"Just Like the Qing Empire"

Internet Addiction, MMOGs, and Moral Crisis in Contemporary China

"正如清朝"：现代中国的网络成瘾、在线游戏、与道德关键时刻

Alex Golub
Kate Lingley
University of Hawai'i, Manoa

龚雁达·助教授
夏威夷大学人类学系

龙梅若·助教授
夏威夷大学美术和美术史系

This article examines discourse about Internet addiction and video-game-related suicide in the People's Republic of China. Through an analysis of media reportage, interview transcripts, and chat rooms, a preliminary account of the origins of contemporary Chinese concerns with Internet addiction is provided. This approach differs from biomedical models, which see Internet suicide as a form of mental illness, similar to drug or gambling addiction. This approach draws on anthropological and sociological models of the cultural construction of social problems and argues that concerns with Internet addiction are part of a more general moral crisis faced by Chinese, in response to rapid consumerism, the medicalization of mental illness, and new forms of public and publicity.

提要：本文章检查了最近中华人民共和国关于网络成瘾和关于网络游戏产生自杀的争论。通过新闻报告、访问记载、和网络论坛的分析，我们记述现代中国人对网络成瘾的关心，又初步地解释此关心的来源。目前的医学分析把网络成瘾和相关的自杀当作如毒品成瘾或赌博成瘾同样的精神病。本文章利用人类学和社会学的方法，认为社会问题由文化条件而形成，又认为现代中国人对网络成瘾的关心属于一种道德方面的关键时刻，当他们面对着消费者主义的发展，精神病的医学化，和公众生活的种种新方式新条件。

Keywords: *China; Internet addiction; MMOG; suicide; consumerism; popular culture*

关键词：中国，网络成瘾，网络游戏，自杀，消费者主义，通俗文化

From late 2005 through 2006, American mainstream media began covering events of "Internet suicide" and "Internet addiction" in the People's Republic of China. Although this coverage reflects America's fascination with Asia as an exotic site of technological sophistication (for a Japanese example, see Allison, 2006), it also reflects the spectacular nature of some of the most widely reported Internet suicides in China. In 2004, for instance, a child leaped to his death in Tianjin, leaving behind a four-page confession detailing his deeply emotional ties to the characters in Warcraft III. But cases of Internet addiction and Internet suicide are more than engaging exoticisms from "the East." It is clear that Chinese discussions of addiction to the Internet and video games resonate with contemporary American debates on the subject. As in the United States, Chinese worry about Internet addiction, *wangluo chengyin* (网络成瘾), and the set of tropes used to describe immersive gaming—being "immersed" (*chenjin* 沉浸), "submerged" (*chenni* 沉溺), or (most strongly) *chenmi* 沉迷—infatuated, addicted, or even in a coma—would be familiar to anyone who follows Internet addiction debates in the United States.

It is tempting, therefore, to include the Chinese case in a larger, cross-cultural study of Internet and video game addiction, and indeed the literature is growing on this topic. We take a slightly different anthropological approach to Internet addiction, drawing on a variety of theoretical sources and frameworks from medical anthropology, science and technology studies, and the sociology of social problems. We examine how biomedical diagnoses of Internet addiction are "co-produced" with larger social and political issues in contemporary China.

By attempting to contextualize discourses of suicide and addiction, we argue that they crystalize concerns for more general changes in the "moral order" of China. Drawing on Kleinman's (1998) work on "experience and its moral modes," we argue that Chinese reportage expresses a profound sense that Internet addiction is emblematic of socioeconomic change in China and underlying moral tensions. As such, this articulates awareness and concern with fear of a threatened moral order in the face of social change, medicalization of social relationships, the rise of new forms of self-fashioning enabled by new media that are not socially sanctioned, the growth of consumerism as a lifestyle, and the dilemmas of childrearing and family structure in a changing country. As one poster to a Chinese online forum put it, China today is "just like the Qing empire"—full of the promise of a growing cosmopolitanism that will strengthen China and integrate it into a global political system but also exposed to foreign influences that may lead to its downfall.

We draw here in a very preliminary way on Chinese media reportage, chat room transcripts, and blogs to describe the terms in which contemporary Chinese discuss Internet addiction, compulsive game play, and their treatment in terms of mental illness. Although these data are ethnographically superficial, we believe these narratives can provide provisional answers to questions regarding the cultural context of gaming in the Asia-Pacific region. How would one undertake a rigorous

comparative ethnography of Chinese and American video game habits? How do video games fit in China's rapid modernization, especially with the rise of Chinese consumer culture? Finally, how do video games provide a resource for Chinese people to undertake new forms of self-fashioning at the turn of a new millennium?

This article employs perspectives used in the sociological literature on social problems, medicalization, and moral panic, as well as the wider literature in medical anthropology. Although we do not seek to trivialize the pain of mental illness or dismiss reports of Internet addiction as "false," we insist that these cases be put back into the wider context of contemporary Chinese life. Despite the popularity of such diagnoses in both China and the United States, there is no widely accepted definition of Internet addiction as a form of psychopathology, and many within the scientific community are skeptical of research indicating its existence (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006).

We draw on Jasanoff's (2004) concept of co-production to argue that discourses of Internet addiction "are at once products of social work and constitutive of forms of life; society cannot function without knowledge any more than knowledge can exist without appropriate social supports." Psychiatric evaluation of Internet addiction, then, "is not a transcendent mirror of reality," but in fact "embeds and is embedded in social practices, identities, norms, conventions, discourses, instruments and institutions" (Jasanoff, 2004, pp. 2–3). Thus diagnoses of Internet addiction are co-produced with larger social and political issues.

In sum, we argue that the Internet does not simply "impact" Chinese culture any more than Chinese single-handedly create an environment for a culture-bound syndrome known as Internet addiction. Rather, information technology is one element that interacts with cultural structures, recent history, and politico-economic context, which produces contemporary Chinese social life including both medical diagnoses of Internet addiction and the social order they in turn create.

We begin by tracing the history of Internet anxiety in China, media coverage of spectacular Internet suicides, and the rise of fears about Internet addiction as a form of mental illness. We then move to a wider discussion of suicide in China and the social change the country is currently undergoing. In doing so, we attempt to create a model of social change that explains not only the prevalence of "Internet addiction" but also the prevalence of concern about the disorder. In the third section of the article, we demonstrate the applicability of our new model through an analysis of some of the discourse surrounding Internet addiction in China. In conclusion, we summarize our findings and discuss further research.

Anxiety About the Internet in China

The Internet has always been viewed with ambivalence by the Chinese government. On the one hand, the Internet is both a symbol and a means of modernization key

to China's development. On the other, the Internet provides access to material the Chinese government deems unsuitable and creates a new "public sphere" in which activists can communicate and organize (G. Yang, 2003). As a result, the Chinese government has attempted to institute different methods of restricting Internet content, beginning with the "great firewall of China," which began operation in 1995 (Barme & Ye, 1997) and continues today.

The growth of an Internet-mediated public sphere, which serves as a "third place" for interaction (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), has led to new physical locations for Internet users. *Wang ba* (网吧), or Internet cafés, have become gathering places where people who do not own a computer at home—most people—can access massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), chat rooms and e-mail. As loci for morally dangerous Internet access, they are also imagined as morally unsuitable public places—especially since the deaths of a dozen people in a fire in 2002—and have been portrayed as physically unsafe (Jenkins, 2002). Consider, for instance, the following discussion of Internet cafés:

> The environment at Web bars is troubling. Web bars are narrow, dark, stuffy, and the air in them is foul. Fire-fighting installations in some Web bars are crude and present serious safety hazards. Web bars provide their habitues with a dissolute cultural atmosphere in which they can behave without any inhibitions. A substantial number of the netizens at Web bars are students, but undesirable young people from society can be found. Some Web bars sell various kinds of cigarettes and cigars, wine, soft drinks, and snacks. Youngsters do as they please here, get in the bad habits of smoking and drinking, and frequently create disturbances. All these things have highly deleterious effects on youngsters' physical and mental health. (S. Yang, 2006, p. 73)

The result is a long series of government attempts to regulate Internet cafés (Qiu & Zhou, 2005). Most recently, for instance, the Chinese government announced a 1-year moratorium on licensing new Internet cafés ("China Won't Allow," 2007).

Bizarre and pathological behavior created by the Internet and online games has featured prominently in the Chinese press since 2002: A boy murdered his uncle to steal money to play video games (Xinhua News Agency, 2006); two children exhausted by gaming marathons fell asleep on railroad tracks and were killed (Watts, 2005); a man murdered another over the theft of a virtual sword in Mir II (Watts, 2005); a 13-year-old committed suicide after playing Warcraft III (Xinhua News Agency, 2006); four teenagers were seriously injured in a knife fight between 19 gamers at an Internet café over treasure dropped by a monster in an MMOG (Liaoshen Evening News, 2006); a 17-year-old killed himself after meeting his online sweetheart "Flying Skirt" in real life, only to find she was a homely woman in her 30s (Xinhua News Agency, 2005); and a morbidly obese man died after a marathon gaming session ("Online Addict Dies," 2007).

These popular reports have been accompanied in recent years by academic studies indicating the growth of Internet addiction as a mental disorder. In 2005,

reports from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the China Youth Association Network indicated that Internet addiction was a serious problem in China (Funk, 2007). The Institute of Psychology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences estimated that a university of 5,000 students typically loses 50 students a year, and 80% of the dropout rate is due to Internet addiction (Funk, 2007). Most recently, the Chinese government has begun to sponsor eight clinics to treat Internet addicts (Cha, 2007).

Contemporary notions of Internet addiction as a pathology draw from biomedical models of mental illness, and the creation of clinics for treatment clearly treat Internet addiction on the model of gambling or drug addiction. These institutions seem to have been influenced by the scholarly work of Kimberly Young (1998), who has also produced an extensive array of popular self-help books designed to help people overcome Internet addiction. However, these Chinese clinics work on a much more carceral model of treatment than Young suggests, combining various drug regimes with regular intravenous drips and—most well-known—administering electric shock for extreme patients (Cha, 2007; Funk, 2007). It should be noted that the psychological literature on Internet addiction is ambivalent—there is no *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th edition, text revision; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) entry for Internet addiction and addiction experts are critical of claims that video games are addictive (Steenhuysen, 2007). Recent reviews of the literature (Widyanto & Griffiths, 2006) find much of the work on Internet addiction to be problematic. Chinese adoption of the idea of Internet addiction thus involves the adoption of a new and controversial diagnosis, rather than importing well-established medical models from the West (as was the case in early periods in the history of psychology; Chen, 1999).

The controversial nature of Western research on video game addiction has not stopped opponents of Internet games. Indeed, several clinic directors consider the relationship between drugs and video games is more than merely metaphorical. Indeed, drug regimes are used to treat patients as a substitute for the Internet. Hence clinic director Tao's claim, "We use these medicines to give them happiness, so they no longer need to go on the Internet to be happy" (Cha, 2007, p. A01). Treatment of Internet addiction with pharmaceuticals presents a model of human emotion in which subjective experience can be created in individuals through the application of various drugs. Given the stark biomedical view of subjectivity expressed in this quote, it is not surprising that the experience of spending time on the Internet could be literally understood as physical addiction.

The Internet is equated with addictive drugs, not only at the level of the individual; it is also regarded as a social problem. The overwhelming concern with Internet addiction in China is the way in which it will effect Chinese development—a deep-seated theme that speaks to old Maoist and pre-Maoist rhetoric of independence from colonialism as well as deeper Chinese concerns with ethical and spiritual cultivation and refinement. The Internet is therefore equated not simply with addictive drugs in general but with opium and opium's long association with a wide range of

social problems in China. This equation is made quite clear by Tian Bingxin (2005), who interviewed Zhang Chunliang, an anti-Internet crusader, on a Chinese Web site. Tian Bingxin claimed

The allure of Internet games for children is like the poison of opium in China so many years ago; it doesn't discriminate between the poor and the rich, between those of high or low position. It doesn't matter if you're an unemployed worker, a wealthy businessman, or a Party cadre, the highest hopes of innumerable parents for their children's future may well be destroyed by Internet games.Zhang then agreed: "We can say that if Internet games are not properly controlled, they may well become the 21st century's 'electronic opium' and 'spiritual opium'" (as cited in Tian Bingxin, 2005). By equating the Internet with opium, these anti-video-game crusaders draw a parallel between China's rapid modernization through the importation of foreign technology on one hand and the spread of opium addiction and subsequent humiliation of the Qing empire (in the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century) on the other. The fall of China and its victimization by Europeans and Japanese is the paradigmatic event from which nationalist politics seeks to recover.

It is this memory of opium dens that seems to inform Zhang's claim: "From modern cities with forests of skyscrapers, to closed-off and backward traditional farming villages, *wang ba* have spread with the swiftness of a toxin; Internet games have become attached to the social body like poisonous tumors." As a result, Internet games "bring originally fortunate and happy families to a frightening state, and seriously weaken people's sense of social morality" (as cited in Tian Bingxin, 2005). As this last quote suggests, Internet addiction is more than "merely" a new form of illness in China; it is seen as pernicious and deadly because it threatens to affect the downfall of China, just as the importation of opium did. The real threat is not concerned merely with the bodies and minds of those addicted but also their family and society's moral order.

Explaining Notions of Addiction

What factors explain the rising interest in Internet addiction and Internet suicide in China? Anthropologists would insist that because all perception is mediated by culture, explanations of suicide are never merely an empirical response to objective circumstances. Rather, the creation and diffusion of notions of addiction and public problems is a process shaped by cultural forces at work within the arena in which the problem develops. In the case of China, it is salient that suicide is a topic of enormous cultural elaboration.

It is important, for instance, to note that recent diagnoses of Internet suicide rely on the perception that suicide is caused by mental pathology. This is a noticeable shift in China, where psychiatrists have resisted the "medicalization" of suicide and have seen it instead as a powerful but ambiguous response to social and moral

dilemmas. As Lee and Kleinman (2003) demonstrated, suicide in China is often culturally inflected as a form of "resistance," which is morally ambivalent. They pointed out that in China "suicide is often seen to be a rejection of everything in society on the level of cultural production, and compels members of society to doubt its core values" (Lee & Kleinman, 2003, p. 292). Although polluting, suicide can "be seen as an active moral act inasmuch as it is meant to show that even death is preferable to living under unacceptable political conditions" (p. 296). At once shaming and polluting, suicide can also be seen as moral, and indeed, committing suicide can become a moral imperative in certain social situations.

In the classical tradition, famous figures such as the righteous scholar and bureaucrat Qu Yuan committed suicide to escape an unjust legal regime (Lee & Kleinman, 2003, p. 298). This theme is related to other stories of virtuous world-ignoring asceticism in which morally upright figures agree to sacrifices such as death, castration, or exile to maintain their personal integrity, or as the price paid to complete a valued project (McNeill & Sedlar, 1970, pp. 135–136). But as Hsieh and Spence (1980) showed, suicide is especially a moral imperative for women forced into no-win positions. Here suicide consists of not only an implicit critique of the regime that forces one to commit suicide but a positive act of Confucian moral virtue.

These cultural traditions help explain the distinct patterning of suicide in contemporary China. Today suicide continues to be a major social problem with a distinctive form. Globally, men are more likely to kill themselves than women, and classic sociological approaches that focus on such anomie predict that suicide rates will be higher in urban areas, where the pathological forces of modernity are concentrated. In fact, as numerous studies have shown, in China women are more likely to successfully commit suicide than men, and suicide rates in rural areas are three times higher than in urban areas (Ji, Kleinman & Becker, 2001; Phillips, Liu, & Zhang, 1999). Suicide is a serious public health concern in China, with high occurrence and depressing statistics.

In contrast, studies on Internet suicide in China focus on the dangers posed to male, urban, affluent students—the demographic that appears *not* to be at risk in the population more generally. Suicides in China often result from the pressures young women are subjected to in rural areas, where their lives are tightly constrained by prearranged marriages and strong pressure to produce male children. In other words, the "real" problem with suicide in China is the large numbers of deaths of female peasants—not affluent young men whose families can afford to send them to private clinics.

Of course, the Chinese press cover spectacular rural female as well as Internet-related suicides, and it is not particularly surprising that the press disproportionately focuses on the suicide of those with high-status such as well-to-do young men. Nevertheless, it is clear that fears about Internet suicide in China and the underlying addiction that supposedly causes it cannot be explained simply by the *fact*.

MMOG as Moral Crisis

To those who are familiar with the history of new media and social change in the United States, the moral debate surrounding new forms of publicity and technology in China will sound familiar. Concerns about Chinese youth moving online seem to mirror anxieties about social transformation in the 19th century in the United States as the population shifted from largely agrarian to urban communities—anxieties centered on the nature of moral order in the cities. As Boyer (1978) pointed out, reformers had "the conviction—explicit or implicit—that the city, although obviously different from the village in its external, physical aspects, should nevertheless replicate the moral order of the village" (p. x). This type of concern is analogous to social change in China in many ways. In Maoist thought, of course, the countryside and rural agrarian work was emphasized over corruption in the city. At the same time, there is massive urban growth in China and migration to cities in defiance of *hukou* (local residence permit) policies. Finally, as Steinkuehler et al. have pointed out (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), MMOGs function as "third places" for youth, resulting in virtual worlds that create a new "public space" in which interactions can occur—interactions that threaten to create a civil sphere whose presence may not be welcome by the Chinese government or that may seem pathological to other players.

It is not surprising, therefore, that invocations of dark, threatening *wang ba* seem to mirror reformist concerns about spaces such as penny arcades and movie theaters (Nasaw, 1993) in the early 20th century. Similarly, Chinese fears of psychopathology induced by new media mirror an ensemble of concerns in the United States, which revolve around many forms of new media including broadcast radio (Dennis, 1998), television (Barker & Petley, 1997) and video games (Williams, 2003).

In sum, fears of Internet suicide in China might be prompted by concern over changes to the underlying moral order of Chinese society in the face of not only the spread of the Internet but wider social changes as well. We review some of these changes in the next section.

Changing Selves and Changing Societies

In contemporary China social relations are being reordered by changes in consumer culture, of which the Internet is only a part. These new forms of selfhood and self-creation alter the structure of families as well as individual subjectivities. As Farquhar and Zhang (2005) pointed out in their work on biopolitics in Beijing, many individuals in China today are seeking ways to recuperate such subjectivities in the aftermath of the Agambenian "bare life" they were subjected to during the Cultural Revolution. One of the main forces driving this change is China's "consumer revolution" (Davis, 2000). China today is undergoing massive socioeconomic change, and nowhere is this more evident than the rise in consumerism (Yan, 2000). Internet use in China is also soaring: The number of users online increased to 23% in 2006, with

30% of the Beijing population currently online (China Internet Network Information Center, 2007). The transformation of middle-class Chinese lifestyles thus involves what Farrer (2002) called "opening up"—experimentation with new forms of identity and association through consumerism and the Internet. As Yan (2000) argued,

> booming consumerism is not merely a reflection of the booming economy; rather, it also reflects the changing social system and facilitates further changes in the system, such as redrawing the boundaries between social groups, creating social space outside state control and forming a new ideology. (p. 179)

In sum, consumerism allows new ways for people to "build their identities from the ground up" (Chen, 2001) in a new environment in which there has been a "radical valorization of the personal" (Farquhar, 1996, p. 240). Chinese youth culture places great emphasis on "self-expression" (*ziwo biaoda*, 自我表达). New forms of subjectivity made available can be seen in the literature on the simultaneous "opening up" of both the Chinese economy and Chinese social mores (Farrer, 2002; Friedman, 2005; Rofel, 1994), part of a "new culture of cool" (Yu, Chan, & Ireland, 2007), in which self-expression is paramount.

In the realm of medicine, Chen (2001) identified that "in the process of market revitalization, health-seeking practices" have "changed as consumers renegotiated shifting boundaries and meanings of medical care" (p. 165). As a result of transnational pharmaceuticals and health care products, "the array of goods has introduced to Chinese consumers specific ideals of health, wealth and happiness in the form of individual regimens that diverge greatly from early socialist ideals of social welfare" (Chen, 2001, p. 177). At the same time as consumerization and new forms of self-making have occurred in China, consumerism is tied to a rise in the *medicalization* of human well-being.

As Chen (2001) showed, market reform in China has lead to the decline of the public health care system at the same time as biomedical notions of health are entering China. Focus on traditional practices such as Qigong are being replaced by emphasis on access to medication, and individual health care is becoming increasingly the prerogative of the wealthy, as reform forces clinics to prescribe expensive drugs to fund budgets no longer supported by the state. Also traditional medicines (which take a long time to prepare) and more communal notions of self-improvement are being displaced by consumerized biomedical notions of health. These constitute changes that "emphasize the individual as a project of self-identity and self-representation," which is both profoundly personal and "mediated by state and national agendas" (Chen, 2001, p. 12).

Similarly, Chen (1999) noted that psychiatry in China has passed through three stages that range from early Christian missionary work in treating the mentally ill, through Maoist notions of developing the minds and hearts of populations (based on Soviet models), to more globalized psychiatry in which "'mental hygiene' is intertwined with biomedical practices to underscore a prevailing state discourse

on the need for order and normality" (p. 311). These new psychiatric models see institutions as "centers of medical science where mental illness can be treated as a disease and not as a social deviation" (p. 313).

At the same time, the rise of entrepreneurial, private health care has created "doctors [who] try to become known (in carefully gauged publicity) as effective, experienced and unique. They *embody* medicine, grounding their practice and its appeal to patients in their own special features as clinicians" (Farquhar, 1996, p. 247). Although Farquhar is speaking here about rural doctors, the modern rise of celebrity doctors and Internet crusaders, such as Tao Ran and Zhang Chunliang, indicate that this method of selling health care with "an aura" in the Benjaminian sense is still active in China today.

Thus, in contemporary China, biomedical psychiatric treatment comes to be seen not so much as a form of self-making for the subject of the treatment but rather as a consumerist approach to eliminating social discord in the family. This is particularly relevant in the treatment of Internet addiction, because such treatment is usually sought by parents on behalf of their children. In such a view, it becomes unnecessary for a parent to resolve conflict with a child, when it is possible to pay someone to perform operations on the child's body, so they will no longer be in conflict with the parent.

Discourse of Moral Crisis

An analysis of the wider social field in contemporary China lends credence to the claim that biomedical discourse of Internet addiction grew alongside an impending sense of moral crisis. Consider, for instance, anti-Internet crusader Zhang Chunliang, who described the incident that originally spurred his interest in fighting Internet addiction.

> [I saw] a mother, aged somewhat over fifty, enter the *wang ba* with a despairing expression on her face. She walked over to her son's computer, but her son remained absorbed, staring at the exciting game on the computer screen, shouting over and over, "I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" He had absolutely no awareness of his mother's arrival, and when his mother realized this she threw herself on her knees before her son, saying "Son, Mama is begging you, let's go to class, Mama has been looking for you for a week. . . ." Having said this she burst into terrible sobs. The sound of her sobs was heartbreaking. (as cited in Tian Bingxin, 2005).

Several aspects of this short vignette will be familiar to readers of Western accounts of Internet addiction: the distraught mother, for instance, or the isolated male child absorbed in violent emotions. What may strike Western readers as strange, however, is where the mother wants to take the child: not back to the family home, but to school. As unusual as this choice may seem to Western readers, we would claim that it exemplifies the moral crisis that many Chinese face today.

At issue are changing notions of success and the role the Internet plays in distracting children from their schoolwork and other activities necessary to lead to success.

The idea that the concept of Internet addiction is tied to threats to parental authority and changing forms of self-expression of young people is bolstered by the earlier work of Zhao Bin on television and youth consumerism in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Zhao found that over 85% of the respondents to his survey controlled the amount of time they allowed their children to watch television, and over 90% of families limited their children's viewing time to less than 2 hr a day (Zhao, 1996, pp. 645–646). Zhao's interviews and survey work indicated "behind the strict control by parents over the time children spend watching television . . . is the fear that television causes poor school performance" (p. 641). In fact, Zhao found that "pressure to perform well at school had already trickled down to children as young as six" (p. 641).

Zhao placed this anxiety that new forms of consumption will threaten student achievement in the context of changing relations between parents and children. In a study of the brief rage for Transformer toys, Zhao and Murdock (1996) found "the shifting balance between individualism and responsibility, the increasingly blurred line between parental care and indulgence and the erosion of filial piety" (p. 215) were key factors in shifting notions of the proper relationship of children to parents. Parents raising children under China's one-child policy had come of age during the Cultural Revolution whose "lost past . . . has to be compensated for by a better future, which lies in the only child" (Zhao, 1996, p. 644). The result was the metaphor of single children as "little emperors" (*xiao huangdi*): ambivalent objects that were simultaneously "spoilt, self-centered, wilful, extravagant, and sometimes 'despotic'" while being "the sole bearer of parental hope" (Zhao, 1996, p. 645). In the late 1980s and early 90s, tensions between parents and children were played out over whether hard-earned savings ought to be spent on an Optimus Prime or Skyscream transformer. In contemporary China, this tension was expressed as teenagers seeking to define their own identity through consumption practices that required autonomy from, rather than dependence on, parents.

We can see how these concerns with the success of children and children's own forms of self-expression become entangled in the everyday lives of people by examining the story of a woman participating in a public online interview with media figure Dr. Tao Hongkai (Lan Hua, 2004). The mother of an 18-year-old, this woman asked for help from Dr. Tao to help her son "bring his grades up" so that he could attend college. She claimed,

> He has grand ambitions (his goal for the college entrance exam was Wuhan University, and for students from Jiangsu, Wuhan University only admits those who get over 600 on their exam), but he lacks any actual movement toward hard work [*chi ku* 吃苦, lit. "eating bitterness"]. His inclination toward play is too great; he doesn't finish the homework his teacher gives him, because play is more important.

Her attempts to communicate with her son have so far been in vain.

> When we go to talk to him, he won't pay attention to us; when we write him letters and leave them on his desk, he tears them up and throws them in the waste-paper basket; we've been in frequent touch with his teachers, and asked them to talk to him, but in front of his teachers he is like a lukewarm pot of water, totally unresponsive. By now, it is very difficult for us to enter into his inner world, or to get him to explain what is going on in his mind.

Her son's main activities—going online and playing basketball—were the cause of his difficulties, leading to vanity and lack of a work ethic.

> Last semester there were a number of times that he skipped his evening review class to "steep" himself in the *wang ba*, and this semester, whenever he has time off on a Sunday afternoon, he goes to the *wang ba*. If you tell him not to go, he doesn't listen, or says he's going to school but in the end, we have to go to the *wang ba* to find him. Every afternoon between the time that school gets out and his evening review class, he has an hour of free time, and he just plays an hour of basketball, never eating anything, but only buys some snacks after his evening class is over; he's also very concerned about his physical appearance, and spends time in front of the mirror every day.

Finally, he is distracted by the opposite sex.

> Every day when his evening review class gets out, he always gets home six or seven minutes later than the others; there's a female classmate that he walks home with, and in order to keep her company, he walks a long way out of his way to get home. One time, the two of them actually went to buy snacks at the night market and were 40 minutes late getting home. When I brought it up [to him] he slammed his hand on the table and said "Aren't my grades just a little bit low?"

Internet addiction here is only part of a more general disorder on the part of the woman's son—his inability to excel in school, his obsession with his appearance, his lack of filial piety, and his interest in girls. This concern with the Internet in wasting productive time is similar to the verb used to describe what youth do in *wang ba*: they *pao* (泡). *Pao* literally means "bubble" (blister or soap bubble) but also describes the action of boiling water or effervescence in soft drinks—ephemeral and having no lasting effect. To a certain extent, we can say that Internet addicts "fritter" away their time at Internet cafés, but *pao* can also be translated as "steep" (the action performed by tea leaves in boiling water): an image of the dissolution of concentrated efficacy and flavor out of a body and into the wider environment. This imagery is perfectly suited for metaphors of addiction that emphasize drowning and immersion in a liquid medium.

The co-production of Internet addiction with anxiety about the success of children can also be seen in youth responses to discourses of Internet addiction. Youth

often reject narratives of addiction as overly conservative and close minded. Thus if Zhang Chunliang deploys imagery of the fall of the Qing dynasty, the following comments accessed from a pro-Zhang Chunliang blog are critical.

> It's because there are too many people like you, that my family came to misunderstand me; it used to be that once a week or so I could do a little MC [Molten Core, a high-level instance in World of Warcraft], and play a little W3 [Warcraft 3]. Now they only have to see the appearance of the word "Warcraft" and everything is off limits. As long as China has people like you in it, it will never develop; it seems that people like you have forgotten how the Qing dynasty fell. (Liu Han, 2006)

The fall of the Qing is blamed not on opium here but on Chinese inability to embrace new technologies and employ them against colonial forces. The writer is implicitly referring to the last decades of the Qing dynasty, when the Empress Dowager Cixi allowed her court eunuchs to appropriate money intended to modernize the outdated Chinese navy, which had been the vehicle of China's humiliation at the hands of the British in the Opium Wars. Instead, the money was spent on building the elaborate summer palace known as the Yiheyuan (颐和园) (Spence, 1990, p. 229). Like an empress blinkered by traditional notions, antigames crusaders refuse to learn from the outside world, and thus doom China to a subordinate status.

Others have commented in forums protesting the pathologization of leisure time by pointing out the similarity of Internet games to sport, considered here in its morally positive modality.

> You really are unbelievably stupid; why can't this country accept this new sport? It's precisely because there are people like you. Look at South Korea, which has no one [like you], they have respect for their top gamers. Isn't soccer a game? There are schools that have banned soccer, so why does everyone still take it seriously? Sports are general [why should they be] only limited to the body? You're a destructive insect [蛀虫, "mulberry-borer"] in our midst! I really advise you to buy a magazine and learn to understand electronic gaming, [since] you're really nothing compared to those who do. Don't be a frog at the bottom of a well all your life! (Liu Han, 2006)

Again, the proverbial image of the frog at the bottom of the well is used to emphasize the isolation and narrow perspective of those who oppose social and technological innovation. Thus, in sum, concerns about Internet addiction and pathologies arising from it reflect more than just sensitivity to well-publicized tragedies such as Internet suicide. Instead, they reflect the fact that the Internet provides a space where youth can experiment with their identities and social relationships beyond their controlling parents. Games, in particular, are spaces that offer the pleasure of play without the responsibilities foisted on youth by parents.

Weber's (2000) research on Chinese youth seems to underscore this sense of the younger generation's ambivalent response to responsibility.

> I think the greatest difference between the past two generations is responsibility. In the past generation, the people were very united in their hearts as Chinese. They regarded duty as very important and they take [*sic*] greater responsibility toward their family. . . . But now, the current generation has taken ideas that are more like western values from mediums like television and books. They are not willing to take responsibility for some things, especially those things that do not concern themselves. (p. 42)

The idea that MMOGs provide an escape from an otherwise stressful life can be seen in extracts from Wu, Fore, and Wang's (2007) study on in-game marriages. In this study, people who were asked about their motives in undertaking virtual marriage emphasize the lack of stress and responsibility that online experience provides: "It's just for fun, it's different from the reality, having a lot of fantasy—besides, it saves money. It's horrible to get married in reality"; "In-game marriage is only a game; you can play and get high, but you don't need to take it seriously"; and "Because in real life we are all afraid to get married, but in the game, we can do something we are afraid to do and take no responsibility for it" (p. 76). In Internet marriages documented by Wu, participants engage in consumerist, heteronormative behavior but without the high stakes of real-life marriage. This fact, like the presence of morally transgressive activity (killing other players, stealing items, etc.) and the shunning of gender-switching avatars, simultaneously challenges bourgeois norms of respectability even as it reinscribes them.

Conclusion

We have attempted to provide a preliminary description of the cause and shape of contemporary discourse about Internet suicide and video game addiction in China. In contrast to typical accounts of Internet addiction as a biomedical disorder, we argue that the rise of Internet addiction as a social problem is part of an ongoing realignment of moral relations in contemporary Chinese society. Internet addiction as a phenomenon must be understood as more than a medical object.

Internet addiction has emerged alongside several larger social and political trends in the contemporary People's Republic of China. Although portrayed as the pathology of the individual sufferer, Internet addiction has become a phenomenon through which Chinese people moot profound moral changes that shape the nation as a whole. The attention given to the Internet as a source of moral danger reflects Chinese concerns with the recuperation and development of their country and the role youth will play. Just as the Qing empire experienced morally ambivalent accommodation with global modernity, so too people in contemporary China experience consumerist lifestyles and the proliferation of new information technologies as full of both risk and promise.

It is important not to trivialize the loss of life that has occurred from Internet-related deaths, just as it is important to recognize the real potential for pathological

behavior that may occur from exposure to the Internet. Nevertheless, we argue that the discourse of Internet addiction cannot be seen merely as a "mirror of true reality." Whatever Internet addiction may or may not be, as a diagnostic category it reflects and is buttressed by social changes in Chinese society. It will be tempting for scientists and the public to gloss over the wider issues with which Internet addiction is co-produced in China. But to relegate the study of Internet addiction to a narrowly conceived research program in biomedical psychology would be, as Sahlins (1976) once said, "a kind of bargin made with reality in which an understanding of the phenomenon is gained at the cost of everything we know about it" (p. 15). Studies of Internet addiction must explore the phenomenon thoroughly from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints if the phenomenon can be understood in its entirety. In this promissory piece, we have attempted to demonstrate that a social scientific approach based in anthropology and sociology must be a necessary component of this exploration. Any future research in this area must address not only the clinical data on Internet addiction but also the sociocultural context with which it is co-produced.

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Alex Golub is an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa. His research focuses on issues of land tenure and indigenous identity in Papua New Guinea's mining and petroleum industry. More recently he has begun to examine identity, knowledge, and power in World of Warcraft.

Kate Lingley is an assistant professor of art history at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa. Her research focuses on Buddhist votive sculpture of medieval China, with a particular interest in the social functions of religious art.