"Daily Daka": everyday rhythms of body and space in a Chinese Internet Café

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to present a preliminary result of my anthropological fieldwork at a Chinese Internet café. The presence of Internet cafés in China is declining in general along its past 'glories' and controversies. This study captures the present of one particular Internet café: its daily rhythms and its quality as a living place. This detailed accounts includes materiality of the space (its objects, interfaces, disciplinary practices and maintenance) and dwelling bodies (physical exhaustion, bodily techniques and consumption of food). Through ethnographic descriptions, I hope the example of one Internet café can inform the importance of the quotidian in the studies of gamers.

Keywords

Chinese Internet cafe, ruins of modernisation, rhythm-analysis, anthropology of everyday life, gaming space, gaming body.

INTRODUCTION

Internet cafés in the most developed countries are not commonly seen and not necessarily associated with videogames in most contexts. Gaming arcades grew phenomenally along with Fordist industrialisation in the West in 70s- early 90s and declined to the state of debris at the present as new forms of gaming entertainment became dominant. Internet cafés played a similar role as main facilitator of Internet connection, which then popularised online gaming in the past 20 years or so. The material conditions (rarity and high cost of personal Internet connection and computer) for the ubiquitous existence of Internet café are gradually disappearing, as the owner of the Internet café in which I did my fieldwork said, 'it is now the "sunset" time for the whole Internet café business'. The industry underwent a transformation of not only its infrastructural facilities, but also invented a whole new set of meanings distancing itself from the former controversies and moral panics it involved. For many urban youngsters who used to make up the majority of patrons of Internet cafes in the past[1], Internet café represents somewhat different from the older generation who grew up with, entangled with and now sentimentalising Internet cafes. For some, it is simply a space (alternative to other spaces) to play games, while, for others, it constitutes a collective memory and nostalgia of the past.

One of the major inspirations from Benjamin's *Arcade Project* (1999) is the particular choice of the subject, the Parisian arcade, not 'in its heyday but as a "ruins" existing in a

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[1] Only urban, where the research is based. It is not necessarily the case in county towns and rural areas where Internet cafes are still relatively prominent spaces with functioning Internet connection and basic hardware

time when it has been outmoded' (Highmore 2002, p.65). Internet cafes are in similar situation: they are no long fully-fledged spectacles and topical issues but still to be found in many relatively hidden and dilapidated places. It was both celebrated for its novelty and condemned for its 'detrimental' impact on moral values. However, they are transforming from popular low class space for 'vulnerable social groups' (Qiu 2005, p.262) to legitimate places for (gaming) entertainment that gradually receding from public attention. This project aims at recycling the present of Internet cafes in China.

The trends of studies on Chinese gamers has focused on larger narratives and broad view of social structure such as the role of the state and moral construction of 'Internet addiction' while little attention has been paid to micro-ethnographical studies of gaming spaces and gamers' everyday experiences. This study aims at an anthropological account of one Chinese Internet cafe at the present, in which participant observation is the core component. The focal point is to divulge the mundane and material aspects of the place in which people both incarnate alienation and facilitate the escape of it.

The everyday (as well as the non-everyday elements of it) embodies repetition and difference as well as interactions between the two. In my account, this is divided into two aspects: spatial rhythms and bodily rhythms. Spatial rhythms include materiality of the gameplay interfaces, gamers' patterns (as well as disruptions of such) of using the space, administrative disciplinary practices, the production and disposal of waste and a soundscape analysis of chaotic ambience and augmented noise due to confinement of the space. The body comes in close association with space: daily rhythms of play, food, defecation, and rest of regular patrons from early in the morning to late in the evening, physical exhaustion and strategies of surviving long gaming sessions, and mostly important bodily techniques of gaming as well as ways of dealing with interruptions. The rhythms I attempt to expose and theorise are not simply rigid patterns of bodily or spatial practices or a quantified time in general but more importantly fragmented and subjective experience of repetitions. Quality of this particular place comes into life when these spatial practices and bodily rhythms are put to the foreground.

For example, the Chinese phrase "daily daka (scan the card)" originally refers to a daily procedure of work, the begging of the disciplinary measure of work time. Now it is also used in the setting of the Internet cafe. Regular patron would greet each other by saying "Hey, you are here again to Daka". Everyone has to first scan their ID card (and pay) at the counter before settling down. The same procedure takes place in the conventional calculation of work time- workers touch on and off their IDs.

Through studying these rhythms, it is possible to take account of players' constant negotiations between leisure and work or 'serious' and directly instrumental activities, excessiveness and discipline/rational expenditure of energy, intentional 'loss' and wastage, boredom and disorders, not simply the setting of the Internet café, but their lives as an officeworker, a small businessman, a son, a husband, and finally a gamer.

BIO
Zhang Ge graduated from University of Melbourne in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts (Media Studies and Asian Studies) before he started his postgraduate research in the Mphil (Anthropology) program in the Department of Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His main research interest is anthropological studies of gamers and urban space. He first encountered the field of game studies in Australia and he hope his own anthropological research can contribute to the gradual building of this field.

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