
Facing the Crowd: Cocooning and Leveling Up in China's Urban Sprawls

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Introduction

Shanghai, 7pm, Thursday evening: the city's streets, tea houses and entertainment centers that are spread out across old and new districts are buzzing with crowds of people selling and buying food and other goods, some working, some entertaining and others being entertained; people temporarily interrupting their journeys from home to work, or from work to home for a quick chat, a round of game play, a drink, or a combination of all of these. What might come to mind first, when we talk about crowds in China's cities, are these vibrant images of over-populated and dense city hot spots, people leaving their tight homes for entertainment or business elsewhere. The Chinese Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Construction, for example, reports that 45 percent of Chinese, about 600 million people, lived in cities in 2008 and that 60 percent of Chinese would be urban residents by 2030. If we look beyond the buzz on the street, in the mall or in the subway, however, we are not only confronted with masses of people and anonymity of the public, but also with a search and a competitive gamble for a face in the crowd that extends way beyond the national borders of China.

In a gaming club, located in one of the recently revitalized entertainment centers in Shanghai, we met Vincent. Vincent is a passionate player of the "Killer Game" (杀人游戏), a Chinese version of the Russian game "Mafia" or the

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Figure 1 Face-to-face game play in a tea house.

American version “Werewolf,” that can be played either online¹ and/or face-to-face in dedicated gaming bars. When we asked Vincent what attracted him to the club and to the Killer game itself, he responded: *You know, I am not born in this place. My home town is in Jianxi province. I just came to Shanghai for college. After graduation, not many of my college friends stayed here. So at the very beginning I felt lonely. So I just spent my spare time at the computer. And after that, I think this game gave me more and more friends, and happy time. That’s why now, me, I love this game. It changed my life and it changed my way. You know, in a strange city like Shanghai... it’s not so easy. It’s not easy to make friends. But I think till now, this place [game club] is the easiest place for people to meet different people. In the very beginning, we always went to the bar, because I love to drink. But we didn’t find any true friends there. And sometimes, I go to different place for travel, but I didn’t make friends there. But after I came here, that completely changed.*



Figure 2 Gaming hall in a tea house in Shanghai.

Vincent is 32 years old and works in a financial company in Shanghai, a job that requires him to travel regularly to Beijing and second tier cities in China. Similar to Vincent, many of the other players we met in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou during field research in summer 2007 and 2008, developed large and trustworthy networks of friends through leveraging a mix of online and offline resources and connections to others. These social connections (or *guanxi*) often guaranteed both emotional support in a large foreign city and instrumental means to further one’s career: it gave players face (or *mianzi*) in the massive crowds of China’s urban sprawls and in relation to political narratives of an open and modern nation state.

In-between Online Networking and Offline Gaming

During the summer months of 2007 and 2008 we went to China to study gaming. In 2007, we mainly focused on online game play, virtual currency exchange and the technology’s entanglements with the spatial, economic and political infrastructures of Beijing and Shanghai. Online gaming in China is not confined to players’ homes or student dormitories. According to the latest report from China Internet Network [3], 37.2% of Internet users in China frequent a total of 110,000 Internet cafes in China’s urban and rural areas. For example, we found it common practice that online gamers interacted with each other face-to-face in Internet cafes. They met each other for post-game activities in public bars and cafes, and conducted economic transactions with street vendors or other players offline, acting across a city-wide network of social connections and spatial infrastructures, selectively choosing social connection points in a large web of public crowds. Players were acting across these physical spaces and online games, entrenched in social and political networks as well as technological infrastructures that expanded beyond the immediate digital space of the online game [6].

While online gaming has become one of the most widespread and cheap entertainment forms for the Chinese youth, it also coexists and overlaps with a wide range of other gaming and entertainment practices including traditional games such as *Go*, *Mahjong* and *Chinese Chess*, as well as emerging hybrids of old and new public gaming forms. An example of the latter are commercialized mixed reality games that can be accessed in dedicated gaming clubs engaging players in offline gatherings and online social networking.

¹ e.g. <http://www.killbar.com>

In 2008, we thus shifted our focus and studied the expansion of technologically supported gaming culture beyond the virtual realm into traditional public entertainment places such as the tea house and the gambling hall (see Figure 1 and 2). In particular, we focused on gaming clubs, players and player associations of the aforementioned killer game. The gaming clubs and the killer game in particular, are tied to opportunities for young people to develop and maintain *guanxi* (social connection), stage identity and interpret *mianzi* (face) of others. A strong support network is vital to the success for new businesses, for young entrepreneurs or even finding your next job in a large city such as Beijing or Shanghai with a competitive market. Many of the people new to the club were either new to the city or returning after years abroad. The contacts people developed at the clubs could help navigate an unfamiliar marketplace, or teach the ins and outs of a new “culture” or simply be shoulders to cry on when things go awry. Assembling a support structure is one of the hardest challenges these new and returning youth face.

Game Play and Guanxi

Vincent, as many other people we met in the gaming clubs, with money to spend and free time to spare perhaps aptly fits the stereotypical image of the emergent middle class in China, a small but growing number of white collars who in many ways achieved what Lisa Rofel’s “desiring subject” of post-Mao China strived for [7]: a cosmopolitan lifestyle that entails flexible navigation of urban infrastructure, as well as access to resources associated with an imagined modern elsewhere. In Rofel’s depiction of China’s social sphere in the late 80ies and early 90ies, people yearned for a new individual and national identity, “a cultural practice in which both the government and its citizens reconfigure their relationship to a post-socialist world” [7]. What kinds of imaginings of individual and national identity emerge when

the desiring subject of post-Mao China might be satisfied? How are these imaginings tied to and expressed through the public forms of play and leisure that we have been describing so far?

While for the youth of China’s cities today the immediate desires and yearnings might concern yet another ideal of the cosmopolitan citizen, they remain deeply entrenched with pre-existing cultural practices of social networking and with the challenges of situating oneself in a highly competitive market. A Chinese cultural practice that continues to be crucial for Chinese personal as well as professional connections is *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is a Chinese construct of social relations and reciprocal exchange [5, 8]. It is an important but complex frame in which certain social practices of material and emotional exchange are understood in China. Often, *guanxi* is practiced and experienced through both the flow of material gifts (or capital-as-gift) and favors and the build-up of emotional and moral values such as trust or resentment within a network of dyadic relationships [2]. At its best, *guanxi* mobilizes genuine human feeling to achieve virtuous goals despite uncaring bureaucratic obstructions; at its worst, *guanxi* enforces feudal obligations to maintain and extend corrupt pathways beneath the rule of law.

What underlies these general features is a diverse range of *guanxi*: in addition to good or bad, or strong or weak, it can be commodified, political, or friendly [5]. In each of these cases, however, *guanxi* is understood in distinction from a particular way of acting in the world, a way based on subsuming one’s interests to institutions and their rules and ideologies. Indeed, a line of scholarly research has interpreted *guanxi* in light of Maoist attempts at modernization, reform, and nation-building as a “reaction-formation in the social body” [8] or a form of “navigation

around the system” [1] against universalistic narratives and ethics of national identity and self-sacrifice.

Seen as an opposition to the universal or ideological, the art of doing *guanxi* resembles a kind of game play, a skilled activity that is marked as social, not work, amateur not professional, personal not official. And so, a-priori, one might expect *guanxi* to be quite compatible with the social world of gaming: a place in which to playfully make social connections, feel human closeness, and maintain friendships over time, with a distinct feeling of being apart from the "non-game" "official" world, however, deeply intertwined with one's functioning life.

Across the various forms of game play we studied (online gaming, online network-gaming and face-to-face game play in public game clubs) players were able to build and maintain extensive *guanxi wang* (*guanxi* networks), which often provided important emotional and material support across a competitive work and social urban scene. The opportunity to build and extend one's social network in an expansive and highly populated urban space like Beijing and Shanghai constituted a particularly important means for people who returned to China from studies abroad and for people who moved from rural to urban areas for work or education. Sky, whom we met in a gaming club in Beijing, explained why he thinks the game became so popular in China:

How should I say, I think we need to think from the perspective of the crowd, because in China... some may play purely for the sake of a game, or for them, it is like a kind of glory, for example, my level is very high, or I play this game very well. He will feel he can get a sense of achievement, they are a kind of spiritual sustenance, but for the people who work, he may feel entertainment, a pastime.

Of course, it is also to establish guanxi. To know more friends.

Sky referred to the multi-dimensional meaning of game play: a leisure activity that on the surface is performed purely for fun and entertainment while at the same time providing individuals a sense of achievement or even the pathway to spirituality, however, also granting the very instrumental means for extending one's social network that newcomers to a large city such as Beijing and Shanghai have to rely on.

Although both online and offline gaming settings provided the opportunity to develop and maintain quality *guanxi*, online gaming and gaming clubs differed in the kinds of connections they made available to their customers (see Figure 3 and 4, Internet café compared to gaming club). Online gamers in China often spend many months and years developing trustworthy and reliable networks that depend on offline interactions beyond online game play [6]. In contrast, the gaming clubs relied on face-to-face interaction to attract and engage players and then extend from these offline interactions into the online space through online forums and player blogs. In the gaming clubs, close relationships and *guanxi* thus developed faster compared to their online counterparts and relationships often extended quickly beyond interaction through the gaming context. Some of the players we met in the clubs became room mates, lovers or business partners only after a couple of weeks of game play.

Game clubs, however, are pricey. In contrast to the cheap entertainment online games provide (2 hours game play in an Internet café cost around 2 RMB), an hour of game play in one of the gaming club costs around 10 RMB. Many of the club members we met paid up to several thousand RMB per month, an amount that many of the game players would



Figure 3 Internet Cafe in Hangzhou.



Figure 4 PkPub, a game club in Shanghai.

find impossible to expense. Club players, then, were granted access to a wider and more diverse social network compared to players restricted to the cheaper online games, through comfortably navigating between digital gaming spaces and urban centers such as the game club and tea house.

Lanzhe, whom we met in a gaming club in Beijing, for example, just returned from 6 years of education and work in the United State. To him Chinese gaming culture differed significantly from the leisure life and game play he found common in the US: *Well, first of all in the United States, there is no well known killer club. It may have things to do with the character of Americans... Americans in fact do not like to live in groups, they, do not like to be together with a lot of people, and they think it is annoying... when it [the game] became popular in China, the Chinese people, as you know, always like being busy, especially in the north, isn't it?*

Lanzhe's example shows that while at the one hand the gaming clubs and tea houses provided a certain exclusive environment, described by many club members as a space reserved for white collars, people with college-level education and steady income, it was rendered attractive exactly because of the closeness and familiar anonymity to others, who might be potential *guanxi* partners and help shape one's *mianzi* for the future.

Concluding thoughts

The physical/digital entertainment spaces that we briefly described in this paper resemble to a certain degree what Ito et al. termed a sheltered cocoon in public [4]. In contrast to Ito et al.'s findings, where cocooning through mobile devices provided individually controlled infrastructures, the gaming clubs and bars constituted collectively managed

cocoons that span both offline and online spaces and interactions. Through connecting these collective cocoons in creative ways players were able to develop and maintain *guanxi* and gain *mianzi*, that are necessary to rely on for navigating and understanding one's position in the crowds of China's dense urban spaces.

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