

## Online game addiction among youth in China:

How do different stakeholders look at online game addiction among Chinese youth?



*Figure 1 Screenshot from the European server of Jade Dynasty (Zhuxian)*

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## 1. Introduction

In the last few decades the internet has become an indispensable part of people's lives. Especially the younger generations have a broad knowledge of how digital devices work and the advantages and conveniences of using the internet. According to Golub and Lingley, the Chinese government has always viewed the internet with ambivalence, because on the one hand it is a sign of modernity, but on the other hand it provides access to a different world view, different opinions, and additional information, which might not conform to the government's view (2008). However, the number of internet users in mainland China has increased from 620.000 in 1998 to 649 million people at the end of 2014, it is the world's fastest-growing online population (Stewart 2010; CNNIC 2015). About 55% of those users are below 30 years old. In the same year, China had a total of 366 million online gamers and the largest game population in the world (CNNIC 2015).

Online gaming has become a popular way for children, adolescents and adults alike to spend their free or not so free hours. However, with the gaining popularity of online and offline gaming, it often replaces other more social activities, like playing sports or real-life socializing. Gaming addiction also has become a very serious issue, which has a profound impact on society. Since 2002, there have been many cases of aggression and bizarre behavior caused by gaming addiction. Golub and Lingley (2008) mention a few in their article, such as an obese man dying after a marathon gaming session, and a 13-year old jumping of a building after playing *Warcraft* hoping to "join the heroes of the game" (62; Xinhua News Agency 2006). Although, in a lot of countries, there is still an ongoing debate about whether gaming addiction is an addiction at all, China was one of the first to label problematic online gaming as a clinical disorder and is together with South Korea, the Netherlands, Canada and the United States, one of the few countries that has treatment centers for internet addiction, the first being opened in 2004 (CCTV International 2009).

In my thesis I will discuss different stakeholders and how they look at the phenomenon of online game addiction among Chinese youth. I will use Foucault's theory on power relations as a supporting framework for my research (Foucault 1981). I define Chinese youth as the age group between 12 and 30, but with a focus on high school and higher education students. I define online gaming as using an internet connection while gaming, often on a computer, instead of offline gaming on a console, and focus mainly on Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMO) as they are believed to be the most addictive online games and they are the most widespread in China. First, I will briefly discuss Foucault's theory of power and power relations. Secondly, I will discuss the development of the internet and the online gaming industry in China. Subsequently, I will briefly discuss what online game addiction is about. After that I will talk about the first stakeholder's views, namely that of scholars.

Then I will continue on to how the government looks at online game addiction. Next, I will discuss the online game industry, internet cafés and the mobile gaming market and finally I will look at Chinese youth and their parents. After discussing these stakeholders I will give my conclusion.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) believes that power is not only the ability to control, punish and reward people, but also the ability to make people accept a certain kind of reality. This so called 'power of definition' is important for example in addiction cases, because it not only decides how the problem is diagnosed and when someone is seen as addicted, but also how it should be solved (Van Galen 2012). Foucault also believes that power is mainly focused on normalization, living according to common norms. Power is not necessarily wielded by people, but rather by institutions. Normalization by power does not only occur on the societal level but also on the level of the human body, such as the difference between what is viewed as normal and what not concerning beauty, sexuality, and mental health etc. (Kraan 2006). In his 'analysis of power', Foucault studies how institutions exert their power on others and consequently how those others react by affirming their own identity and resisting the effects of this power. He argues that power is not only used by one group to oppress another, but that power relations are apparent through all relational structures of society. According to Bălan, Foucault believes that "power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor" (2010, 38). Foucault also argues that power only exists when it is put into action, and that it entails "a set of actions performed upon another person's actions and reactions" (Felluga 2011, 1). Therefore, individuals are the place where power and resistance to it are exerted, and not just the recipients of this power. He also argues that power goes hand in hand with resistance, which again emphasizes that there is not just an one-sided relationship between oppressor and oppressed, but that the latter is productive as well; where power is exerted, someone will resist that power. Foucault believes that the state is an institution that not just owns power, but that in order to make the political system function, builds a system of relations between individuals (Felluga 2011).

In his later work, Foucault uses the concept of 'government' to illustrate how power functions. 'Government' refers not only to political structures, but rather to the "way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (Foucault 1982, 221). The state has no exclusive role in deploying power in modern societies. There are complex regulatory processes present in all levels of society. Furthermore, Foucault argues that there is an active engagement of the subject rather than a passive acceptance of sovereign power (Zhang 2013). Moreover, Foucault believes that power is only exercised over people who are free, freedom is the condition and pre-condition of power. If the subjects of power are not free, such as slaves, power cannot be exerted (Foucault 1982).

Another often used term in Foucault's works is discipline. According to Foucault, discipline is a type of self-regulation encouraged by institutions which acts as a kind of instrument for individuals to

change their behavior and their reality. Power produces reality and institutions use various types of power enforcement, such as disciplinary techniques, to control individuals. Foucault argues that this external pressure leads to self-discipline for the individual. According to him discipline is a “set of strategies, procedures and behaviors associated with certain institutional contexts which then pervades the individual’s general thinking and behavior” (Bălan 2010, 4).

Foucault’s theory about addiction is that addiction or sickness can only be recognized when there is also an idea of being ‘non-sick’. There is also not one person who decides what is sickness or addiction, and when someone is sick or addicted, it has to be accepted by society as a whole. When society does not agree something is an addiction, then it cannot be an addiction. Jaarsma gives the example of a child who would spend hours reading or playing soccer, was he a reading addict, or a sport addict? Not according to Foucault, because there is no social acceptance that too much reading or playing sports is an addiction (2010).

### **3. Development of the internet and the online gaming industry in China**

#### **The development of the internet in China**

During the late 1980s, academic institutions set up the first two computer networks in China, the China Academic Network (CANET) and the Institute of High Energy Physics (IHEP) network (Davis 2005). In 1994, China connected to the World Wide Web through a line between China and the USA, making China a new player in the international network, and in 1995 internet access for businesses and the general public was established (Herold 2011; Davis 2005). The year after, the Chinese computer networks fused together becoming the China Science and Technology Network (CSTNET) (Davis 2005). In the late 1990s, additional connections were made between China and other regions and the Chinese government started to implement regulations to control the internet. In 2000, China had eight principal interconnecting networks all under the jurisdiction of different institutions, mostly ministries and their subsidiary telecom operators (Herold 2011; Davis 2005). The initial use of the internet was mainly for educational and research purposes, but it has developed into a popular medium of mass information, commerce and entertainment (Davis 2005).

Whereas in 1996 there were only 100.000 Chinese internet users, a report of the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) showed that China's internet population reached 338 million in July 2009, thus surpassing the United States as the world's largest internet market and at the end of 2014 it had increased to 649 million people (2014; 2015). Still, the internet penetration rate in China remains low, only 47.9% compared with almost 87% in the United States (CNNIC 2015; Internet live stats 2014). However, the impact of the internet on predominantly urban people is very high. With the popularization of computers and the internet, society began to attach more importance to the role of the internet in education, which has increased opportunities for young people to come into contact with the internet (Yang 2006). This can explain why the majority of the Chinese internet users is under the age of thirty (Kang 2008). Well over 50% of the internet users is attending or has completed high school or higher educations (Kang 2008; Cheng 2009). For these young Chinese, the internet provides a separate place where they have more freedom to express their views, or show different behavior. They can do what they want without impacting others in real life and without the influence of parents, teachers and others (Herold 2011; He 2014).

In China, online gaming and social networking are the most popular uses of the internet. In 2014, the average online time of Chinese internet users was 26.1 hours per week and roughly 40% of China's online gamers spent 14 hours or more per week playing games (CNNIC 2015). In 2009, 67.3% of the internet users accessed the internet at home, while 33.9% went to an internet café to access the internet (Cheng 2009). In 2014, the amount of people who accessed the internet at home had

increased to 90.7%, while the number of people using the internet café for access had decreased to 18.1% (CNNIC 2015).

The development of the internet in China has been controlled by the Chinese government. Most access routes to the internet are controlled by the central government. Private companies only rent bandwidth from the state, or state-owned companies. Most of the content on the internet is allowed by the government, and according to Herold, it has shown a willingness to provide some freedom to internet users as long as it does not get out of hand (2011). It has also put up its so-called 'great firewall', blocked, filtered and removed information or websites deemed 'inappropriate' or against the party-state ideology and essentially separated the Chinese internet from the international internet (Stewart 2010; Pong 2009). Furthermore, it has put an overwhelmingly amount of propaganda-like material on the internet. This strict censorship has also led to a practice of self-censorship, where posters of information, or owners of websites themselves censor their content (Pong 2009). In sum, the internet is tolerated by the Chinese government so long as it does not harm the societal order and is in line with the state ideology.

Although the internet is largely controlled by the state, it has also provided massive amounts of Chinese information sources to the Chinese population. Chinese citizens are now able to access information about the government, the economy, read news from all over the country, and communicate with people throughout the world amongst other things. Even the blocking of foreign sites should not be blown out of proportion according to Davis (2005). Most Chinese show little interest and have often insufficient language skills to read these websites. Moreover, most of these website blocks are easily circumvented if wanted (Davis 2005).

### **The development of the online game industry in China**

As the internet is getting more popular in China, online games have become one of the most popular forms of internet technology and leisure activities (Cheng 2009; Kshetri 2010). In June 1998, the first website specializing in online games, OurGame, was established in China. Three years later, in 2001, it had the most game players in the world. In 2006, over 120 million Chinese played online games, overtaking South Korea as Asia's biggest online gaming market (Cheng 2009; Kshetri 2010). According to CNNIC, at the end of 2014 the number of online game players has increased to 366 million (2015). Nowadays, online games have developed from simplistic games such as Pacman into sophisticated and massive virtual worlds, team-based online shooting games and multiplayer real-time strategy games (van Rooij 2011).

The Chinese online gaming industry has also evolved into one of the largest and most profitable markets in the world (Zhang and Fung 2014). According to the China Game Publishers Association (GPC) the industry generated roughly 13 billion dollar revenue in 2013, of which 64.5% was generated



through client-based PC games such as *World of Warcraft*, games you have to download and install on the computer to play (17173 2013). In the early development of the online gaming industry in the 1990s, costs for customers were still high and companies were struggling with the piracy issue. However, according to Kshetri “companies launched innovative business models to overcome these barriers” (2010, 3). The growth of broadband networks, PC users and the appearance of internet cafés also facilitated in the growth of the online gaming industry (Kshetri 2010; Ernkvist and Ström 2008; Cao and Downing 2008). Especially internet cafés in China proved to be very important in the establishment of an online game industry. They provided a place where Chinese internet users could have cheap access to online games, without having to invest in the hardware normally needed for playing PC or console games. In 2006, online games were played by 90% of China’s gaming population, most of them pay-to-play or free-to-play Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), the largest sub-category of MMO games, which became more popular from 2001 on, or advanced casual games (Kshetri 2010). In 2014, of the top 15 PC online game products, 13 were MMO’s (CNNIC 2015). MMORPGs are played in a virtual fantasy world where the player can create a character and make it stronger by completing quests, fighting monsters, completing achievements etc. and can play together with thousands of players all over the world. According to Cao and Downing the reason why MMORPGs are so popular, aside from being the cheaper option, is that they are based on subscription, with recurring revenue and that online games offer the opportunity for young people to socially interact with other players, which is much wanted in a society where most Chinese are only child (2008).

In recent years there has been a growth in domestically developed games. When online games first started appearing, South Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese game development companies dominated the regional market, while Chinese companies mainly operated the games. However, Chinese operators such as NetEase and Shanda have started to focus on domestically developed games and Chinese companies have slowly narrowed the gap between themselves and foreign companies. Where foreign games, mainly South Korean games, accounted for more than 80% of the roughly 140 game titles available in China in 2004, in 2006, import of foreign games had decreased to 10-20 titles and Chinese companies developed 218 online games, increasing from an estimated 15% market share in 2003 to 65% of the total revenue in 2006 (Kshetri 2010; Ernkvist and Ström 2008). In 2007, eight of the top ten MMO games in China were made by Chinese companies (Kshetri 2010). In the fourth quarter of 2014, the online gaming industry generated more than 4.5 billion dollar (iResearch (2) 2015).

A distinguishing feature of these domestic games is that they are based on Chinese culture. One of the most popular MMORPGs in China, NetEase’s *Fantasy Westward Journey*, is based on the classic story of *Journey to the West*, and Perfect World’s *Jade Dynasty (Zhuxian)* has incorporated different elements of Chinese culture (Kshetri 2010). Even though popularity of foreign games is

declining in China, there are still some games that are performing exceptionally well. The MMORPG *World of Warcraft* from American game developer Blizzard Entertainment is very popular in China, having over three million players in 2006, well over one million more than in the United States (Kshetri 2010). In 2014, *World of Warcraft* still ranks fourth on the most popular pc games in China according to 17173. The successor of *Fantasy Westward Journey*, *Fantasy Westward Journey 2*, can also be found in the top 10 (2014).

The gaming industry in China is highly competitive. According to Kshetri “there were about 150 domestic or joint-venture online-game operators, more than 100 video game development centers and 30 companies marketing and distributing foreign and domestic online games” (2010, 12). However, most of these companies do not make profits. Research showed that in 2008, 80% of the Chinese gaming market revenue was generated by the ten biggest game companies, which means that the other 20% was divided between over 100 other companies (Kshetri 2010). This high competitiveness also means that companies want to produce as much as they can at a low price and a high speed. However, this causes the online game market to overflow with poor quality and non-innovative games. Many Chinese game companies also do not have the money or right equipment to make high quality 3D games, and often rely on foreign game developers for their technology, or stick with making 2D games (Cao and Downing 2008). Today, the top 2 online game companies, Tencent and Netease, already accounted for 50% of the total revenue in the first quarter of 2015 (iResearch (2) 2015).

Another significant point about the online game industry in China is that it was and is not state owned. Cao and Downing note that the success and development of the industry is mostly organized around non-state sectors such as private investment (2008). Video games are not seen as central to the party-state’s ideology and therefore have acquired more possibilities for the market and private capital. However, this freedom also makes it harder for the government to confine the industry within the existing framework. Still, after the market, the state is the next most important force that shapes the online game industry (Cao and Downing 2008).

#### 4. What is online game addiction?

Online gaming has become a popular pastime for Chinese youth. However, some gamers have taken their gaming behavior to the point that it is negatively influencing their social life regarding school, work, family and social contacts. According to the CNNIC, 35.5% of average online gamers played more than 2 hours a day, while 50.6% of heavy users played more than 2 hours a day (2015). Excessive use of the internet is generally labeled as online game addiction or internet game disorder. In Chinese sources the term 網絡遊戲成癮 (*wangluo youxi chengyin*) is used. While it may seem very straightforward terms, there is a lot of disagreement about the definition of online game addiction and whether it is really an addiction at all. There is no official diagnosis or widespread accepted definition for online game addiction. Van Rooij has translated a more general definition of addiction to the definition of online gaming addiction as “a loss of control over gaming, leading to significant harm” (2011, 11). Scholars researching internet and online game addiction often use the eight criteria of Dr. Kimberly Young for diagnosing this addiction. These criteria are:

1. Be preoccupied with the internet.
2. The need to use the internet with increasing amounts of time to receive satisfaction.
3. Be unsuccessful in controlling their internet use.
4. Feeling restless, depressed or irritable when forced to control or stop internet use.
5. Staying online longer than intended.
6. Risking the loss of a job, educational opportunity or important relationship because of the internet.
7. Lying to family, therapists or others about the extent of their internet use.
8. Using the internet to escape from problems or relieving anxiety, stress or the feeling of helplessness (Young 2011, 20-21; Deng and Wang 2010).

Some scholars argue however, that these criteria might be too broad and only use the ones they deem to be significant for the diagnosis of online game addiction in China (CCTV International 2009).

In November 2008, the Chinese government was the first country to designate internet addiction, and by extension online game addiction, as a clinical disorder (Szablewics 2010). However, its decision to label internet addiction as a mental illness has been very controversial, as mental disabilities are strongly looked down upon. This has also lead to many academics as well as parents to suggest internet and online game addiction are moral problems rather than mental ones, because as noted by Szablewics, when regarded as a moral problem, the fault lies with the internet, whereas if it is a mental one, the fault lies with the addict and/or the family. So people opted for ‘moral reformation’ rather than psychiatric treatment (2012). The term internet addiction also has no entry in the

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) (Wang et al. 2014). Outside of China, scientist are still strongly divided about labeling gaming addiction as an addiction, some argue that the concept is based on media hysteria and not on facts, others argue that online game addiction is just another name for 'high engagement', or that it is inherent to a deeper lying psychological problem (van Rooij 2011). With the introduction of online aspects in video gaming, and multiplayer games, game addiction has become more prevalent. A report by the American Medical Association noted that game overuse was commonly seen among MMORPG players (van Rooij 2011).

## 5. Online game addiction in academic works

With the popularity of electronic devices and the internet, online games have become one of the most popular daily entertainment activities in China. According to Lindtner and Szablewics, in the academic world there had been a struggle for the legitimacy of a game culture for years, which has led to more studies on games and the concept of the gamer. Gamers are often stereotyped as anti-social, gendered and wasting their time with playing games. However, Lindtner and Szablewics argue that the gamer identity is a more complex concept, tied with social, technological and economic change in China as well as debates surrounding online games, such as the one on online game addiction (2011). Wei et al. note that online gaming plays an important role in internet addiction, and may be even more severe in its negative effects. The majority of online game addicts sacrifice at least one element of their lives, be it their sleep, performance at work or at school, social contacts or family relations (2012).

According to Wei et al., there are four main attractions to online gaming. Those are, the original game design, the role playing achievements, online social interactions ,and last, psychological needs and motivations (in this virtual world players can more easily achieve goals than in real life) (Wei et al. 2012). Unlike consumption of traditional media, online gaming is interactive. Gamers can have a different experience playing a game than other players. So the reason for play might also differ. Some like the competitive aspects of games, while others like the social aspects. These different motivations also influence the way the gamers play, whether they play solo or in a group, how much social interaction there is, and how much time and money a gamer is willing to invest in a character. In MMORPGs, gamers also have the ability to largely shape the character they will play with, they can choose their name, gender, part of the physical appearance, race and their profession (Zhong and Yao 2013). Throughout the game they will receive various quests to level and build up their character, can fulfill additional challenges for rewards, can interact, form teams, fight and trade with other characters, in some games it is even possible to marry another player, and players can join a guild or an alliance where they play together with a large group of other players. Essentially, the player grows up with a character, developing and guiding him through the game, which may lead to a stronger attachment between the gamer and his/her character (Zhong and Yao 2013). Many gamers also cannot afford buying in-game items to level up their character fast, and therefore have to invest a lot of time into building up their character. Continuous developments and expansions mean that MMORPGs are never-ending, there is always something new to explore. Other genres, such as Real-time Strategy games (RTS) do not have this never-ending element, but instead have short games often under 30 minutes. Gamers can of course play multiple games, so RTS can also be very addictive (Szablewics

2012). However, these characteristics, together with the social elements, may explain why MMORPGs are so much more addictive than other game genres.

Some studies have argued the positive effects of online games, such as teamwork, social interaction, gaining a sense of confidence and accomplishment and gaining the ability to cope with real world problems, but most studies focus on the negative effects on gamers health and behavior (Wang et al. 2008; Wallis 2011). I think that by mostly focusing on the negative effects, scholars downplay the positive effects of online games in order to emphasize the gravity of the problem and the necessity for treatment. Excessive online gaming may lead to chronic lack of sleep, less satisfaction with real life, attention problems, lower grades, loss of interpersonal relationships, violence, theft and using online gaming as an escape route, a way to not have to face problems or responsibilities (Wang et al. 2014; Know 2012). Although some online games also have educational elements, most contain excessive violence, sex, stereotyping and racial discrimination, negatively influencing young people's life satisfaction (Wang et al. 2008). Many gamers cannot distinguish between the real and the virtual world, and will show violent behavior to get what they want (Bao and Gao 2008). Apart from behavior, long hours of gaming is often seen as leading to physical complications. It can be harmful for the eyes to look at a computer screen for longer periods of time, the lack of movements also negatively affects the joints and muscles (Know 2012). Not only in China, but worldwide has online game addiction become a serious problem (Wang et al. 2014).

Many studies have attempted to define internet addiction, but there is a lot of disagreement about what internet addiction entails and how it should be treated (Herold 2011; Yousafzai et al. 2014). Using Foucault's theory, in the international academic discourse there is no party who has the 'definition power' and thus the ability to decide how internet addiction is defined, because there is not one definition that is carried by enough people to be accepted as the 'true' definition. There are already various studies examining the effects of internet addiction, but not many studies focus specifically on online game addiction (Wei et al. 2012). Although there is still no real consensus about the terminology of online game addiction, most researchers agree that excessive playing of online games can have negative effects on the psychological and physical health of the gamers. In 2008, the Chinese government was the first country in the world to suggest that internet addiction should be listed as a clinical disorder (Szablewics 2012), however as mentioned before, the term internet addiction still has no separate entry in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, instead it has been included in a section of the *DSM* as needing more research before it gets its own entry in the manual (Wang et al. 2014). In Chinese academic work, the concept of internet addiction by American scholars Ivan Goldberg and Kimberly Young is often used, as well as the diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling, to examine online game addiction (Zhong and Yao 2013; Deng and Wang 2010). Blinka and Smahel note six components of online game addiction according to Mark Griffiths:

salience (regarding online gaming as the most important activity in one's life), mood change, tolerance (player needs to play more and more to achieve satisfaction), withdrawal symptoms, conflict, relapse and reinstatement (tendency to return to addiction after rehabilitation). It is however not clear how many of these should be needed to diagnose online game addiction, and in what ratio (2011). The World Health Organization also outlined similar symptoms of online game addiction (Zhong and Yao 2013).

In China, the emphasis regarding the danger of the internet mostly lies on Chinese youth, by playing excessive amounts of time online, "neglecting their offline obligations to family, school and society" (Herold 2011, 8). Various academics have used the moral panic theory to examine the crisis about internet gaming and internet addiction in China. Two important characteristics of moral panics are that they are, one, reincarnated over time, and two, working class youth are often the cause or victims of the moral panic (Szablewics 2010). A consequence of the moral panic around online game addiction is the social stigma it puts on gamers. In almost all cases concerning moral panic over youth and technology, the technology is to blame. However, the 2008 decision to label internet addiction as a clinical disorder has led to a different view. Mental illness is still very looked down upon, and remains a source of shame. The decision led to parents and experts to argue that internet addicts needed moral reformation rather than psychiatric treatment, therefore viewing the problem as an external one rather than an internal one, which would lay the blame with the addicts and their family (Szablewics 2012).

Internet addiction has also often been portrayed as a kind of electronic opium, corrupting young men's minds and spirit, making internet addiction seem very dangerous and possibly contagious (He et al. 2015). However, portraying internet addiction as something you can catch, takes away the concept of choice (Szablewics 2012). Portraying internet addiction with the analogy of opium for the spirit transforms a concept that older generations of Chinese often do not understand to a concept that is very well known. The comparison shows the fear of China about youth and technology as well as a fear for the foreign influence that may threaten the spiritual civilization of China. However, this phrase 'opium for the spirit' does not feature in official discourse about internet and online gaming addiction (Szablewics 2012). So the official discourse, the government, labels internet and online game addiction as a mental illness, while the media portrays it as a kind of opium, both very negative images in Chinese culture. Both parties use their power of definition in their respective fields to shape a particular (mainly negative) image of internet and online game addiction which greatly influences the general opinion about internet and online games. Consequently, this negative image might make it easier for the government to implement stricter regulations regarding the internet and convince the general public of its dangers. However, by portraying online games this way, it may also negatively influence the online game industry's high profits.

In many recent studies there has been a focus on the role of family factors in internet and online game addiction. They often report a greater dysfunction in families where there are people addicted to online games, compared to families with no addicts. Overinvolvement of parents as well as neglect both lead to a greater alienation of the youth from their parents and consequently a higher chance to develop an addiction for internet or online gaming (Li et al. 2014; Bax 2015). The fear of parents is that addiction to online games will lead to their children 'heading down devaluation road'. In neglecting their schoolwork and detaching from society, their future sale-ability, their ability to get a good job, will decrease to the point that their only selling point is their extensive knowledge of computers. Important to look at when analyzing online game addiction therefore is not only the technology of the internet, but also the family, the education system and the Chinese market (Bax 2014). Li et al. argue that even though internet addiction is becoming a serious problem in China, there are currently very few screening, prevention and treatment interventions for internet addicted youth in China (2014).

Tao Hongkai, a well-known scholar, who stayed in the United States for 18 years as a visiting scholar, and is currently a distinguished professor at Huazhong Normal University, as well as an expert on internet addiction treatment, also argues that family plays a large role in internet addiction and believes that both Chinese adolescents as well as their parents are partly to blame. The youth should take responsibility for its own actions, but parents are to blame for their problematic educational and socialization methods (Bax 2015). He believes that parents are smothering and spoiling their children, as well as pushing them too hard towards perfection. Feeling suffocated, the child will reject school, reject its parents' wishes and will detach himself from society by fleeing to the virtual world where he has the ability to decide for himself. He will resist parental authority in search for his own power. Therefore, parents should take a step back to give their child the opportunity to become more independent and in control of himself. This will result in a larger ability to resist the temptation of the internet and online games (Bax 2015). Tao Hongkai also argues that parents are more concerned with the effect internet and online game addiction has on the school grades of their child, than its effect on his or her well-being, as school grades will affect the future of the child and consequently the future of the family. They tend to reward their child with material gifts, which creates dependency and lack of self-control (Bax 2014). He believes that parents should raise their children as independent and self-controlling individuals, to create a secure environment which will reduce the chance of them having the need to escape and becoming infatuated with online games. Beside the parents, society also plays a large role in the development of online game addiction through a "malfunctioning education system" and "unbridled materialism" (Bax 2015, 6). Bax argues that Chinese adolescents are being disproportionately evaluated for their exchange-value. When adolescents play an instrument for hours a day they are seen as 'dedicated' musicians, because this is a socially accepted hobby, however



adolescents spending hours gaming online is seen as addictive and harmful to their school grades and consequently harmful to their future exchange-value (2014). This also coincides with Foucault's theory about normalization, because online gaming is not considered as a socially acceptable hobby, people are quicker to depict someone who plays online regularly as a gaming addict, while playing music or playing sports for an extensive amount of time is seen as dedicated rather than addicted, for this is socially accepted and therefore normal behavior.

Tao Ran, a military psychiatrist and a colonel in the People's Liberation Army, has quite a different opinion on how to regard internet addiction. He is an advocate for psychiatric-based medicalized discourse, he views either the computer as a kind of virus that everyone can catch, or the Chinese population as already having addictive impulses that will be enacted when it accesses the internet (Bax 2014). Tao Ran points at the fact that 76% of the juvenile criminals have some kind of internet addiction, arguing that online games teach youth that it is okay to fight, steal and kill and therefore destroys the gamers morality. However, Bax argues that these gamers do not necessarily encounter violence in these games for the first time, but rather in their own family. Many adolescents who spent excessive amounts of time on the internet or playing online games have been at one point in their lives domestically abused, whether physically or verbally, or have been neglected by their parents (2015). Bax believes that many of the symptoms of online game addiction actually comes from an existing stressful social situation for which they use the internet to deal with these situations. Many make the mistake of seeing the internet as the cause of online game addiction, while in reality it may rather be seen as an effect of deeper-lying societal problems (2015; Omroep Max 2014).

According to Bax the internet addict is portrayed as moving away from the 'normal' society, the unproblematized 'real world', and moving towards the 'unreal' virtual world. By moving away from society, they do not adhere to the accepted social norms set by Chinese society and are therefore portrayed as abnormal. According to Tao Ran, to escape the pressures of the real world or release some of that pressure, users will immerse themselves in the virtual world believing it to be more beautiful than the real world (2015). However, many addicts are not simply using the internet to escape the real world, but are "seeking out feelings of satisfaction, freedom, peace, equality, and even superiority" (Bax 2015, 10). In the real world they experience dissatisfaction and discrimination, while the virtual world gives them equality and a feeling of belonging. In the virtual world they are not subjects of someone else's power, but can control their own actions. They are able to shape their own identity, or even a different one. In a way they are resisting the power of the state, society and their parents in order to find their own power. According to Bax, they are not just having difficulties with controlling their internet use, but more generally are having trouble with how to live in Chinese society. Many adolescents have difficulty relating to their parents and coping under the overwhelming pressure put on their shoulders (2015).

The first internet addiction treatment center was set up in 2004 by Beijing's Military General Hospital under the leadership of Tao Ran. It used a combination of physical training and medication and has already treated thousands of people. The treatment center was very successful and was praised internationally. It led to similar treatment centers appearing in other Asian countries. However, shortly after the opening of Tao Ran's center, an abundance of internet addiction camps appeared in China, there are thought to be 300-400 camps, often led by self-proclaimed experts without credentials and training, using several kinds of treatments varying from military-style training to injection of psychotropic drugs and the use of shock therapy (Szablewics 2012). Many camps were also not regulated by the government. Still parents would pay a lot of money for a chance to cure their children of internet addiction, and various camps advertised under false pretenses. Therefore, many children were sent to these camps, and parents started to freak out when their child would just get on a computer. Even scholars like Tao Ran and Tao Hongkai thought it was high time for the government to act and start regulating these camps, and in 2008 Tao Ran publicized guidelines defining what would characterize an internet addict, to take away some of the fear of parents. These characteristics were: playing online for at least six hours a day for three months straight and feeling emotional and physical loss when not being able to go online. In August 2009, a young internet addict had been beaten to death in an internet addiction treatment center, which led to increased attention on these centers as well as their treatments. According to Szablewics, this also shows the fact that many 'doctors' want to profit from treatments of internet addiction (2012). They may be exaggerating the effects of online game addiction in order to make more profit from treatments. This led to critique from both online gamers, the media as well as the academic world, criticizing the treatment centers for their desire to generate large profits from their treatments, as well as their treatment methods (Szablewics 2012). In the same year, the ministry of health made guidelines for treatment camps, banning "the use of physical punishment, 'destructive surgeries' and forced lockups" (Stewart 2010). In 2014, a documentary called China's Web Junkies was broadcasted showing how treatment camps worked, as well as telling the stories of internet addicts staying at these treatment camps, giving explanations about the danger of online gaming and advising parents on how to deal with the problem (Shlam and Medalia 2014).

## 6. Online game addiction and the government

For the Chinese government the internet has often been called a 'double-edged sword'. On the one hand, the internet is essential in the modernization of China, and its participation in the world order. On the other hand, the internet is a new medium that is hard to control and its western influence can harm social order in China and the legitimacy of the Party to rule (Chen and Ang 2011). Online games create a new virtual world for Chinese youth, where they can interact with other players and are not restricted by the influence of the government, the family, social conducts, and their own life's limitations (Golub and Lingley 2008). The freedom it offers may be seen as dangerous by the government, because as Bax states: "it is (theoretically) a massively popular tool that allows individuals to do as they please" (2014, 694). Power is divided over every user, and there is no hierarchical control present. For Chinese youth, the internet is a place without obligations, tasks and restrictions (Bax 2014). Trying to suppress the negative influences the internet may have on Chinese society, the Chinese government has made great efforts to regulate the internet. With the emergence of online game addiction, the government has yet another negative effect of the internet to deal with (Chen and Ang 2011).

One of the concerns of the government was the effect online games might have on Chinese social and nationalistic values and especially on Chinese youth (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). As Lindtner and Szablewics note, online games though often not politically motivated, are unhealthy for the development of Chinese adolescents and have an enormous impact on the harmony of Chinese society (2011). Especially Western games often contain excessive violence, sex, and according to Cai and Gao an unhealthy or immoral ideology (2012). The government fears that online games will replace other more constructive activities, that it will have negative effects on players' health and that gamers will develop unsocial and immoral behavior (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). Another concern is about the internet being a potential source of foreign influence, which will also negatively affect Chinese youth, according to the government (Szablewics 2010).

The state has taken different positions towards online games during their development. In the beginning, the state was mainly regulating games, but during the proliferation of the gaming industry as one of the most profitable markets in China, the state desired a more involved role (Cao and Downing 2008). It wants to promote a healthy internet environment and believes that online gaming and internet addiction are connected. There have been stories all over the media about online game addiction leading to failure at school, self-neglect, physical problems, theft, suicides and even murder (Wallis 2011). To counter the negative effects of online game addiction, the government has implemented regulations regarding game play and under-aged gamers, restrictions for the online

gaming industry as well as set up addiction treatment camps to cure youth believed to be internet addicts. However, even with these counter measures, the government is loath to ban online gaming completely, for it is one of the most profitable markets in the country (Wallis 2011).

The gaming industry was born marketized, where non-state firms were the leading forces. This gives the Chinese government a different position to work from compared with the internet as a whole and, according to Cao and Downing, reflects a shift from heavy reliance on state-owned enterprises to a greater role of the private sector (2008). Because of the marketized nature of the industry, the state does not automatically have the power to control the whole industry and to retain a significant influence in this market, the state is actively involved with the policing, licensing and restricting of online games under the claim of trying to protect gamer's rights and Chinese youth's morality. By restricting certain content and having control over which online game company gets a license and which doesn't, the state exerts its power to regulate the industry according to its ideals.

Cao and Downing note three aspects of how the state regulates online games. The first aspect is monitoring and regulating the market, essentially making sure that only the games they agree with are being operated, second, facilitating the domestic game industry, and third, incorporating online games into its nation-building agenda (Cao and Downing 2008). Ernkvist and Ström argue that the position of the Chinese government in regard to online gaming is influenced by three aspects of state policy: information control, techno-nationalism (aiming to increase the competitiveness of domestic companies to be able to compete on the national and international market), and social fears or pragmatic nationalism (2008). According to Ernkvist and Ström, the Chinese government developed a cost-effective policy that while controlling internet information, would not restrain the economic potential of the online game market. It used five strategic measures to control the information on the internet: "legislation, blocking, build-up (increasing healthy content), education (propagate use of healthy content) and self-regulation" (2008, 105). The influence of the Chinese government generally is either a top-down process, regulating and designing the structure of the industry, or a negotiated process, where there are different actors with conflicting interests who influence the industry (Ernkvist and Ström 2008).

The problem with the regulation of the online game industry is that there are various institutions that have overlapping authorities regarding censorship and the issuing of licenses. The three largest government agencies in this area are the General Administration of Press and Publication of the People's Republic of China (GAPP), the Ministry of Culture (MOC), and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). They all have jurisdiction in regulating online games, but the uncertainty of who can do what, has led to several skirmishes and uncertainty amongst game developers. The 2013 merge between GAPP and SARFT was hoped to lead to more integration between the different parties, because according to Hogan Lovells, China's internet industry is heavily over-

regulated and there is a need for a redefinition of roles (2013). A unity of regulatory processes and clearly defined roles will make it easier for the government to govern the cyberspace.

In the recent years, the public perception of internet cafés has changed from a popular social leisure space, to an unsafe and unclean environment as well as a breeding place for online game addiction. Socially higher classes of people look down upon these cafés, regarding them as being infested with thugs and criminals (Szablewics 2010). Therefore, internet cafés have been the subject of many governmental policies and raids in the last decade. In 2001, the government organized the first campaign of extensive inspections and forced some internet cafés to shut down (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). After a devastating fire in 2002 in an internet café, where 25 people, mostly teenagers, were killed and another 12 injured, and which brought attention to the poor safety conditions of these venues, the government implemented stricter regulations for internet cafés. Internet cafés were prohibited to be placed within a radius of 200 meters from middle and primary schools, minors were no longer allowed in, although this rule was easily circumvented by using older friends' ID's, smoking inside was banned, just like inflammable objects, and cafés had to close between midnight and 8 am. Serious breaching of these rules could end in the revocation of their operating license (Chen and Ang 2011). And where control often lacked in the physical department, all computers were equipped with monitoring software, to be able to survey the internet usage (Kshetri 2010).

The Chinese government changed its official policy against online gaming from internet cafés toward the online game industry in late 2003. Online games already had been the subject of regulations on the internet operations in general, but starting in late 2003, the government implemented new regulations specifically targeting the online game industry. In 2003, the China Game Publishers Association (CGPA) was founded, a 'working committee' that according to Ernkvist and Ström would tie the government closer to the gaming industry (2008). There was also a shift in attitude by the government towards online games, from being seen as a kind of opium, to being seen as a tool to teach people history and culture. Domestic game developers were encouraged to stress the importance of 'healthy games' and to put in more cultural and historical aspects from their own Chinese culture. They were also given the advantage and preference above foreign developers in the domestic market (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011; Ernkvist and Ström 2008). New regulations made it impossible for foreign game companies to operate in China without a joint-venture with a domestic company. By blocking foreign game companies from the Chinese market, the government gave domestic companies more opportunities to develop, which it then could subject to strict regulations, as domestic companies are probably easier to monitor and control than foreign companies, which are not necessarily bound by Chinese regulations. Furthermore, by enforcing foreign companies to establish a joint-venture with domestic companies, the latter are able to get the technology from the former needed to make qualitative better games. To increase the quality of domestic games, the

government has also launched training programs for online games developers and designers (Kshetri 2010).

Games already have to go through strict approval procedures to obtain an operating license, and with more concerns rising for the extended amount of time Chinese youth played online, additional in-game regulations were implemented to prevent excessive play as well as monitor and control time spent online, especially concerning Chinese minors. In 2005, plans were made for an anti-fatigue system which was implemented in 2007. This system controlled the time underage gamers could spend to an online game. After three hours, their status points would be reduced, which made it harder to continue as the character became weaker. After a total of five hours, they would lose their status points altogether, and were often kicked out of the game for a number of 'rest' hours (Ernkvist and Ström 2008; Szablewics 2012; Yousafzai et al. 2014). In 2006, there was also a plan for a rating system of online games, for example, rating the games on violent content and age suitability, which should have been implemented in 2010. Today, there is still no rating system available, even though a 2012 survey showed that 72% of the respondents backed such a rating system believing it to protect minors from online violence and pornography (Xinhua News Agency 2012). Liang also believes that the government should establish a game rating system which is overseen by an independent body, as well as strengthen its supervision on online games (2012). However, without a legal framework that enforces game ratings, this classification can only be a recommendation. The government also launched the Real Identity Registration Scheme, to force online gamers to register their name, date of birth and identity number when registering for an online game. The Parent-Control Project was launched in 2011 to give parents authority to monitor and limit the play time of minors. These regulations also strengthened the dominant position of the state in the online game industry (Fung 2015).

CCTV international has broadcasted a documentary about internet and online game addiction called *Virtual Temptation*, which shows the desperation of the parents and the dangers of the internet and online games for the health of young Chinese as well as how therapists analyze addicted youth (CCTV International 2009). Moreover, the state has also been actively involved in supporting the development of indigenous content in online games. It is especially promoting the idea of linking online games to traditional Chinese culture (Cao and Downing 2008). An example of an in-game content restriction of the government is the replacing of skeletons by bodies with flesh or by large graves in the Chinese edition of *World of Warcraft*. The government claimed that it was part of an effort to purify the internet and protect the harmony of society. According to Nardi this action was more a show of power on the part of the government, than a real purification attempt, as skeletons do not have a particular traditional meaning in Chinese culture (2009).

Most actions of the government against the gaming industry however, are halfhearted according to Cao and Downing. They note that the majority of the regulatory policies are actually just “administrative skirmishes among different government agencies,” and that the campaign against internet addiction has become a very profitable industry for the Chinese government (2008, 50). On the one hand, gaming is actually encouraged because it supports the digital and creative industry. On the other hand, the government uses its regulations to try and keep the negative effects of gaming in check (Zhang and Fung 2014). Szablewics notes that the Chinese government often uses less important social problems to divert the attention from real problems that are difficult to solve or ignored by the government. What she calls the moral panic about online game addiction, is a great distraction from more politically sensitive issues (2012). By connecting online games with topics like violence and pornography, and claiming to want to establish a harmonious society and healthy and safe online environment, the government acquires more support for or less resistance against the controlling of the internet as a whole. What seemed to be valiant efforts to combat internet addiction, have often been staged media events and some other internet regulations have failed miserably as well. In 2009, the installment of a ‘Green Dam Youth Escort Censorware’ on every new computer sold in China, which would create a safe and healthy internet environment for Chinese youth, was postponed and ultimately never conducted (Szablewics 2012). Whether these failed regulations are a sign of the state subscribing only marginal importance to fighting online game addiction, or a sign of its disability to control the entirety of the cyberspace is not clear.

Social fears are shared by the Chinese government as well as by families and society in general, however, according to Ernkvist and Ström, the state is primarily driven by the desire to strengthen its legitimacy. With the popularization of online games, it has realized the “potential of online games to be used as a propaganda instrument to shape youth’s preferences,” mainly focused on patriotic and nationalistic values (2008, 106). The China Communist Youth League (CCYL) has used online games to promote their idea of a ‘national spirit’ among Chinese youth. The CCYL also collaborated with a Chinese gaming company, PowerNet Technology, to make a game called *Anti-Japan War Online*, based on the Japanese invasion during 1937-1945, where players could play out different battles, but only as the Chinese side (Kshetri 2010). Violence in these propagandist games, though less excessive, is often tolerated as long as it is morally right, such as fighting against ‘bad people’ (Japan, corrupt officials etc.). The arrival of domestic online games emphasizing the Chinese culture and history, has led to a rise in nationalism among the youth and some gamers have expressed in-game nationalistic behavior. For example, in 2006, in the game *Fantasy Westward Journey*, a large group of players protested against a fictional city because it had a flag on its wall that looked very similar to the Japanese flag, bombarding it with anti-Japanese insults. This reflects a certain pride of Chinese national culture within online games (Wallis 2011).

Furthermore, the government uses the idea of a moral conduct to guide the behavior of the Chinese populace. It promotes a certain correct way to live and act, for example by promoting activities that are considered respectable and giving guidelines for civilized behavior, offline as well as online (Szablewics 2012). It presents a certain normalization not only for regular society, but also for online games, to encourage Chinese to act according to moral norms and values determined by the state. According to Cao and Downing the state sponsors specific domestic games that can be used to strengthen the moral and ethical education of Chinese and to develop healthy consumption patterns among Chinese youth. Through these online games, the government strives to “educate young people to resist increasing foreign content in cultural industries and to cultivate a generation that identifies with the state’s ideology” (2008, 525).

In order to gain more support for controlling online games, the government often links them with excessive violence, pornography and addiction. However, the downside of this practice is that linking online games with violence and addiction, causes people to often perceive the online game industry negatively, which has consequences for the growth potential and economic prospects of the industry. The raids on internet cafés and limitations on playing also affects the industry. In this case the government is on the one side stuck between the desire to protect its legitimacy, educate the populace and preserve national and social values, and on the other side the economic potential the industry has and the large revenue it generates (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). Therefore, the state uses online games as well as internet cafés in its efforts to modernize, but also continues to implement strict regulations on the online games, to raid internet cafés and to emphasize online games are corrupting Chinese youth (Szablewics 2012).



## **7. Online game addiction and the economy: the online game industry, internet cafés, and the mobile gaming market**

### **The online game industry**

The government is not the only party who struggles with the concept of online game addiction. For the online gaming industry itself it is also a two-sided problem. On the one hand, the industry relies on its close ties with the government in order to be able to produce and operate online games and is therefore bound by governmental regulations and self-regulation. It is actively promoting their games as healthy, censoring its game content to coincide with the state's ideology and implementing in-game restrictions to monitor the duration of play of under-age players such as the anti-fatigue system and real-name registration I mentioned earlier. Shanda entertainment and Netease, two top company in China, pledged to make only 'healthy games' in order to improve the virtual environment (Szablewics 2012). Many companies are also self-censoring their games beforehand to avoid being denied an operating license. Especially operators of foreign games can lose millions when they have to wait long for a license, because people will migrate to foreign servers where the game is already released. According to Foucault, this self-censoring would fall under the term discipline, and is a reaction to the regulations of the state, to censor game content they assume the state would not agree with in order to avoid problems, delays or refusal.

On the other hand, the online gaming industry is one of the most profitable industries in China with a yearly revenue of almost 18 billion dollar in 2014 (iResearch (2) 2015). Therefore, it also has to keep their player base satisfied and prevent them from moving to foreign and less-restricted games on non-domestic servers in order to keep generating this amount of revenue. The top online game company in China today, Tencent, generated more than 2 billion dollar in the first quarter of 2015 (iResearch (2) 2015). With the internet population of China at 649 million and having a gaming population of almost 378 million at the end of 2014, the online gaming industry, just like the Chinese government, is reluctant to restrict their games any more than necessary (CNNIC 2015).

### **Internet cafés**

According to a report estimate, 135 million Chinese use internet cafés of which 51.7% plays online games, such as MMORPGs, and 77.2% of youth play internet flash games (Szablewics 2010). Because of this high percentage of online gamers in internet cafés, the gaming industry had considered these cafés as new channels to generate revenue by promoting their games, selling gaming cards, and providing services. This has led to new alliances between the operators of these internet cafés and game producers (Qiu and Zhou 2005). However, at the same time, the general stance of the state and

the general public towards internet cafés became rather negative. Whereas internet cafés used to be popular places to access the internet, because many rural internet users did not have a computer at home, there is increasing discrimination against internet cafés and online gaming (HRIC 2005; Szablewics 2010). In 2005, more than 25% of China's internet users could only access the internet at an internet café (HRIC 2005). In 2007, internet cafés replaced the workplace as second most important place to go online, but within 2 years were surpassed by the mobile internet. A few years later, the workplace surpassed internet cafés again. Since 2009 there has been a decline of internet café users. Due to a ban on new café licenses, the number of internet cafés dropped in 2008 to 185.000, compared to 225.000 in 2006. It dropped further to 136.000 internet cafés at the end of 2012 due to an increase in household broadband and mobile internet. However, the size of internet cafés grew (Kshetri 2010; China Daily 2013). According to the CNNIC report, in 2013 and 2014, only a little over 18% of the internet users used internet cafés to access the internet (CNNIC 2015).

Qiu notes four phases of development of internet cafés in China. The 'technological enlightenment' phase which took place in the late 1990s, the 'crackdown' years after 1999, the new growth period of 2004-2008, and the phase of consolidation since 2009 (2013, 121). Internet cafés, once seen as an elite market, are now portrayed as low-class and a breeding place for internet and online game addiction (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). However, even with the negative portrayal of internet cafés, they are still crucial in the online society of China "in terms of infrastructure, service provision, and sociocultural innovation" (Qiu 2013, 121). Due to their status as unsafe and unclean, internet cafés do not receive funding nor support from the government and are often subjected to raids of the government, installation of control mechanisms and forced closings (Qiu 2013; Herold and Marolt 2011). This negative portrayal of internet cafés might also be a strategy of the state to increase regulation and therefore control without having to subsidize the sector.

The first internet cafés were called *wangluo kafeiwu* (網絡咖啡屋), or internet coffee houses. In 1996, one of the most famous internet coffee houses at the time called the Internet Science Education Hall, was designed to promote the domestic internet market. After the appearance of promotional cafés, many for-profit internet cafés were set up. They bought internet access wholesale and sold it to their visitors for a profit (Qiu 2013). The first for-profit internet cafés began to emerge in 1998 in the larger cities of China (Yang 2006). Until about 2000, they focused mainly on wealthy foreigners and were hardly seen outside the higher class communities in the big cities. From 2000 on, internet cafés changed from being upper-class educational venues, to mass-service entertainment venues, particularly offering online gaming and started to emerge in the smaller cities and rural areas (Qiu 2013). Because of the lack of computers in the homes of rural Chinese, many internet users could only go to internet cafés to go online, which rapidly increased the popularity of these venues (Yang 2006). These internet cafés tended to be small scale, but great in number. They were often operated

by micro entrepreneurs and focused on the lower classes. They depend however on a wired internet connection and therefore are placed in concrete places and because of this need for a concrete place they became intertwined with the local politics (Qiu 2013). The largest group of café frequenters were young people. However, there was also a large presence of undesirable people hanging out in these venues, who would smoke, drink and misbehave, thus generating a bad influence for the young people at the cafés. Internet cafés were often dark, stuffy, and relatively unsafe as well as being a place where young people were without supervision and could do whatever they wanted (Yang 2006). Many youth started visiting internet cafés daily, sometimes even sleeping there, and spending a lot of time online. According to Yang, some also took advantage of their parents, asking them for money to do online research, but in reality go to internet cafés to play online games, or watch videos and things like that. Others, without resources from their parents, resorted to theft (2006).

The fire in 2002 that killed 25 adolescents who were playing online in the internet café, resulted in a media frenzy over the problem of black internet bars and the threat of online game addiction among youth. This led to more severe regulations, raids and mass closures of these cafés by the government. The government as well as the media has connected online game addiction with the environment of the internet cafés (Szablewics 2010). Efforts to upgrade internet cafés into nationwide chain stores failed, internet cafés remain small and independent. The few that became chain stores are located in the more wealthy coastal areas (Qiu 2013). Partly due to official crackdowns, Qiu notes that many internet café operators chose or were forced to use computers without external input equipment, such as drives or USB plugins (2013). This resulted in computers that were mainly used for online entertainment purposes, and has contributed to the image of internet cafés as places that facilitate online game addiction and are harmful to the morality of Chinese youth (Qiu 2013).

In sum, for internet cafés, online gamers are a large income pool, however, the panic around internet and online game addiction has caused internet cafés to be seen as dangerous and unhealthy and has led to stricter regulations and regular crackdowns and ultimately a decline in café frequenters. The increase of household broadband and mobile internet has also contributed to this decline.

### **Mobile gaming market**

In 2014, China's mobile gaming market obtained revenues exceeding 1 billion dollar per quarter (McCall 2015). It also exceeded the online game market share of webgames for the first time, taking a second position behind client games. According to the report of iResearch, mobile games are expected to gain a larger market share than client games in 2018 ((1) 2015). The improvement of mobile networks, the introduction of 4G networks and upgrades of smartphone hardware leads to more and more internet users to use smartphones to go online as well as more mobile games being produced. According to Sun et al. Chinese mobile service users recently reached 875 million people, of which 80%

uses their smartphone to access the internet (2015). With the development of the mobile game industry, concern about mobile game addiction has also arisen. Especially because teenagers are the largest smartphone consumer group. The problems that already existed in online pc games also extend to mobile games. According to Liang, the portability of and privacy features on mobile phones, may influence mobile gamers more negatively than pc gamers (2012). According to Sun et al. the average time mobile users spend each day on playing games was about 32 minutes, while 28% would spend more than an hour a day (2015). Although several of the already existing regulations on online games can also be applied to mobile online games, regulations directed towards internet cafés as well as home broadband networks will not have much effect. However, according to 17173, the Ministry of Culture is developing a new regulatory policy mainly focused on mobile games' virtual in-game items and services expected to be implemented in the second half of 2015 (2015).

## 8. Online game addiction and society: Chinese youth and their parents

### Chinese youth

At the start of the twenty-first century, urban youth is increasingly shaped by a consumer culture based on electronics, and has a desire to create a distinct cultural and individual identity. The internet has provided this opportunity for individualism and globalization (Kang 2008). However, in China, there are certain expectations of young people. They are seen as the basis for the future of the community and with the one-child policy this means that the whole responsibility comes to rest on the shoulders of only one child. The society has become highly competitive and the stress of having to succeed leads youth to visit internet cafés in search for “a sense of freedom, relaxation, community, and equality as well as fun, which can hardly be found elsewhere in their lives” (Qiu 2013, 132).

Chinese adolescents are brought up under a strict hierarchical power system where they are subject to not only the state’s authority, but also strict parental authority. They have been taught to be respectful and obedient to their superiors. The large pressure that is put on their shoulders by society and their parents to succeed and achieve good results in school and on the work floor, has caused them to look for ways to relieve that pressure. By going on the internet and playing online games, Chinese adolescents can escape or resist this authority and create their own world, their own rules, and their own hierarchy. In the virtual world power is not based on educational ability or academic success, but it is based on how good you are in the game. However, in order to keep your game characters high level and maintaining a top status, it needs a constant investment of time, and often also money. This makes it harder for people to reduce their playing time, as they will not be able to keep up with the top anymore.

Internet cafés are not only attractive because of the opportunity to play games, but also because they are places where young people can socialize, without the high pressure of school, family and society in general (Qiu 2013). However, in recent years internet is more easily available in college dormitories and at home. Internet cafés are more and more seen as low class, and many who used to frequent these cafés now prefer to play online games in their room, sometimes also inviting a small group of friends over to play together. Especially youth who grew up with internet connections in their home, disapprove of internet cafés (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). The appearance of mobile internet and the increased use of smartphones has also led to more freedom regarding the place where one can access the internet.

Today, internet cafés are a main subject in the moral panic surrounding online game addiction. They are seen as morally unsuitable and having a negative influence on the health of their customers. If there is mention of internet cafés in the media, it is almost always accompanied by words such as

crackdown, forced closings or official regulations (Szablewics 2010). By consequently linking internet cafés with these negative terms, the general opinion of internet cafés is quickly influenced. There is also a tendency among young student gamers to make a distinction between themselves who are just normal gamers and the abnormal 'aimless' addicts who play games in internet cafés. Gamers are continuously redefining their identity and defending themselves against the stereotypes found in the media (Szablewics 2010). They are resisting the general discourse about online gamers that portrays them as lazy, addicted and unsocial. According to Golub and Lingley, Chinese youth often rejects the commotion surrounding internet and online game addiction as conservative and close minded (2008). Gamers argue that they are not addicted to online games, but to the feeling of belonging they get from playing these games. Also they are addicted to the creation of new friendships, and the nostalgia and hope the games give them (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). Adolescents, while powerless in the real world, they feel like an emperor online, being able to control their own actions and being able to express their individuality (Bax 2015). Online they are able to escape the power of the state, society and their parents. They are able to use their own power, shape their identity and make their own decisions.

Loneliness is also a known reason for spending a lot of time online, especially because many Chinese adolescents are only child (Bax 2014; Omroep Max 2014). They see the friends that they make online as more real than their offline friends, even if their parents refer to those friends as unreal and bad. Still, almost 83% of online game players acknowledged that online gaming negatively influenced their personal life, grades or work performance (Peng and Liu 2010). They often do feel regret about not succeeding academically and not adhering to social norms and expectations and therefore go online to get a feeling of happiness and satisfaction. According to Bax, they are not only having trouble controlling their time online, but also with adhering to the normalization of Chinese society. Some gamers feel that parents do not understand them, and put too much pressure on them taking away their happiness and own control. Trying to adhere to dominant ethics such as competition, ambition and individualism, they find that in the virtual world it is much easier to achieve these ethics (2015).

Many adolescents make a clear distinction between the kinds of games they play, arguing that some genres are better than others and less addictive. For example, they differentiate between two MMO games, *World of Warcraft*, an MMORPG, and *Warcraft III*, an Real-time Strategy game (RTS). Players argued that for *Warcraft III* you had to use your brain and that it was more like an electronic sport than an online game. According to these players, *World of Warcraft* was more attractive to people who wanted to create a new virtual world and develop themselves, or their character. They also believed that it was more time consuming and more addictive, because the playing sessions were endless, while with *Warcraft III* they could play one game in approximately 30 minutes. Even though players make sharp distinctions between the site of play and the kind of game they play, parents often

are blind to these differences. Reports about internet addiction also rarely make the distinction between the type of games (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). By ignoring this distinction, the media is able to keep generalizing all online games as unhealthy and addictive and consequently all highly involved gamers as addicted. Adolescents often had different reasons to play online games, for some, online gaming became a way to train themselves in strategic thinking, perseverance and competition, for others, online gaming became a space where alternative realities were possible, an alternative mode where they could be successful (Szablewics 2012).

The moral panic about internet addiction also has had a profound effect on the online game community. It has resulted in stricter rules concerning game play and game content as well as the appearance of treatment centers, self-help books and efforts of the government to create a healthy and 'green' online game environment (Szablewics 2010). Players of online games have often tried to promote 'gamer rights', voicing their protest against the new regulations through surveys, virtual communities and online videos (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). One of the most successful efforts was the video *War of Internet Addiction*, where in 64 minutes more than 100 gamers criticize the censorship of *World of Warcraft* leading for example to the deterioration of guild communities. They demand the right to play freely instead of being controlled by the regulations of the Chinese government. There is even a call for migration to the Taiwanese game server if they cannot play freely at the Chinese server (Zhang and Fung 2014). The video was watched over 10 million times within a month. On online forums and bulletin boards players also battle for gamer rights, for example claiming that because there is online game addiction, it does not mean that everyone who plays online games will be addicted (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). It is about the legitimacy of gamer identity as well as the right to play games without restriction. Many players build private servers in order to be able to log on to Taiwanese and European servers to undermine these restrictions (Lindtner and Szablewics 2011). Another protest was directed toward the anti-fatigue system, which forced the government to apply the system only to underage players. Similar protests against the real-name system voiced concerns over privacy issues (Ernkvist and Ström 2008). This resistance against the state's power by online gamers, shows the power relations between the government and online gamers. These regulations of the state encountered protests and resistance from online gamers, which causes the state to redefine its regulations and consequently its power.

There have been many stories in the media about bizarre behavior caused by online games. For example, a boy who murdered his uncle because he needed money to play online games, two children who were exhausted after a gaming marathon and were killed when they fell asleep on the railroad tracks, or a 17-year old whose online love wasn't what he expected her to be after meeting her in real life and killed himself (Golub and Lingley 2008; Stewart 2010; Cao et al. 2007; Ji 2008). These stories only add to the moral panic concerning internet and online game addiction.

## Parents

In China, many parents are fearful of the negative effects of online game addiction on their child's academic and professional success, but are often powerless to stop it. The one-child policy, the highly competitive learning environment and rising economic expectations create a situation in which there is a lot of pressure on the child's shoulders (Szablewics 2012). Parents are relying on their only child to bring them a better future. He is being pushed by his parents to be the best, and perform as well as possible. Online games are seen as a kind of opium that would corrupt the spirit of these children, taking them away from their studies and even cause them to withdraw from society in general, escaping to the online world in order to relief some pressure and stress from the offline world (Szablewics 2012). Essentially, parents think of online games as nonproductive and a waste of time, not contributing anything to the future prospects of their child as well as it being the cause of the child's failure to perform academically and his or her inability to cope with the high stress and pressures of society (Bax 2015). Online game addiction is often portrayed as if it was contagious, and therefore even more dangerous, with seemingly no choice involved. Some parents do not even allow their child to use the internet, because they fear their child would become addicted (Szablewics 2012). Wan and Chiou argue that discourses of internet addiction downplay the social aspect of online gaming (2007). Visual reports often focus on isolating an individual gamer, rather than showing groups of gamers playing together, while the social interaction is very important especially in MMORPGs as there are for example instances and bosses that are very hard to defeat on your own and often need the assistance of guilds or clans (Wan and Chiou 2007). This emphasis on a single player suggests a relation only between the gamer and his computer screen, making it seem as if the gamer is powerless to resist (Szablewics 2012). By only showing a part of the story, the media uses its power to alter the perception of people about online gaming, suggesting that online gamers really are anti-social. Or by portraying it as contagious, it suggests that online gamers do not choose freely to go online.

Golub and Lingley argue that the idea that internet addiction is "tied to threats to parental authority and changing forms of self-expression of young people" is supported by the early work of Zhao Bin, a scholar and associate professor of media sociology at Beijing University, as well as former professor in several other universities in the United Kingdom and China, concerning television and youth consumerism in China in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Golub and Lingley 2008, 68). In her survey analyzing parental control on watching television, she found that over 85% of the respondents controlled their children's watching behavior. She argues that this control was mainly out of fear that watching television negatively affected school performance. There was also a visible shift in the relationship between youth and their parents. Key factors were "the shifting balance between individualism and responsibility, the increasingly blurred line between parental care and indulgence



and the erosion of filial piety” (Golub and Lingley 2008, 69). The notion that the future of China lies in the hands of the children, arising during the Cultural Revolution, causes single children to be spoilt and self-centered, but they are also carrying the stress of being the only hope of their parents for a better future. Adolescents, however, are not really eager to be dependent on their parents’ hopes and are rather seeking to define their own identity and actions (Golub and Lingley 2008). While parents, seeing their authority or power slip away, are doing everything they can to regain that authority.

According to Szablewics, parents are often seen as the main force in the battle against internet addiction. In a 2006 study, Tao Hongkai published a book containing several letters about internet addiction written by parents as well as children themselves. The majority of the letters talk about concerns about academic performance and dropouts related to internet addiction (Szablewics 2010). In the media, the parents are also depicted as desperately trying to get their child to function correctly again in Chinese society. Szablewics gives an example of a father who stabbed himself in the leg to get his child’s attention away from his online game (2010). Another example is of a mother who tackled her child on a busy road to stop him from going to an internet café (Szablewics 2012). Bax argues that the internet addiction phenomenon essentially revolves around the competition between China’s education system which is represented by the parents and the consumer-based society which is represented by the online gaming industry. A battle between work or study, and leisure in the form of online gaming. Parents spent a lot of resources and effort in order to keep their child away from online gaming, from being a consumer, and keeping him on the right path of academic success and good future prospects (2014).

## 9. Conclusion

So to conclude, how do different stakeholders look at the phenomenon of online game addiction among Chinese youth? First, in academic work there is no agreement over the precise definition and cause of internet addiction. Some believe it is a mental disorder, while others believe it is a manifestation of a deeper-lying social problem. What the majority does agree upon is that most online game addicts are a part of dysfunctional families, having troubled family relations, either in the form of abuse, neglect, or overinvolvement and so forth. Many believe that apart from the parents' educational and socialization methods, the highly competitive Chinese society is also a big influence on the development of online game addiction. The society, including the youth's parents, puts a lot of pressure and expectations on the shoulders of the younger generation, often too much to bear. Online gaming then comes into play as a way to relieve some of that pressure and escape to a virtual world where goals are much easier met and where adolescents have the power to control their own action and define their own identity. Because many Chinese adolescents are only child, loneliness also plays a large role in pushing youth to go online, where they can socialize with other players their age. Scholars do not agree about how to treat these online game addicts. Tao Hongkai believes in treatment through talking sessions, while Tao Ran uses biomedical models to treat his patients. There are also a lot of treatment centers throughout China, and while some of them do a pretty good job in curing their patients, many are criticized for their harsh, and some argue even inhumane, treatment methods as well as their desire to bring in large profits from their treatments.

Second, for the government online game addiction is seen as a threat to the morality and health of China's youth as well as a potential source of foreign influence. The government has taken different positions towards online games during its development, changing from a regulating role to a more involved one. It set up various committees and implemented a lot of regulations, such as the anti-fatigue system and the real-name registration, in order to control the development, operation and content of online games as well as the online behavior of their players. However, as the online gaming industry is one of the most profitable markets in China, the government is loath to completely ban online gaming, and avoids restraining its economic potential. It also uses online games as an outlet for nationalistic propaganda, as well as using it to promote Chinese cultural and historical aspects. Furthermore, internet cafés, seen as a breeding place for internet and online game addiction, are frequently subjected to government regulations, raids and crackdowns, as well as many being forced to shut down.

Third, for the online gaming industry, online game addiction is also a dilemma. As their source of income, they want to promote online gaming and avoid restricting it too much in order to keep their

player base content. However, they also depend largely on the government for a favorable position in the market and the licenses to develop and operate their games. Therefore, they are bound by the government's regulations. Many companies self-censor their games and emphasize the development of healthy, green games. Even though the general stance against internet cafés is very negative, online game companies consider these places as new channels to generate revenue by promoting their games and providing additional services, leading to new alliances between internet café operators and online game companies. The development of the mobile game market has also provided online game companies with a new platform to produce games, which may be less under the influence of government regulations.

Fourth, many adolescents see the panic about online game addiction as exaggerated and close-minded. Because of the social stigma that is put on online gamers, they have to continuously defend themselves against popular stereotypes, claiming for example that they are not necessarily addicted to online games, but to the feeling of belonging they get from these games. There have been many protests for gamers' rights, the right to play freely, such as the video *War of Internet Addiction*. However, adolescents are increasingly profiling themselves as different from the 'real' addicts, making clear distinctions between the space they play in, and the kind of games they play, as well as the reason for playing. Where internet cafés were once seen as very popular places to go online, especially the younger generation, born late 1980s and early 1990s, is looking down on internet cafés as places infested with criminals and addicts, congruent with and possibly largely influenced by the opinion of the government, schools and parents.

Finally, the parents are often seen as the forerunners in the battle against internet and online game addiction. They fear that the addiction will negatively influence their children's academic performances and consequently their future prospects. With the one-child policy, their child is their only hope for a better life, and when they are shutting themselves off from society, escaping to the virtual world to play online games, many parents feel ashamed and disappointed. Some parents are so afraid that their child will 'catch' internet or online game addiction that they will not allow their child on the internet, for whatever purpose. Their desperation for their children to be cured from internet addiction also leads them to spend massive amounts of money, sending their child to a treatment camp. However, with their attitude they will most likely only push their child further away.

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