announced a new set of regulations with regard to the operation of the *wangba*. Included in the changes was a age restriction stating that children under 16 could not enter a *wangba* and restricted operating hours so that *wangba* could legally operate only between the hours of 8am and midnight and not 24 hours as before. Since this time the police have also engaged in frequent raids resulting in mass closings, such as the one that occurred just a month before my arrival.

Noting that much of the youth addiction problem has to do with the Internet games and not only the *wangba*, the Chinese government has most recently turned its attention to censoring and controlling the content of the video games themselves. Thus far, the CCP has rooted out games with pornographic content, as well as those games which are considered to negatively portray the history of the nation. For example, the game “Hearts of Iron” has been banned because it depicts Manchuria, Tibet and Xinjiang as

²⁸ Tim Richardson, “Chinese Youths Trash Internet Café,” *The Register Online*, 12 May 2004. Available at http://www.theregister.co.uk/2004/05/12/china_cybercafe/

independent nations. According to a member of the Ministry of Culture, “Online games with content threatening state security, damaging the nation's glory, disturbing social order and infringing on other's legitimate rights will also be prohibited.”²⁹ The phrase “damaging the nation’s glory” is a particularly worrisome one, as the process of defining what is harmful to the “nation’s glory” may be considered a pretense for historical revisionism. Oddly enough, a number of Chinese Internet gamers mentioned the popularity of a game which, in some respects reversing the outcome of the Nanjing Massacre during World War II, allows Chinese gamers to mercilessly slaughter Japanese people. Despite such rumors and testimonials from people who have played this game, it is unclear whether or not it actually exists and, if it does, how the government has responded to or ignored it. However, such stories call attention to the fact that most video games share a narrative structure similar to a novel or movie, and thus the makers of the games have considerable power in creating a unified vision for the players. The government’s recent manipulation and censoring of video games’ narrative structure is yet another indication of the manner in which they exerting careful control over the industry.

Making the CCP Proud: The “Legitimate” Future of Wangba

On political and social grounds, the CCP has prided itself in taking a hard-line, no nonsense approach on the subjects of *wangba* and Internet gaming. However when it comes to issues of the pocketbook it is no surprise that the Chinese government’s political and moral grounding falters. According to findings cited by Chinese media

²⁹ “China censors online video games,” *BBC News Online*. 1 June 2004. Available Online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/3766023.stm>

CCP members in order to illustrate the party line on certain issues and thus provides a revealing glimpse into the CCP's grand vision for the future of the *wangba* business. The article sketches three different "model" *wangba* which are taking the new age restrictions to heart: The *Xingbing wangba* is put forth as an example because its owners were the first to pledge that they would not permit underage customers. The manager at the *Lihuaqing wangba* has remained steadfast in her resolve to turn away underage customers, even though she is losing money by doing so and the management at the *Tongsheng wangba* reports that they do not need to rely on underage customers to prosper as they have a large clientele of businessmen.

The linear thought process the reader is expected to follow in reading about these three *wangba* illustrates the warped post-socialist rationale embraced by the newspaper. With their emphasis on leading the way through example and piously upholding ideals despite hardship, the *Xingbing wangba* and *Lihuaqing wangba* serve as examples of revolutionary spirit like those one might expect to have encountered in Cultural Revolution-era China. The management at the *Xingbing wangba* and *Lihuaqing wangba* are pure of heart and desire only to uphold the party line, even in the face of personal hardship. In this sense, they are representative of the modern-day revolutionary heroes, prized for their self-sacrificing nature.

But what of the *Tongsheng wangba*? If the first two illustrated a nostalgic embracement of the classical revolutionary fervor and commitment prized in the past, the last *wangba* in the article brings the reader back to the capitalist present. Perhaps aware that in the modern moment revolutionary heroes are few and far between, the last example attempts to sway the minds of the people through an appeal to their

pocketbooks, illustrating that the *wangba* business can succeed even without the patronage of underage customers, who, undoubtedly, make up a large percentage of the potential market. According to the article, the *Tongsheng wangba* is sparkling clean and comfortable air conditioned, a perfect environment for businessmen to visit on their way home from work.

As the *Shanghai Liberation Daily* is published mainly for the eyes of party members, I was lucky to get my hands on a copy of this article. The source was none other than the manager of the *Lihuaqing wangba*, who I happened to stumble upon during the course of my journeys through Shanghai's protrusion of *wangba*. Indeed, I spoke at length with the elderly female manager who is quoted in the article as saying "Minors lack the capability of judgment, we adults must keep their best interests at heart." Jia Zhihua was happy to speak with me about the sacrifices she was making for the party. Leading me into her small office in her empty *wangba*, she spoke with me for hours about her experience in the *wangba* industry, noting that she was one of the first to venture into the field. Overflowing with pride because of the recognition she has gotten from the government, her happy demeanor seemed at odds with the rows of empty computer terminals in her *wangba*. Despite being chosen as a model, Jia Zhihua's business has been failing ever since the new age regulations were imposed. She explained to me that no-one bothered to come to her *wangba* anymore because there were so many others in the area which did, illegally, permit underage customers.

If all *wangba* are not to end up like the *Lihuaqing wangba*, then something must change. Trying to predict the future of the *wangba* in China is a tricky task, complicated by a number of different factors. Many predict that *wangba* will become obsolete as

computer technology becomes more affordable and more and more people have private Internet connections. Take away the only remaining clientele who do not have personal computers, the children, and what is left but bankruptcy? However, many of the *wangba* managers with whom I spoke disagreed. The trick, they said, is that the *wangba* must offer customers something which they cannot get at home, and since that something is no longer Internet access, the savvy businessperson must invent new attractions.

This clearly is the goal of the 3D Topnet *wangba*, a Taiwanese chain that prides itself on its comfortable atmosphere and superior technology. Located in the ritzy Gubei district of Shanghai, this store is one of 17 3D Topnet stores in the city. According to the manager, the first store opened in Shanghai in 1997, with his store being a recent addition that has been open for less than a year. At this *wangba* customers can make hotel reservations, hold webcam meetings and burn CDs. They may do so in their choice of seating: they may pay 6 yuan an hour for a regular screen computer in the main room, 10 yuan an hour for a flat screen computer, or 18 yuan an hour for a flat screen computer in their own private lounge with reclining leather armchairs. When thirsty or hungry customers conveniently order their choice of beverages or snack food from any one of the twenty employees who work every shift. 3D Topnet also stocks a store full of video game paraphernalia such as tee shirts with popular game logos and miniature action figures. If all of these services are not impressive enough, the young manager with whom I spoke also talked of plans to build a *wangba* which has its own internal gymnasium.

Not surprisingly, the 3D Topnet *wangba* has, like those *wangba* mentioned in the *Liberation Daily*, been selected as a “model” *wangba* by the Shanghai government. As

such, the manager stressed the importance of keeping the store “in order” and not allowing underage customers and/or people without identification. Indeed, it was a surprise that when I returned to the 3D Topnet just one week later even I was asked to show identification, despite the fact that I was a foreigner.

As the city of Shanghai alone still has over 1,000 legal *wangba*, it is clear that despite government crackdowns they will remain a strong presence in urban Chinese society. However, the government process of trying to legitimize this bastard child has clear implications for the future of the *wangba* as social/leisure spaces. By restricting access to the *wangba*, the government has fundamentally altered their nature, transforming them from universally accessible public spaces with a frontier-like quality to forbidden and restricted zones for adults only. The efforts of the government and business interests are thus resulting in the reform and refinement of the space that was the *wangba*. How, if at all, will this change the manner of social interaction that goes on within these spaces? Will the new *wangba* still have the “qifen” sought after by Internet gamers? And where will the underage gamers, who are once again faced with no personal space to call their own, go?

These are certainly questions which must be considered in respect to the future of the *wangba*, but for now let it suffice to say that from the looks of the local Dongfang Wangdian, which is still bustling with underage boys, there are ways to circumvent state control. Furthermore, boundaries set in the physical world may have little or no influence on the virtual world, and this is where we are headed. Having taken a look at the physical environment of the *wangba* and the manner in which its frontier-like feeling is being tamed and restricted by government and business interests, it is now time to delve beyond

physical boundaries, taking a closer look at the virtual worlds for which the *wangba* merely serves as a porthole.

Chapter 3:

(Bi)Locating the Self: Mixing “Virtual” and “Real” in the Space of the wangba

I am sitting in a small booth in the 776 wangba, in somewhat uncomfortably close proximity to WX’s friend, who is telling me about his desire to meet an American girlfriend. Indeed, the loveseat on which we are sitting seems perfectly constructed for couples and as I look around the room I see a number of boyfriends and girlfriends cuddled together watching movies. Unlike other wangba, 776, a Taiwanese-owned chain, prides itself on providing a comfortable environment for its customers, offering free soft drinks, tea and coffee and superior connection speed. Customers also select from a wide array of seating arrangements, anything from the tiny “loveseat” cubicles at which we are seated to typical “open-air” computer rows which are ideal for playing Intranet games and allowing the players to talk to/yell at one another.

In order to break the tension in the air I call over to WX, who is sitting in a single booth opposite of us, playing Qiji. WX barely turns his head; he is absorbed in the land of MU. I turn back to my attentive partner and change the subject back to Internet gaming, asking him to show me his character’s body armor and weaponry, something which he is only too happy to do. The appearance of his avatar is admittedly impressive. A female archer, she is clothed in ornate robes and surrounded by a glowing orb of light. As he proudly explains, the more beautiful clothing is more expensive and thus an indication of advanced achievement in the game. In addition to having different levels of clothing, each avatar may also achieve different levels of light and some characters don wings, yet another signifier of elite status.

He explains to me that he chose the female avatar because it makes the game more interesting. Because he is a girl, male players are willing to make special deals with him, often giving him items for free or purposely allowing him to win battles. “This guy is such a cheater (pianzi)” I hear over my shoulder. Miraculously, WX has now emerged from his gaming coma and come to stand next to us. He looks over his friend’s shoulder as I get an in depth introduction to a virtual chest full of weapons and special items. WX’s eyes light up as he looks at his friend’s superior collection of goods. He points at one item and asks if he can have it. “For nothing?” replies his friend, “This guy really has no face (mei mianzi).” WX laughs but cannot hide his embarrassment and thus sheepishly returns to his own cubicle. WX’s friend seems pleased. “See he needs me to help him so that he can move up to the next level...that is the reason he brought me here tonight.”

-7.25.04, 8:30pm

The above excerpt from my field notes indicates that the spaces of the wangba and Internet gaming are governed by a complex set of social interactions and social hierarchies. The lighthearted verbal sparring between WX and his friend reveals the way in which friendships and strategic alliances are an important key to doing well in the

games just as the space of the *wangba* itself serves as a hangout where people go on dates and friends socialize. Within this space, however, traditional identities and relationships are changeable. No matter what kind of relationship players may have outside the *wangba*, within it social status is largely determined through success in the games. Additionally, while the conversation between WX and his friend seems in one respect a perfect example of typical macho competitiveness, it is interesting to note, on the other hand, that WX's friend found nothing emasculating about his female avatar. Rather, he was proud of his cunning in making a choice which gave him additional leverage in the game.

Aside from supporting a flexible social environment, the *wangba* also offers a diversified leisure environment in which customers may select their activity(s) of choice. It is at once a movie theater, arcade, chatroom, diner and library. As such, the system of meanings and desire involved in visiting a *wangba* may be different for each customer; the *wangba* houses a virtual space of infinite choice and opportunity. For some, the physical environment of the *wangba* has little significance as it is simply the space that facilitates their entry into the virtual world provided by the Internet. However, others find that the space of the *wangba* itself is a desirable location, valued because of its "qifen" or lively/exciting environment. Like a bar or a coffee shop, some may go to consume alcohol or coffee, but many go because of the social environment in which the consumption takes place.

As such, taking a closer look at the nature of social interaction within the *wangba* provides the key to understanding this phenomenon more thoroughly and is an integral element of video game culture which is often overlooked by Euro-American Games

Studies scholars for whom the *wangba* environment is alien. As previously mentioned, this difference is largely due to the different technological trajectory of China as opposed to countries in Europe and America, whereby Internet users in European and American countries access the Internet mainly through private connections, making the public space of “Internet Cafés” obsolete.

I would be remiss not to point out, however, that a crucial difference between the *wangba* and a bar or coffee shop is the fact the customer is simultaneously engaged in both a physical social setting—as illustrated by the conversation between WX and his friend—and a virtual social setting—the Internet game or other online activity. In this sense, the *wangba* customer must bi-locate his/her social self; existing neither fully within his/her physical surroundings nor within his/her virtual one.

Just as the *wangba* gamer must bi-locate his/herself, so too must we; taking into consideration the fact that social interaction within the *wangba* is mediated by the visual and narrative structure of the video game, a thorough analysis must delve into the virtual world of the games themselves. Keeping in mind the pride with which WX’s friend spoke about his arsenal of weapons and goods and the manner in which WX envied him for it gives the merest inkling of the manner in which this visually stunning technology serves to magnify, distort and accelerate “real life” processes such as capitalist consumption, nationalism and love.

In order to demonstrate the two different yet intertwined social environments created by the *wangba* and by the games, I will examine two very different genres of online gaming, one which is commonly played on a Local Area Network (LAN) and which thus emphasizes the physical setting of the *wangba*, and the other which is more commonly

played over an Internet server with thousands of other gamers, and which thus supports a deeper immersion into the virtual world. Through this analysis I hope to reveal the manner in which the space of *wangba* and online games create malleable cultural spaces in which customers and players possess a great deal of agency and freedom to act as they choose.

A Brief Introduction to Styles of Online Gaming

Long before I had ever met WX or his friend, my initial encounter with the games was in February of 2002, when, setting foot in my first *wangba*, my ears were assaulted by the sound of machine guns and yelling boys. The game was none other than *Counterstrike*, a terrorist sniper game played widely throughout the world. In describing this game I defer to an article written in the electronic journal *Game Studies*. Entitled “Creative Player Actions in FPS Online Video Games: Playing *Counterstrike*,” this article, co-authored by Professor Talmadge Wright of Loyola University in Chicago, describes in detail the various skills and social networking involved in playing this ever-popular game. *Counterstrike* is known as a multiplayer “First Person Shooter game” (FPS). This means that while playing the game, the gamer views the virtual world from the first-person perspective of his/her avatar, or virtual character within the game. This type of game has alternatively been referred to as a “Real Time Strategy” (RTS) game in various surveys done by Chinese researchers.³³

Within *Counterstrike*, players are divided into two categories, terrorists and counter-terrorists. The goal, quite simply, is to successfully assassinate the members of the opposing team. In the course of the game, players may use virtual money to purchase

³³ CNNIC July 2004 Report on Development of Internet in China. Available Online: <http://www.cnnic.com.cn>

increasingly sophisticated weaponry and then decide the proper time to employ such weapons (for example when to kill one's enemy with a knife and when to use a long-range machine gun). These battles take place in fairly plain visual environments characterized by muted brown and grey colors and numerous barriers, walls and landings behind and on which players can hide from and stalk their enemies. While the game itself is simple to master conceptually, the actual process of playing the game is quite difficult, as practiced players employ numerous tactical strategies for winning the game. As Wright notes, "In essence, the game is a platform for showing off human performances in a mock combat setting."³⁴

Another popular type of game, the type in which WX and his friend were absorbed, is known as a multiplayer Role-Playing game (RPG).³⁵ In such games, much attention is focused upon the development of the player's avatar which, unlike the avatar in *Counterstrike*, is viewable by the player himself. In other words, the player's perspective in RPG is usually a third person perspective through which the player can watch his/her own avatar and his/her interactions with other avatars with a birds-eye view of the scene. RPG also rely strongly upon the development of the avatars themselves, often involving elaborate costumes, equipment and personalities specifically designed and chosen by the player. Success within the game will often be judged by the complexity and sophistication of one's avatar, and thus is different than the FPS because the objective of the game is less clearly marked.

³⁴ Talmadge Wright, Eric Boria and Paul Breidenbach, "Creative Players Actions in FPS Online Video Games: Playing *Counterstrike*," *Game Studies*. December 2002 Vol. 2, Issue 2. Available Online: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/wright/>

³⁵ Tony Manninen, "Interactive Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games," *Game Studies*. May 2003 Vol 3, Issue 1. Available Online: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0301/manninen/>

In 2002 I had noticed a few such RPG, but they seemed at the time to be far less popular than the FPS game *Counterstrike*. Whether this was just my inaccurate perception, a result of geographical differences (i.e. that the game was more popular in Harbin than in Shanghai) or due to the fact that I was making these observations in the months directly following the September 11th terrorist attacks, I will never know for sure, although it has been noted that the attacks sparked new “modified scenarios” created by *Counterstrike* gamers who wanted to center their combat missions in virtual Afghanistans.³⁶ However, in the Shanghai *wangba* that I observed nearly three years after the September 11th tragedy, RPG seemed to be equal in popularity, if not more popular, than *Counterstrike*. A recent survey taken by CNNIC bolsters this observation, revealing that 48.2% of Internet gamers polled played RPG as opposed to 14.2% who played RTS.³⁷

Aside from the obvious differences in the manner in which RPG and FPS games are played, the key element separating the two is the different manner of social interaction fostered within the games themselves. In his article on “Interactive Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games,” Tony Manninen notes that “players have attempted to overcome the apparent limitations [of internal interactive forms] by using external communication support,.....,or, by arranging the game event in a LAN environment (e.g., all the players within the same physical room).”³⁸ Following this line of logic, games which have more internal interactive possibilities, such as RPG where the

³⁶ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003) 289.

³⁷ CNNIC July 2004 Report on Development of Internet in China. Available Online: <http://www.cnnic.com.cn>

³⁸ Tony Manninen, “Interactive Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games”

player may use body language in addition to textual communication, would require less “external communication” than a game such as *Counterstrike* where communication is limited to short text messages and restricted by the rapidity with which the game progresses. This makes great sense when considering that *Counterstrike* is more often than not a game played within the confines of the *wangba* whereas RPG are easily played within either the home or *wangba* setting.

The following sections are concerned with the individual’s involvement in these two styles of Internet Gaming as represented by the FPS game *Counterstrike* and a popular RPG, *Qiji* (MU). Though these two games by no means exhaust the wide range of social possibilities that exist within the *wangba*, they do illustrate two very different methods of social interaction and in doing so reveal the social malleability of the space of the *wangba*.

Space to Work, Space Away From Work: Interpreting the Social Distinctions made by Counterstrike Gamers in the Wangba

A visit to a *wangba* would not be complete without witnessing a group of rowdy gamers swearing at each other over a heated game of *Counterstrike*. More so than any other video game, *Counterstrike* is commonly played on a Local Area Network (LAN) and has thus become a quintessential *wangba* activity. The social interactions of the *Counterstrickers* themselves thus illustrate the important connection between the physical space of the *wangba* and the virtual space of the video game. During the course of my research I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to speak with two different *Counterstrike* teams. A simple comparison of these two different teams helps to shed light upon the diverse ways in which gamers interpret the “function” of video games. It

furthermore reveals the manner in which gamers are cognizant of and react to a negative public discourse on gaming, and how this public discourse may catalyze the players to consciously create differentiations and hierarchies within the subculture itself.

The first of the two gaming teams was comprised of a motley assemblage of five young men who practice at the E-tribe *wangba* every night of the week. Known as team “Smart,” they had been together nearly a year (they stated with certainty that they had come together on November 23, 2003) when I met them at a gaming promotion intended to test out and introduce a new Internet game to the market. Though they appeared young and disheveled I remember being immediately impressed by their sense of professionalism when speaking of their team. Like all of these kinds of groups, this one had a clear leader who answered most of my questions in such a nonchalant manner as to give me the impression that I was interviewing a high-powered politician or movie star who dealt with press on a regular basis. He explained to me that the main team was comprised of four players, with one alternate. The eldest member of the team, himself, was 25 while the youngest was born in 1986, making him 18. Training took place every day from 7:00pm until 11:00pm, after which they gathered around to discuss the day’s “lessons,” such as various tactical strategies that did or did not work. The particular *wangba* in which we were sitting was their stronghold or home base, chosen because of its convenience to their homes and places of work. Indeed, despite their young age none of them was in school, they had all moved from high school directly to the world of full-time employment, though they seemed disinclined to discuss their day-jobs and clearly took more pride in their night-time “profession” as members of a *Counterstrike* army.

The team even enlisted the help of a recruiter, whose job was to search out potential teammates over the Internet and invite them to audition for a spot with the group.

Despite this highly organized system of training and recruitment, all of the team members maintained that their primary purpose in joining the group was for fun and not money. Now best friends, they had all met through playing *Counterstrike*. Referring to the game as a hobby which increased their communication with others and helped them make friends, they also were preparing to participate in International gaming competitions, such as the World Cyber Games (WCG), the largest competition of its kind. Importantly, the WCG has its roots in East Asia as the first three competitions (2001, 2002, 2003) were held in South Korea.³⁹ Thus, one of the most interesting aspects of my discussion with these teammates was the manner in which their rhetoric in describing their team constantly alternated between professionalism and leisure. While they clearly had a highly organized system of recruitment and training, they also avoided taking gaming too seriously, quickly pointing out that it was a hobby which they engaged in for social and leisure purposes.

The “Smart” gaming team fits neatly into the stereotypical demographic sample one expects to find when studying video gamers: young men and boys who didn’t do so well in school and are now holding down menial jobs that pull in just enough money to allow them to spend every night in a local *wangba* eating instant noodles and challenging other gamer friends to virtual fist fights. Such a representation, while partially accurate, belittles both the gamers themselves and the games that they are playing. It does not, furthermore, accurately represent the extent to which gaming has become a popular leisure activity among a wide array of urban Chinese. In this sense, it is only fair to

³⁹ For more information about the World Cyber Games visit <http://www.worldcybergames.com>

balance this “stereotypical” representation of gamer teams with another example, one which, perhaps, will undo some of the misperceptions about the kind of people who engage in this activity. The members of the “Smart” gaming team were brought together by a love of and skill for playing *Counterstrike*, but other gaming teams are brought together for purely social reasons. One of the most interesting discoveries of my research was a group of co-workers who promoted playing *Counterstrike* as an after-work company activity.

One day I met WX at the busy corner of Huai Hai Rd and Ruijin Rd, the epicenter of the fashionable downtown shopping area and the start of the section known as the French Concession. Ducking into an alley between two glistening shop windows full of the latest European fashions, I followed him through a maze of alleyways and small courtyard style apartment buildings reminiscent of some quaint European city. Entering one such building I was greeted by two women sitting behind a reception desk playing video games on a computer. WX led me into a conference room furnished with a silver metal conference table and chairs that looked like they had been bought from the local Ikea store. Men and women shuffled in and out of the room, all fashionably/alternatively dressed in designer jeans, tee shirts and sneakers. I felt as though I had stumbled into an artists’ loft in the center of Soho.

The Caotang (Grass Roof) company is comprised of 13 people, all under the age of fifty, with a majority of the employees in their twenties and thirties. They specialize in all aspects of the production of video and television shows. Started first in Taiwan, a majority of the employees are Taiwanese expatriates, something which explains their choice of the 776 *wangba*—a Taiwanese chain—as the site of their gaming competitions.

It was 1:30pm and many of the Caotang employees were just beginning to trickle in. WX explained that it was not unusual for people to work until the early morning hours at this company and therefore most people only came into work in the late afternoon. As it so happened, the person with whom I was to speak had not yet arrived. In a last minute change of plans, WX ran up and down the narrow winding staircase of the private house-turned-office building, recruiting people to take part in my interview. Fitting with the casual demeanor of the company, people wandered in and out of the conference room throughout my time there, offering additional information and/or disagreeing with the answers of their colleagues. In this schizophrenic environment the only person I had a chance to speak to in depth was a 28 yr. old female who, as it so happened, was one of the company's managers.

Z was introduced to *Counterstrike* by her colleagues at Caotang less than six months ago. It was then that her friends first brought her to the 776 *wangba* in Shanghai. According to her, when she first began to play *Counterstrike* she felt the game was boring, but as she increased her skill level and grew accustomed to the game she found herself enjoying it more and more. Z stated that in Taiwan, where she lived previously, women spend more time in *wangba* than they do in Shanghai, although she herself had not gone to *wangba* while living there.

Z believes that playing *Counterstrike* as a group helps “unite” or “tuanti” the members of Caotang. Not only is it a chance for the employees to improve their social interaction outside of work, but it is also important because playing the game gives them better insight into their colleagues' moral character. When playing *Counterstrike* the Caotang

Company frequently competes against other production companies similar to their own. Beating another company's team is a source of pride and honor for them.

Most importantly, Z explained that the Caotang company chose to gather at the *wangba* as an alternative to a more traditional after-work location such as KTV (Karaoke Halls). In this respect, she offered a valuable age-related and gendered perspective on the choice to promote Internet gaming as a company activity. According to her, the company was comprised of a younger group of workers and female employees and so the common Chinese business practice of going to KTV didn't work for them. The *wangba*, she stated, is a "comparatively better choice." This comparison is extremely important because it implies that internet gaming in the *wangba* is replacing other traditional and gender-biased after-work activities.

As in many other Asian countries such as Japan and Taiwan, Chinese KTV halls are locations where leisure and business collide. It is common practice for businessmen to rent out a room in one of these places and entertain visiting business partners and important guests. Most of these locations are not merely karaoke halls but also double as "hostess clubs" where women, referred to as "xiaojie" or "little elder sister" are paid to sit next to the men, pour their drinks, and engage in flattery and flirtation with the men. Although it is not always the case, most of these women are also prostitutes who, for the right price, will accompany the businessmen home if they so desire. Having been dragged to a number of these places by my Chinese friends, I can attest to the fact that they are not created with women in mind. Indeed, women who go to KTV as customers often are thrown in the mix with the xiaojie, forced to share overcrowded and unsanitary women's restrooms while the men enjoy the superior service of restrooms replete with

attendants and hand towels. While women are tolerated as guests within these establishments, they are clearly sidelined within such as male-oriented environment. By turning to the *wangba* for company leisure space, younger businesses are thus acknowledging the growing number of women in the workforce, as well as a general change in leisure preferences. As children of the “digital age,” the Internet and computers play a larger part in the lives of many young entrepreneurs and therefore are more willingly incorporated into their leisure space.

Despite choosing to go to the *wangba* instead of KTV, Z argued that both locations are spaces of “release” or “faxie” for otherwise “conservative” or “baoshou” Chinese who dislike public displays of emotion. In the spaces of the *wangba* and KTV this conservatism is put aside as the gamers shout and swear at one another or, in the case of KTV, sing on the top of their lungs. This kind of space is important for Chinese who have little personal space in a city with such cramped living conditions. However, Z noted that one of the drawbacks of Internet gaming is the fact that it does not completely eliminate this conservatism in that it allows people to avoid face to face interaction, letting their emotions out to a computer screen rather than another human being. Of course, such a lack of face to face human contact is mitigated when players go to the *wangba* as a group, thus adding a physical social element to this otherwise virtual social environment.

In my interviews with the leaders of these two teams of *Counterstrike* gamers one of my main objectives was to determine why people wanted to play these games. In response to my question I generally received two different answers explaining the “function” of gaming in players’ lives. As with Z, WX and many of the others I spoke

with, when referring to themselves most people explained gaming as a means of “release” or “faxie” for pent up emotions and aggression. However, in reference to other gamers, many argued that achieving success in Internet games was a way for people with otherwise unsuccessful careers and personal lives to “achieve a kind of fulfillment” or “dedao yizhong manzu.” In order to understand the reasoning behind these two responses it is important to contextualize them by considering the dominant attitude toward Internet gaming, as dictated by those in power.

Like many other mass cultural leisure activities, Internet gaming bears the public stigma of being a mindless waste of time. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of this perception as it seems to be one that comes simultaneously from many different directions. Certainly, the media and government have played a part as numerous newspaper articles have been written about the ill effects of video gaming and numerous laws have been enacted to censor video game content and to protect youth from accessing *wangba* where these games are most frequently played.⁴⁰ However, this pressure does not come from the Chinese media and government alone. Similar laws and concerns about the negative effects of video gaming have been raised throughout the globe. The connection between video gaming and violence in children became a hot topic in the United States government following the tragic school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, where it was discovered that the boys responsible for the shooting were addicted to violent video games.⁴¹ Whether or not such connections are completely warranted, by

⁴⁰ The role of the government and the media in criminalizing the *wangba* was previously discussed in Chapter 2.

⁴¹ Lawrie Mifflin, “Many Researchers Say Link is Already Clear on Media and Youth Violence,” *The New York Times*. 9 May 1999. Sec. 1 Page 27, column 1.

associating with the video gaming culture, a person automatically flags his/herself as an odd and potentially dangerous social outsider.

Based upon this public culture of criticism surrounding video gaming, it is not surprising that many people feel the need deemphasize their involvement in gaming culture. Here, it may be particularly useful to employ the theories of “taste” put forth by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu believes that “the accumulation and circulation of cultural capital in a society operate according to the hierarchy of classes; an activity or product being judged as refined or profane corresponds to a social hierarchy of consumers....it is not the aesthetic but the social that defines taste.”⁴² In order to avoid association with the uncultured masses, therefore, many part-time gamers classify their attraction to this activity in terms of the “release” function whereby they play the games specifically for the purpose of having mindless fun which facilitates an outpouring of raw emotions, such as anxiety and aggression, built up during the course of daily life. By arguing that the games are appealing because they offer a release (and not, for example, because they are interesting, visually stimulating or difficult) these people elevate themselves above the gaming culture at the same time as they are consuming and taking part in it. It is this kind of hegemonic distancing which may also lead some gamers to draw a clear distinction between themselves and other “game crazies” or “youxi fengzi” who are addicted to the game and might play for more “serious” reasons such as gaining a sense of fulfillment in their otherwise achievement-void lives. Of course, it is not surprising that while many people charged that gamers use success within the games as a “kind of fulfillment” no-one would actually admit that this was true of him/herself. Even

⁴² Yu-fen Ko, “Consuming differences: ‘Hello Kitty’ and the identity crisis in Taiwan,” *Postcolonial Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 183.

competitive Team Smart still classified gaming as a “hobby” which was “just for fun.” These observations regarding the “function” or purpose of gaming are backed up by a recent survey conducted in conjunction with China’s largest Internet gaming website, 17173.com. According to the “17173 Internet Gaming Market Survey,” 34.26% of Chinese Internet gamers surveyed cited entertainment as their main purpose for playing, while only 6.65% stated that they played in order to gain the respect of other players, and 10.27% claimed that they played in order to “practice skills.”⁴³

Despite this, my conversations with the two gaming teams indicate that those gamers who claim that they only play for “release” are vastly oversimplifying their involvement with the games. To begin, it should be noted that success within these games does require a specific set of learned skills. Z mentioned, for example, that when she first began playing *Counterstrike* she felt that the game was boring. It was only after she had played for a number of weeks that she had a better mastery of the controls and was able to participate more competitively. By this time, she said, she found the game more entertaining. Similarly, I had never played *Counterstrike* until this summer, when WX tried to explain the various gaming controls to me. In my first foray into the “battlefield” my character was killed within 10 seconds and numerous repeated attempts to play led to similar results. Rather than finding that the game was a release I, quite the contrary, found that it made me both tense and frustrated at my inability to progress. Thus, much of the “release” function of gaming is predicated upon one’s skill level within the game. This helps to explain the “fulfillment” function of gaming. Though she did not choose to include herself and her coworkers in the group of gamers who get fulfillment from

⁴³ “ 17173 ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ” June 2004, *China Internet Research Center*. Available Online: <http://china.17173.com/jg9.html>

gaming, Z did mention that she and her Caotang coworkers enjoyed a sense of pride and honor upon beating another production company in *Counterstrike*; in this respect it is clear that the game offered something beyond just raw emotional release.

Although gamers themselves may create social and cultural hierarchies within the subculture, it is clear that such distinctions are by no means concretely bounded. For *Counterstrike* gamers, the act of gaming mixes function and desire in complex ways. And yet, the manner in which the space of the *wangba* was utilized by the two gaming teams differed greatly; while Team Smart used the space for serious practice and preparation for International gaming competitions, a schedule which closely resembled that of a professional job, the Caotang team used it as a space in which to avoid the pressures associated with work. It serves as a testament to the malleability and all-encompassing nature of the *wangba* that it can be interpreted by two different groups in such contradictory ways.

“Technologized Visuality” and the Power to Magnify, Distort and Accelerate Capitalist Modernity in the Internet Game through Creative Player Actions

Thus far, this analysis of video game culture has remained very much within the physical social realm, describing the atmosphere within the *wangba* and the manner in which groups of gamers use this space for practicing and playing LAN games such as *Counterstrike*. However, the social interactions which can be observed with the naked eye merely scratch the surface of the complex web of social and cultural exchanges occurring in this space. In order to fully comprehend the multifunctionality of these spaces it is important to take a closer look at the worlds created within the video games themselves, as well the players’ existence within these virtual societies. Considering the

ways in which gamers experience and manipulate the virtual manifestation of three main “real life” processes—consumerism, nationalism and love—will help to establish the extent to which players have agency to act as they wish with these virtual worlds and, furthermore, the extent to which these virtual worlds magnify, distort and accelerate these “real life” processes of capitalist modernity.

Indeed, the medium of the video game, like that of film, lends itself to embellishments and distortions of reality. This becomes evident upon taking a closer look at some of the theories put forth by prominent Chinese film scholar, Rey Chow. Writing of the significant impact that film has had upon the modern subject, she states that, “seldom is it mentioned that what is shocking and disorienting is also the process of magnification and amplification that is made possible by the film medium, which, as it were, makes the spectacle spectacular, the demonstration monstrous, and thus underscores the significance of a technologized visibility.”⁴⁴ In this case, Chow is referring to a rereading of a much discussed incident in which the famous Chinese writer Lu Xun, then a medical student in Japan, saw a film portraying Chinese people apathetically watching the “spectacle” of one of their fellow citizens about to be beheaded by Japanese soldiers. According to standard interpretation of the incident, Lu Xun’s shock at witnessing the apathy of his own people is what spurred him to turn to the field of literature, convinced that the Chinese people needed healing of the spirit and not the body, an ailment best treated with the written word and not the medical knife. However, Chow suggests that it was not this incident, per se, that sparked Lu Xun’s strong reaction so much as it was the powerful impact of seeing it crudely displayed on film. In her opinion, it is the power of the film

⁴⁴ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) 6.

medium itself that shocks, just as much as it is the act of barbarity that is being witnessed. Unlike an eye-witness account, watching something through the medium of film is powerful because of the way in which the camera has the ability to focus on certain shots and aspects of the event, selectively choosing what to magnify and distort. It is in this respect that Chow notes that electronic media constitutes a “clear, direct, and seemingly transparent ‘new language’,” one which allows “entire nations, histories, and peoples to be exposed, revealed, captured on the screen, made visible as images.”⁴⁵

The same is true of the “technologized visuality” of the video game. Even more so than filmic representation, the video game, as a technological medium in which players take on the role of an imaginary character, lends itself to magnifications and distortions of reality. In particular, the RPG gaming style seeks to immerse the player in a complex and visually stunning virtual fantasy world, unlike games such as *Counterstrike*, which, while allowing the player to take on a new identity, still seeks to reproduce a “real” combat scenario. Whereas *Counterstrike* gives the player a realistic first-person experience (the gamer sees through the eyes of his/her avatar and cannot, therefore, see him/herself within the game), the RPG allows the player to take in a birds-eye view of the scene, able to see his/her avatar at the same time that he or she can see hundreds of other players and beasts. Keeping with Chow’s interpretation, the RPG player sees, quite literally, an “entire nation[s]...exposed, revealed, captured on the screen, made visible as images.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid. Quoted in Wanning Sun, “A Chinese in the new world: television dramas, global cities, and travels to modernity,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. November 1, 2001 Vol.2, No. 1, pg 84.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Importantly, however, the video game differs from the “technologized visuality” of film in that the video game player not only witnesses the spectacle, but becomes an active part of its creation. In this sense, the player has the ability to directly affect the progression of events, unlike viewer of a film who is helpless to affect the actual outcome of the spectacle on the screen. In particular, the video game player gains agency through a process known as creative player action. As with many of the games, players do not always have to play according to the rules. Despite the fact that the objective of the game may be to kill demons, players frequently have the option, for example, of killing fellow teammates or other players with whom they have a disagreement. This kind of dueling is referred to by gamers as “PK” or “player killings” and is not unique to Chinese gaming. In their book, *Digital Play*, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig De Peuter explain the rise of PK in the online gaming world and its important implications. They trace its origins back to one of the first online RPG, *Ultima Online*. Significantly *Ultima Online* was an evolution of a pre-existing non-Internet game which was extremely popular. The original *Ultima* was an RPG lauded by game critics for being one of the few video games to avoid a focus on bloodshed, creating a society in which, in addition to killing various beasts, a player progressed based upon his conformity to various “virtues.” However once this game was released into the online world, players swiftly developed new methods of swindling one another, oftentimes killing fellow players in order to steal their possessions.

While Kline, Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter describe PK as a problematic aspect of online gaming, games studies scholar Tony Manninen considers it, on the contrary, to be a process which enhances the “richness” of the gamer’s experience. He states, “The

richness of interaction can be enhanced by a set of interaction forms, which is large, versatile, flexible and focused on the content...The richness itself is, at the end of the day, achieved by the players, who are able to exploit the available interaction forms in an intuitive and non-deterministic style.’⁴⁷ PK, then, is one of many examples in which the players are exploiting the interactive forms in ways perhaps not intended by the game makers and thus adding to the “richness” of the game.

In the course of the following I will examine three such “creative player actions”—PK among them—which add “richness” to the Chinese players’ online gaming experience. Each of these three actions corresponds, respectively, to the themes of consumerism, nationalism and love. Such an analysis will not only reveal the importance of the virtual space and the “seemingly transparent ‘new language’” of “technologized visuality” about which Rey Chow wrote, but it will also show the manner in which the video game adds a new layer to the experience by giving the player agency to interpret and change the outcome of the game.

Dreamspace: Consumerism, Nationalism and Love in Qiji

Qiji translates into English as “Miracle” and unlike *Counterstrike* which is popular throughout the world, *Qiji* was invented in 2001 by the Korean gaming company Webzen and is played largely within Asia and particularly within mainland China.⁴⁸ In the game, a fictitious battle rages between the evil Mozu (Evil Spirit Clan) and the people of the kingdom of MU. Previously a peace-loving and prosperous kingdom, the people of MU are caught off-guard by the invasion of the Mozu and their demon monsters, wild animals that have been magically transformed into an army of demonic warriors. Despite the

⁴⁷ Tony Manninen, “Interactive Forms and Communicative Actions in Multiplayer Games”

⁴⁸ “? ? ? ? ” Available Online: <http://www.muchina.com/guide/introduce.htm>

military strength of the Mozu, the people of MU rally together and hope for a miracle. This miracle comes in the form of a group of skilled warriors who use their special powers to defend the Kingdom. Within this skilled group, players may choose between three different careers for their avatars. They may be a swordsman, a wizard or a (female) archer. The archer is the only female character, but she has two different manifestations. One archer is known for her wisdom and the other is known for her agility. Aside from choosing from these prototypes, the players may then select a name and even create a background story for their avatar. Indeed, the possibilities are nearly endless.⁴⁹

The narrative structure of the *Qiji* is exceedingly familiar: it is a story of good versus evil, peace versus war, and, most importantly, of the manner in which material commodities are both a tool and reward for success. Although the storyline is cloaked in the language of nationalistic unity (the tale brave villagers who must unite to save their kingdom from evil invaders), there is no doubt that a modern-day focus on capitalist consumption lies at the heart of *Qiji* as actual progression within the game relies upon the gamer's ability to acquire material commodities. When the players first begin to play, for example, their avatars possess little in terms of clothing or magical powers. As the gamer progresses, he/she is rewarded with more and more commodities, a beautiful new wardrobe, magical sabers and mysterious potions. From the responses of numerous gamers who raved about the "beautiful" nature of these objects, I would venture to say that the allure of *Qiji* lies in the fact that the game creators have taken a familiar narrative structure and turned it into something exotic and new; yes, the game is all about possessing commodities, but it is the nature of these commodities, that they are both

⁴⁹ " ? ? ? ? " Available Online: <http://www.muchina.com/guide/story.htm>

imbued with magical powers and more visually stunning and amazing than the mind's eye can imagine, that makes them so desirable. In the real world, we may fetishize a purse or a pair of boots, but rarely, upon our acquisition of them, do they prove to be as fantastic as our imagination has built them up to be. In the world of *Qiji*, there is no such disappointment; the ruby-encrusted sword which you desperately want will no doubt turn out to be every bit as wonderful as you hoped it would be when it suddenly gives you the strength to kill monstrous beasts in one fowl swoop. Thus, *Qiji* starts with narrative familiarity, processes which exist in real life and with which we are all comfortably acquainted, and adds to them a visual exoticism that satisfies in a way that reality can not.

Even more fantastic than the exotic nature of the commodities themselves is the manner in which they are acquired within the game. In order to increase their powers the players must kill the mutated demon animals, who upon the moment of their annihilation leave behind money or other equally valuable commodities through which the player increases his/her avatar's magical abilities. Through this morbid mode of exchange, the process of consumption and acquisition of material goods is given both a magical and monstrous quality.

Indeed, the story is not, by any means, a new one. In particular, the symbolism of wild animals-turned-demonic attackers was much discussed in intellectual circles following the 1997 release of Miyazaki Hayao's *Mononokehime* or *Princess Mononoke*. A Japanese anime film widely viewed throughout the world, *Princess Mononoke* tells the story of the clash between nature and industrialization. In the opening scene of the movie, a small and peaceful minority village comes under attack by a demonic boar visualized in horrid detail by the numerous bloody worm-like protrusions crawling over

its skin. The village is saved by its prince, who manages to kill the crazed animal with his bow and arrow, though he gets maimed in the process. Once the animal is killed its bloody exterior melts away, leaving behind only a solid piece of iron which had been lodged in its heart. The message is clear: industrialization, represented by this piece of iron, has corrupted nature. The cause of the demonization of the animals in *Qiji* is less clear as the story states only that the animals were turned into demons by evil Mozu invaders who intended to use them as weapons against MU's citizens. Interestingly, however, when one of these demonic animals is slain, the animal dissolves, leaving in its wake a prize such as money or a useful weapon or object. In this regard, *Mononoke* and *Qiji* clearly share parallel narrative structures, only in *Qiji* it is no longer crude iron—now an outdated symbol of the industrial past—but money and commodities—the symbol of the capitalist present—which has lodged in the animal's heart.

Of course, there is a great danger in reading too deeply into this comparison. In particular, it must be noted that within nearly every video game killing one of the “bad guys” leads to a prize; indeed, this is main means through which almost all games advance. Furthermore, whereas the piece of iron symbolized something negative and corruptive within *Princess Mononoke*, there is no indication that such is the case in *Qiji*. On the contrary, the objects left behind by the dying demons are prizes of great value which carry only positive connotations. This difference may perhaps be accounted for by considering the ideological thrust (or lack thereof) within each narrative. While *Princess Mononoke* portends that the mutative effects of industrialization lead only to misery and destruction, *Qiji* encourages the player to unabashedly embrace capitalist distortions of nature as a means through which to acquire success.

Such a focus on monstrous distortions of nature also recalls the recent work of Jean and John Comaroff, who point to increasing obsession with the monstrous or “occult” as an indication of people’s attempts to cope with the failures of neoliberal market strategy. In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, Jean and John Comaroff argue that while neo-liberal market strategy has benefited some, a great deal of the world’s population, especially peoples living in developing and/or newly industrializing countries, has been alienated and marginalized by this globalized system in which the modes of production and consumption are increasingly separated and the legitimate paths to financial success are increasingly opaque. A heightened focus on consumerism has lead those who have not prospered to turn to acts of magic and get-rich-quick schemes in order to find new avenues through which to acquire wealth and buying-power. It is these alternate avenues of money-making and explaining the system that the Comaroffs label “occult economies.” In their words, occult economies “are a response to a world gone awry, yet again: a world in which the only way to create real wealth seems to lie in forms of power/knowledge that transgress the conventional, the rational, the moral—thus to multiply available techniques of producing value, fair or foul.” According to them, “These economies have two different dimensions: a material aspect founded on the effort to conjure wealth—or to account for its accumulation—by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason; and an ethical aspect grounded in the moral discourses and (re)actions sparked by the (real or imagined) production of value through such ‘magical’ means.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Jean and John Comaroff, eds. “Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism,” in *Public Culture*. (Vol. 12, No. 2, Spring 2000. Durham, NC: Duke University Press) 310.

Players of *Qiji* both embrace and repulse this kind of “occult economy,” fluctuating between a magical economy in which their avatars live and a speculative “real life” economy in which they may sell their hard-earned creations. To begin, the dark yet visually stunning world of *Qiji* seems like a caricature of the Comaroffian vision: the kingdom of MU is a place in which capital gains depend not upon production but upon sorcery and magical weapons used to kill demonic beasts. Here, the act of production is completely absent as goods mysteriously appear in the wake of dying beasts, with no reference to their origin.

Aside from encouraging imaginary occult economies within the story, however, it is also important to note that *Qiji* has sparked a real-life economy dealing in virtual goods. People now willingly pay cash for virtual weapons, tools or items of clothing within the game. Despite having no use in the “real” world, these virtual items are highly prized by gamers and have thus created a speculative market in which the virtual goods acquire cash value. According to the stories, circulated both in the form of gossip and through legitimate media circles, people are making fortunes by selling their online characters. WX’s friend related the tale of one Korean student who played the game *Chaunqi* or *Legend* for two years, at the end of which period he sold his character (i.e. his screen name and password for his online account) for 17,000 RMB, or approximately 2,000 US dollars. Along similar lines, gamers are now seeking legal compensation for “virtual thefts” as in the case of Li Xuguang who brought the Beijing Arctic Ice Technology Development Company to court over weapons stolen by a computer hacker. Li sought compensation for the items stolen, arguing that it had taken him over 2 years and 10,000 yuan worth of online fees to acquire these goods. The court ruled in Li’s favor, ordering

the gaming company to restore Li's virtual property.⁵¹ In this sense, *Qiji* exemplifies what the Comaroff's refer to as the "spiraling virtuality of fiscal circulation," whereby the element of human manufacture, i.e. production, is increasingly forgotten and separated from economies which rely increasingly on speculation.⁵²

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there is still a distinct linkage between production and consumption in such economic processes of exchange, in that the characters and weapons being sold and speculated upon are the result of the mental and physical labor of the player. Anyone who believes that "producing" these stockpiles of virtual goods is simple need only to try it for him or herself to know that it requires considerable effort and skill. Remember, it took both the Korean student and Li Xuguang over two years to fashion their avatars into the marketable items that they became; when they first began to play their penniless avatars were worthless. Thus, it may be that the *Qiji* storyline promotes the Comaroffian "occult economy" through its monstrous demon slaying processes and yet the economy sparked by the games themselves relies upon a fairly traditional process of production and consumption, even going so far as to empower the laborer (ie gamer) by giving him/her both the ability to produce value and the agency to determine whether or not and for what to exchange the valuable goods he or she has produced.

All of this merely points to the fact that, in terms of economics, the dividing line between the physical and virtual has never been clear; money and goods, whether

⁵¹ "Chinese Online Game Company Taken Back to Court for Virtual Theft," *Xinhua News Agency*. 11 February 2004. *Global NewsBank* [database on-line], Record no. 100B336543CC6925.

⁵² Comaroff and Comaroff, 301.

produced in the physical or virtual environments, only have value so long as people believe that they do. Writing of “Virtual Economies,” Edward Castronova reminds us:

If people in free markets determine that a shiny crystal called “diamond” is worth \$100,000, economists basically accept the reality of that valuation. If the object in question is not a shiny crystal called “diamond” but is rather a magic sword called “Excalibur,” that exists only in an online game, economists would still put the value of the item at \$100,000....The mere fact that the goods and spaces are digital, and are part of something that has been given the label "game," is irrelevant. Willingness to pay, to sacrifice time and effort, is the ultimate arbiter of significance when it comes to assessments of economic value.⁵³

Thus, the fact that the sale of a sword within *Qiji* can bring in cash revenue should be no more surprising to us than the fact that diamond rings sold in department stores cost money. This truth is easily accepted by gamers because they have experienced the effort and time that go into acquiring the virtual goods, but as a non-gamer I find myself continually amazed by these stories and, furthermore, my amazement has been matched by every other “non gamer” with whom I share the news. Keeping Castronova’s point in mind, however, I can not help but wonder *why* these virtual economies should be so shocking to us. Perhaps it is because these virtual economies confront us with the intangible and abstract foundations of our own material economies. In other words, recognizing that imagined “virtual realities” have value in the “real world” forces us to confront the fact that the “real world” in which we live is itself a “virtual reality” created through our collective imaginations; we want to believe that the job of sitting before a computer slaying monsters in exchange for money to buy a magic sword is less real than

⁵³ Edward Castronova, “On Virtual Economies,” *Game Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 2003) [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/castronova>.

the job of standing behind a counter at Starbucks selling coffee so as to earn enough money for a new pair of boots, but it is not.

Yet if there is little or no distinction between the commodity-fetishized, demon-slaying virtual economy in *Qiji* and the commodity-fetishized, coffee-selling “real” economy, there certainly is a difference between social relations in the virtual world and social relations within the real world. In the previous section on *Counterstrike* I argued that the LAN setting in which the game is played facilitates friendships through team alliances just as it also sparks the formation of social hierarchies and differentiations that function according to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural taste. This process of social distinction is one very much based within the realm of “real” social relations. However, within the virtual space of the video game itself a much more ruthless social code applies, whereby killing one’s enemy is by no means out of the ordinary. Social interactions within *Qiji* thus operate on a more magnified and distorted scale than they do in real life. This, of course, ties in closely with the previously discussed notion of release or “faxie,” in that a player can release his/her aggravations in a game without having to face the real life consequences that he or she would in response to the same action occurring in the real world. The games as such give the gamers license to experiment with extremes and distortions of reality that they can not experiment with in the real world.

Aside from consumptive practices, two other areas in which these experimental creative player actions manifest themselves are in the realms of nationalism and love. Indeed, within the world of MU, nationalistic prejudices and virtual love affairs are exceedingly “transparent,” to recall Rey Chow’s terminology in describing electronic media. This transparency is achieved through a number of melodramatic actions that

overtly display the player's emotion. In the case of nationalism, this melodramatic action is none other than the aforementioned PK. In the case of love, players often boldly profess their affections through melodramatic "xinqing gushi" or "emotion stories" that they post on popular game-related websites for all to see. Yet in both cases, these melodramatic actions are spurred on by the back-story of the game itself, which encourages partnerships and group unity while simultaneously promoting ethnic prejudices.

The rhetoric employed within *Qiji*'s back-story leaves no doubt in the mind of the reader/player: in the space of the brief one-page storyline, the Chinese word "tuanjie" or "unite" is used 12 times in reference to the people of MU "uniting" to save their land from the invaders. By calling the invaders the Mozu or "Evil Spirit Clan," furthermore, the creators of the game have already couched the battle in nationalistic terms. Zu being the Chinese word that indicates race, nationality and ethnicity, the game is, from the start, one which urges the players to think in terms of ethnic similarity and difference.

This focus on tight-knit group unity is common to many other popular Asian video games and has in the past been attributed to the games' Korean origin. According to one reporter, "Such game scenarios dovetail with South Korea's cultural emphasis on working together and achieving consensus...It's in marked contrast to the American value of striking out as a lone ranger, reflected in popular U.S. games such as Doom and Quake."⁵⁴ In referring to South Korea's "cultural emphasis on working together," it is fairly safe to assume that the author of the article is referring to the legacy of Confucianism, which focuses on strength through unity. Indeed, in pursuing this line of

⁵⁴ Vikas Bajaj, "'Amazingly Wired' Online Gaming captivates S. Korean youths; Emphasis on teamwork counter to playing habits in the U.S.," part of special series, "Digikids: How Teens and Technology Connect," in *The Dallas Morning News*, 15 December 2002, Business Section, pg. 1H.

thought, it is easy to extend the argument to all the nations of East Asia which share a Confucian heritage. Thus, the Chinese emphasis on group gaming and the ease with which Korean games such as *Qiji* and *Legend* are accepted by Chinese audiences may be casually cast aside as a phenomenon grounded in “traditional East Asian values.” However, even if the makers of the game had such values in mind, the author’s argument is, to say the least, on shaky ground in assuming that South Korean and Chinese youth who predominantly play these games pay much heed to their ancestor’s Confucian roots. As previously noted, the popularity of group gaming in China and similarly in South Korea may spring from differences in technological access and development. While kids in the US, for example, may find Sega and Nintendo systems under their Christmas tree each year, the percentage of children in China who have access to computers, let alone personal gaming devices, is far smaller. As such, it is only natural that popular games in Asia cater to group play, such as that promoted within the public environments—i.e. the *wangba*—where a large majority of gaming occurs. Thus, casting this shaky cultural essentialist argument aside, we must investigate the manner in which *Qiji*’s focus on “tuanjie” or “unity” has been interpreted by the gamers themselves.

Indeed, it is clear that Chinese gamers have embraced these group-oriented games, and, in ways perhaps not intended by their makers, perpetuated and magnified the significance of the alliances promoted within them. To begin, forming alliances is important within the game because many of the demons and beasts cannot be slain by most individual players. As a result, numerous stories written about gamer’s experiences make reference to teams or armies and their collective ascension through increasing levels of difficulty. For example, in an emotional farewell to his teammates one player

remarks, “I have known you since the beginning and playing with you since then I have been very happy, you would always lend me weapons to use and help me ascend to new levels.”⁵⁵ In this case, aside from the pleasure of companionship, the gamer specifically cites the importance of various ways in which his partners helped him advance in the game.

More important than the strategic nature of such alliances, however, is the manner in which such alliances are formed; in other words, how gamers decide who is and who isn't permitted within their group. As is the case in *Counterstrike*, in *Qiji*, more seriously competitive teams may form based upon skill level, while other groups may come into existence because of pre-existing relations such as those fostered through work or school. Indeed, if we recall the excerpt from the xinqing gushi quoted in the introduction, the author and his coworkers played *Qiji* at night in the *wangba* and then traded gaming strategies in their meetings at work the next day. These skill and work-related alliances may lead us to overlook another important factor; in addition to patterns of inclusion we should also look at patterns of exclusion.

The easiest way to determine who is excluded from a group is to take a look at rivalries which result in PK, or player killings. As explained by WX's friend, PK may occur for a number of different reasons. If, for example, two players kill a demon, there may be a disagreement over who wins the prize left in the monster's wake. Quite often, however, PK is used as a macho device for proving one's strength, both material (based upon the quality and number of weapons that you possess) and national, within the game. WX's friend noted that when playing *Qiji* he would PK with any Japanese players that he

⁵⁵ “?? (MU) : ?? MU, ????” 17173.com????, author's translation.

might encounter. Similarly, he would sometimes pick fights with Koreans. This manifestation of hyper-nationalism (i.e. killing anyone who is not of the same nationality) has been noted in many other video games, and is not confined to China. Indeed, throughout the globe many games are created each year which depend upon the perpetuation of national/ethnic differences. Quite a few war games in the United States now allow players to fight Iraqi insurgents while one game out of England purportedly trains Muslims to kill Israelis.⁵⁶ Quite often, as in the case of both of these US and UK and games, such scenarios are promoted by the ruling governments. Indeed, as noted in the previous chapter, the Chinese government has also had its hand in promoting games which positively portray the nation and, in conjunction with this, may even be tacitly permitting the distribution of games which perpetuate nationalistic tensions, such as one which a number of gamers claimed to be a game that reversed the of the events of the Nanjing massacre, allowing Chinese to brutally murder virtual Japanese citizens in the way that the Japanese army once ruthlessly murdered so many Chinese.

This gaming trend emerges at a time in which there is growing attention being paid to the recent swell of nationalism within China. Considering the fact that riots are breaking out at soccer matches between China and Japan, it is no surprise that these nationalistic tensions should be present within the video game world as well. Indeed, such a trend only reinforces the manner in which Chinese gamers are manipulating the traditional focus on “group unity” through creative player actions, molding the game’s narrative structure to fit modern times; what was previously interpreted as a focus on Confucian group unity has been reinvented as modern hyper-nationalism.

⁵⁶ Mendick, Robert, “Muslim children ‘kill’ Israelis on UK-made ‘Islamic Fun’ CD,” *The Independent*, 2 June 2002, *Global NewsBank* [database on-line], Record no. 0F3F3BA956A3CF42.

Just as PK serves to enhance the gamer's experience when playing *Qiji*, a world of literature has sprung up surrounding the game, adding to the gamer's feeling that they are indeed part of an entirely different culture. In the introduction I opened with an excerpt from one of these many "xinqing gushi" or emotion stories, using it as an example to show how deeply these virtual realities can affect the gamers' lives. Yet what the initial example did not reveal is that a vast majority of these emotion stories actually deal with the issue of love between players within the game world.

According to the "17173.com Internet Gaming Market Survey" 28.88% of players consider finding a friend to be one of the main reasons that they play Internet games. As the xinqing gushi indicate, included in this category is the search for a girlfriend. Ironically, the survey also reports that the overwhelming majority (83.39%) of Internet gamers are men, and thus the odds of finding true love within the game seems slim indeed. Yet "love" in the game world may vary significantly from "love" in the real world, even so much so that the gamers' "real" gender does not matter. Recall, for example, that WX's friend chose a female avatar because he found that other players were more willing to help him, ostensibly because they were looking for a virtual "girlfriend." While it might seem that other gamers would be interested only so long as they believe that behind the female avatar was a female gamer, this is not always the case. In one notable xinqing gushi, the author, having been unable to win Tian Tian, the virtual "princess" of his dreams, settles for another "princess" who he suspects is a man.

He states:

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Then I rashly married a demon [slang for a conniving woman] that was also called a “princess,” even though I knew that it was a man. But because he was also called “princess” I just made him Tian Tian’s replacement. ⁵⁷

Many of the “relationships” in *Qiji* may be thus driven by the desire to feel a connection with someone in the game, to have a partner who will help you fight the monsters, and who will chat with you and encourage you when you are down; “love” in the game world is contingent upon factors such as willingness to help one another succeed in virtual battles and not upon more traditional forms of physical intimacy. For this reason many of the xinqing gushi make reference to advancing through levels with their loved one.

Further proof that virtual relationships are different than “real” relationships is the fact that many of the gamers’ whose avatars are “married” in the land of MU actually have other significant others in the “real world.” Indeed, in the same story in which the protagonist settles for a male “girlfriend,” he also notes candidly that his “real life” girlfriend is also named Tian Tian, just like the virtual dream-girl he is infatuated with in the story.

At the same time that marriage and dating in the virtual world seem much more lighthearted than in the real world, many of the xinqing gushi authors speak in paradoxically melodramatic terms about their partnerships and heartbreak associated with the loss of a virtual spouse or loved one. One such story ends on a particularly melodramatic note:

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⁵⁷ ??????, “???: ?????????????????????”, 17173.com????, author’s translation, 4 September 2004. Available Online: http://article5.17173.com/content/44/2004-9-4/n647_563210.html

*I am really leaving, friends, goodbye. I hope that your lives are fortune-filled and happy, no matter in real life or in MU, in matters of the heart I hope that you and your loved ones will be united. I have one last thing to say, just to let all Chinese people know: My wife, I love you!*⁵⁸

Whether or not the author is truly heartbroken about his wife or whether this is just the style in which the fiction is written, it is clear from the various manifestations of “love” that traditional kinds of relationships and definitions are changeable within the world of *Qiji*. In this sense, dating is yet another “creative player action” through which the gamers have the ability to experiment with modern processes and relationships that are more rigidly structured in the “real world.”

⁵⁸ “?? (MU) : ?? MU, ???? ” 17173.com????, author’s translation.

Chapter 4:

The Space in Between: Negotiating the Tensions between Freedom and Control, Exotic and Familiar, Virtual and Real

WX's friend is telling me a story about a woman gamer who played Qiji:

“The woman was in the hospital, she had just given birth to a beautiful new baby. She turned to her nurses and asked, ‘has my meimei (little sister) got wings?’”

I didn't understand.

“What, you mean she thought her baby had wings?”

“No,” WX's friend shook his head, “meimei refers to her avatar in Qiji; she wanted to know if her avatar had gotten its wings yet.”

-7.25.04, 8:30pm

Despite the efforts of the Chinese government to restrict both the *wangba* and the Internet gaming phenomenon, it is clear that for many of the gamers this virtual world has already become an important part of their non-virtual lives. Throughout this paper I have struggled to discuss the many intricacies of this space, one properly categorized as neither fully physical nor fully virtual. As such, my analysis has often drifted between two worlds, attempting to show how the two are interconnected and how social relations in the *wangba* require a bilocation of the social (and critical) self between them.

Cognizant of the fact that these two worlds exist simultaneously, I have dealt with the issue of space and the manner in which the world of the *wangba* and online gaming is one through which players may manipulate and redefine their social, economic, and national identities. I have gone about this task in three different chapters. Chapter 1 explored the physical space of the *wangba*, noting the manner in which it differs greatly

from the Euro-American space known as the Internet café. Through an in depth description of the *wangba* environment I hope to have given the reader a feeling for these spaces and the manner in which they offer the customers a wealth of leisure options. In Chapter 2 I acknowledged the fact this space is being contested by Chinese government and business interests which seek to restrict and reshape them to fit a pre-determined idea of modernity. These restrictions are effectively quelling the “frontier feeling” of many of these *wangba*, where environments that once offered customers considerable freedom to do as they liked are now being transformed into tightly controlled and regulated Internet portholes. The government-mandated age restriction, which bars minors under the age of 18 from entering the *wangba*, also carries heavy implications because youth who once constituted the major clientele at these places now have nowhere else to go for their entertainment.

Finally, and most importantly, in Chapter 3 I investigated the manner in which the space of the *wangba* has facilitated different types of social interaction, both in the physical and virtual world. To do this I explored two games which are commonly played in the *wangba*, *Counterstrike* and *Qiji*. First, by comparing and contrasting the gaming habits and preferences of two different *Counterstrike* gaming teams I sought to establish that the subculture of video gaming, as an activity stigmatized by the government and media, has within it various social hierarchies and distinctions but that, in the end, the gaming serves as an important source of release and fulfillment for all those who play it. But while *Counterstrike* is a game played in an LAN setting and therefore one which places much emphasis on social relations within the setting of the *wangba*, many games such as the RPG *Qiji* focus upon social relations within an intricately designed virtual

world. Taking into consideration Rey Chow's notion of "technologized visibility," I noted the manner in which the video game had the power to distort, magnify and accelerate processes central to our capitalist modernity, in particular, consumerism, nationalism and love. Through an analysis of the manner in which these three themes are used by the players within the game *Qiji* I hope to have established the fact that the medium of the video game allows the player to stretch the boundaries of the game through creative player actions.

In recapping the subjects covered it strikes me that I have tried to do a lot, and yet, even as I am aware of the fact that my paper covers a broad spectrum of subjects, I am also aware of the fact that I have left a great deal untouched. Issues such as the role of gender in the *wangba* have been sidetracked, although speaking with the female *Counterstrike* gamer, Z, provided some insight into the issue, as did the exploration of boyfriend-girlfriend "love" in *Qiji*. In both cases, it would seem that despite being in the vast minority (only 16.61% of gamers) women are welcomed, if not encouraged, to join the gaming world, and that this new virtual leisure space is much more accepting of them than other leisure sites such as KTV. Age is another important consideration, as the numerous hordes of underage gamers are being barred entry to the *wangba*, a slightly more mature gaming audience is left in their wake. Indeed, my main informants for this project, referred to by the pseudonyms WX, WX's friend and Z, were all in their late twenties/early thirties and already had steady daytime jobs. Even the members of the Smart gaming team were 18 and older, each of them out of school. My personal findings are bolstered by the 17173.com survey, which finds that 42.85% of gamers surveyed are

between the ages of 23 and 30 and 32.95% of gamers were between the ages 19 and 22.⁵⁹ Finally, I noted briefly in the first chapter that my location, Shanghai, was a dangerous one because of the fact that, as a whole, the city is far more technologically advanced than most other areas of China. However, the reader may be surprised to know that the Internet gaming phenomenon has spread throughout many urban Chinese locations. Not only is Harbin—the northeastern industrial city where I began to research the *wangba* over two years ago—overflowing with *wangba* full of gamers, but also smaller urban areas, such as the tiny western town of Liuyang in Hunan province, have joined in on the trend. Even I was shocked to discover that this tiny town has over 40 *wangba* all, like Shanghai, full of online gamers. Based upon such findings, it is clear that a further investigation of demographic issues such as age, gender and location will become important considerations for future studies, though they are too large a subject to broach within the confines of this paper.

My approach to studying this phenomenon can instead be characterized as an experiential rather than scientific one. By sharing excerpts from my field notes and the stories and testimonies of the gamers with whom I spoke, I hope to have given the reader an idea of what it is like to sit in a Shanghai *wangba* and sip a soda while breathing in the smoke-filled air, to shout at friends and enemies while playing *Counterstrike*, to experience the thrill of successfully slaying a demon in *Qiji*, and to know the immense disappointment of seeing your avatar killed by an enemy during PK. These are all processes central to the formation of identity for the online gamer.

Yet no paper can survive on experiential narratives alone, and thus, I grudgingly turn my attention to the more technical aspects of my analysis. The free-flowing analytical

⁵⁹ 17173.com ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?

mode I have chosen for this paper is due in large part to the fact that there is no set methodology for dealing with such a phenomenon as the one with which I am concerned. Methodological problems arise in that we are simultaneously dealing in both the realm of narrative symbolism, interpreting the hidden meanings of this virtual text as we would a work of literature or film, and in the realm of the social relations, dealing with the manner in which these games have sparked a subculture replete with class distinctions and thriving speculative economies. Thus, anyone attempting to deal with this phenomenon must schizophrenically divide his/her attention between fantasy and reality. And this only begins to scratch the surface of the theoretical and methodological overhaul that must occur.

So what should be the first step in approaching a unified method of analysis? As I mentioned in the introduction, a great failing of the Euro-American body of scholarship that exists on the subject of Internet gaming is their failure to connect the virtual space with the physical space in which the games are played. This would be a crucial oversight when dealing with the *Counterstrike* online gaming phenomenon in the *wangba*, where, as we have seen, the gamers' experiences are enhanced by the social interactions that occur in the physical space as much as those interactions which occur in the virtual space. Thus, we must take the virtual gaming phenomenon as it is and accept that for these gamers the physical and virtual have already merged.

How, furthermore, do we approach a symbolic analysis of the video game? Is it appropriate to "read" video games as a "cultural text" in the same way that scholars have read works of literature and film? How does the notion of player interactivity change the mode of analysis? In a previous section, I used Rey Chow's idea of "technologized

visuality” to help explain the manner in which the video game as a visual narrative has the ability to magnify and distort reality. However, I also noted that the video game as a medium differs from that of film and television. Indeed, one important difference to be considered is the extent to which the video game gives the player more agency and control over the narrative than does a television show or film. When watching a film, for example, the viewer is powerless to change the outcome that the director/screenwriter has chosen, though he or she may certainly interpret the given narrative in different ways. However, in a video game the player is driven by the knowledge that he or she is actively involved in deciding the outcome of the game. Will the kingdom of MU be saved? It depends on whether or not the player successfully slays the demons. It is this kind of interactivity, between the gamer and the game which he/she is playing, that has been the subject of many video game studies.

The fact that the player has the ability to directly affect the outcome of the game is one which lends itself to imaging that the virtual world of video games is one of complete freedom. Indeed, it was with this hypothesis in mind that I embarked upon this research project, hoping to find that the spaces of the *wangba* and Internet gaming were ones in which people could escape the tight grip of the Chinese government, experimenting with their sociality and stretching the boundaries of state culture and ideology. In certain respects this is true, however, it becomes clear the *wangba* and Internet gaming are not without restrictions of their own.

In *Digital Play: the interaction of technology, culture and marketing*, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter construct a useful integrative model that illustrates the manner in which technology, culture and marketing collide and form

“circuits of interactivity” between the programmer/designer/producer and the user/player/consumer.⁶⁰ In calling attention to the link between these actors in the technological, cultural and marketing spheres, they successfully remind us that video games too constitute commercially structured spaces with rules and set boundaries. They make an excellent point in cautioning that while games provide the player with a certain amount of flexibility and choice, they still, in the end, force the player to conform to codes set by the game developers. According to them, “most interactivity is a matter of tactical choices and issues that arise within scenarios whose strategic parameters are preset by a design practice: an invitation to comply or collude in the construction of a particular universe rather than in the deconstruction of its boundaries.”⁶¹ The same kinds of limitations are present from a marketing perspective where there exists “a deep tension between the calculated, organized, and oligopolistic marketing of game culture and the experience of freedom, adventure and transgression its imaginary worlds promise. There is at the heart of the gaming industry a contradiction between ‘commodification and play,’ a tension that paradoxically drives its frenzied creativity and subverts its own success.”⁶² Thus, while gamers certainly possess a degree of agency to decide how they will play the game, they are, in the end, still bound by the decisions of the game creators and, in the case of China we might add, the censorship of the Chinese government. In this sense then, they are—like most cultural phenomena in China—in constant tension between freedom and control.

⁶⁰ See figure 1.

⁶¹ Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Digital Play: the interaction of technology, culture and marketing*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003) 54.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 57.

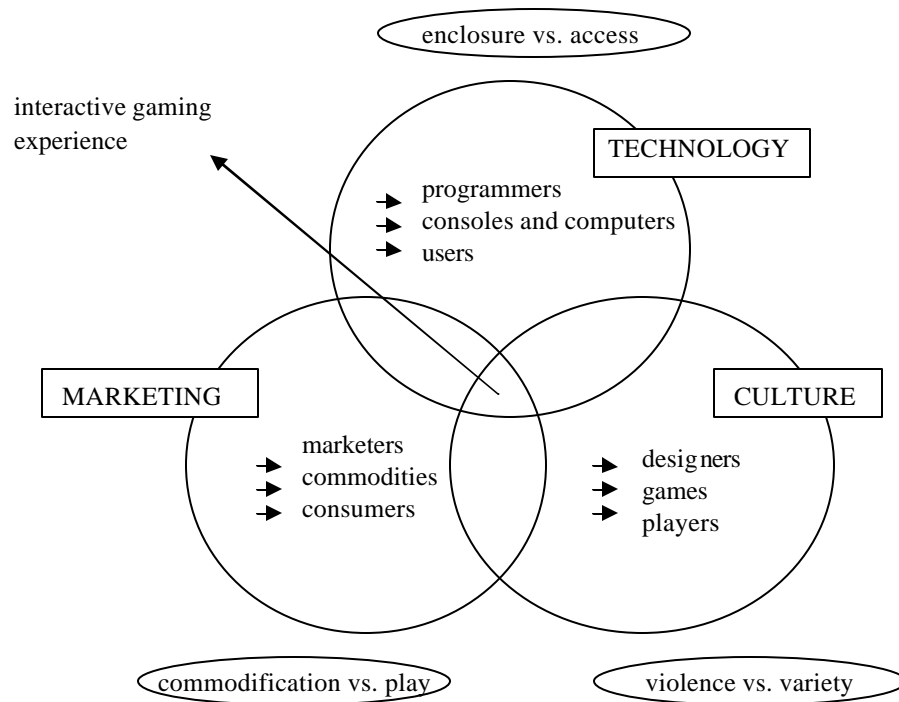


Figure 1. *Contradictions in the Three Circuits of Interactivity*, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, 2003.

This leads me to the final conundrum, which is how to view this phenomenon in terms of its global/regional implications. Though little has been done to address the growing importance of video games in the lives of young urban Chinese, a number of regional cultural studies scholars have investigated the impact of television and film upon the formation of modern Chinese identity. Wanning Sun takes up Rey Chow’s idea of “technologized visibility” and argues that a crucial aspect of modern Chinese television series is their combination of “visual exotica” and “narrative familiarity.” She states, “it is in the negotiation of these tensions that the social imagination of space and place—a

process crucial to the formation of the modern subject—is constantly reworked.”⁶³ Such an argument about the blending of exotic and familiar is not new within the field of Chinese Cultural Studies, as Perry Link discussed a similar function played by a school of racy early twentieth century pop fiction known euphemistically as “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” literature. According to Link, despite the fact that this pulp fiction was poorly written and looked down upon by more “serious” authors, it served the important function of introducing new themes, such as technological innovations and western cultural trends, to an audience which would otherwise shun them as foreign. However, because these new ideas were presented in a familiar narrative form the reader was able to process them and experiment with them without feeling that they were taking any real risks.⁶⁴ This focus on narrative familiarity and visual exotica dovetails nicely with my analysis of the virtual economy in *Qiji* and the manner in which gamers use creative player actions to take familiar texts and manipulate them into something more experimental. It furthermore helps to frame the online gaming experience as one which, aside from negotiating tensions between freedom and control, is also caught up in the tensions between narrative familiarity and visual exotica.

In all these cases it would seem that the inherent tensions within these cultural texts—be they works of popular fiction, movies, television or video games—are tensions between experimentation with something new and conformity to norms of old. While Rey Chow, Wanning Sun, and Perry Link want to see this tension as one which exists primarily within the bounds of art and culture, Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and

⁶³ Wanning Sun, “A Chinese in the new world: television dramas, global cities, and travels to modernity,” 84.

⁶⁴ Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 21.

Greig De Peuter are much more cognizant of the manner in which a fine balance between exotic and familiar benefits the interests of marketing and development businesses. Wanning Sun furthermore links this balancing act to the interests of the Chinese government, noting the manner in which the contrapuntal positioning of the familiar and the exotic may serve to reinforce existing state ideologies more so than inciting a desire for the exotic other.

The worlds of the *wangba* and online gaming are caught up in these in all of these tensions, not to mention the greatest tension of them all, the tension between virtuality and reality. Thus, while the *wangba* and Internet gaming worlds do provide a space in which individuals can experiment with and stretch the boundaries of the rules that govern the state-controlled society in which they live, these spaces are also, themselves, restricted. Optimistically, I will agree with Wanning Sun in stating that these tensions, between freedom and control, exotic and familiar, and, most obviously, virtual and real, foster an environment in which the gamer must constantly rework and reinterpret his/her conception of the modern self.

Yet whether or not the gamer is actively aware of the inherent tensions in the space of the *wangba* and the video game, the blending of the physical and virtual worlds indicates that we are entering a more advanced state of the technological present. Wang Xiaoming observes, “The more one enters the media age, the more insignificant the concrete elements of life that can be seen and felt become. Instead, what jumps off the screen to occupy the central position in life is a group of young people with their foreheads branded with the word *virtual*. A series of rises and falls in the NASDAQ index immediately changes many countenances. When virtual realities so easily unsettle

people, can one still call them virtual?”⁶⁵ From the various experiences of online gamers in the *wangba*, it is clear that the virtual worlds of *Counterstrike* and *Qiji* are every bit as “real” as the stock market, and, for that matter, any other aspect of life.

⁶⁵ Wang Xiaoming, “China on the Brink of a ‘Momentous Era’,” *positions* 11:3 (2003): 599-600.

GLOSSARY OF VIDEO GAME TERMS

Avatar	The gamer's virtual manifestation in the video game
<i>Counterstrike</i>	An FPS or RTS game in which a team of counter terrorists fights a team of terrorists in a sniper-like combat scenario.
MU	The kingdom that the players of <i>Qiji</i> are trying to defend
PK	Player Killing
<i>Qiji</i>	The most popular RPG in China, a game created by a Korean gaming company in which players have magical powers and use them to defend their kingdom from invading demonic beasts.
FPS	First Person Shooter
RPG	Role Playing Game
RTS	Real Time Strategy

GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS AND PHRASES

Baoshou ? ?	conservative (values and actions)
Dedao yizhong manzu ? ? ? ? ? ?	to achieve a kind of fulfillment
Faxie ? ?	release (as in to release tensions)
Kafei dian ? ? ?	café, coffeeshop
Laowai ? ?	a common phrase used for foreigner
Mei mianzi ? ? ?	to have no face, without pride or shame
Meinu Zuojia ? ? ? ?	pretty women authors
Pianzi ? ?	cheater
Qifen ? ?	atmosphere
<i>Qiji</i> ? ?	<i>Wonder</i> , see video game terms
Tuanjie ? ?	unite
Wangba ? ?	net bar
Weichengnianren bude runei ? ? ? ? ? ? ? ?	Minors not permitted to enter
Xiaojie ? ?	Miss or, literally, little elder sister
Xinqing gushi ? ? ? ?	emotion story
Youxi Fengzi ? ? ? ?	a game “crazy” or game psycho

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