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How China's Young "Internet Addicts" Gamify the Disciplinary Treatment Camp

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The fever of online gaming arose because of the rapid development of the market economy and online technology in China in the past fifteen years. Seeing the game industry as a major source of economic benefit, the state faced a problem that accompanied this capitalist consumerism: young people's detachment from family, school, and workplace and retreat to the addictive game worlds that offer much more instant fun than reality.

Since 2006 there have been frequent news reports of parent-child conflicts, school refusal, crimes, and even patricides among adolescents who seem to be addicted to the Internet, especially to online games, which has caused moral panic in Chinese adult society. Parenting experts give lectures and publish advice books to guide middle-class parents to manage their children's gaming behavior. The state has also tried to govern youth gaming through industry regulation and legislation, which has resulted in a strengthening of state control over the Internet. The concept of Internet addiction (*wang yin*; hereafter, IA), a term coined by US psychologist Kimberly Young, was introduced to China and taken up by medical practitioners and educational experts, some of whom established treatment camps.[1] A nationwide survey in 2009 estimated there are 24 million youth in China with IA.[2]

Neither the American Psychological Association nor China's Ministry of Health has ever formally recognized IA as a medical category, but

treatment has been prevalent in China for the past fifteen years in the form of private or semiprivate treatment camps. Since the first of these institutions was founded in Beijing in 2005, the sector has been dogged by controversy: as early as 2006, reports that one camp was treating addiction with electroshock therapy provoked public outcry. Meanwhile, some camps continue to rely on disciplinary methods and residential therapies including military training and psychological counseling. Some treatment camps with licensed medical staff prescribed drugs for depression and anxiety, viewed as comorbidities of IA.[3] The demand for such services—and the harsh, often military-like discipline they promise to instill in wayward minors—remains sizeable, especially among middle-class parents desperate to turn their kids into good students.

Gaming disorder has now become a recognized illness category in the World Health Organization's ICD-11.[4] In countries with highly developed Internet connectivity, excessive online gaming is often an issue. But social reactions to it are somewhat different. In the United States, interventions for excessive Internet use are limited to counseling and self-help groups; private counseling or outpatient services are provided by individual counselors and psychiatrists.[5] A few inpatient rehabilitation programs geared specifically toward IA were recently founded in the United States, such as one in Utah offering overnight hospital stays, digital-detox retreats, wilderness therapy camps, talk therapy, and medication.[6] Although ambitious, none of these established an IA program with a focus on social control of adolescents, as was customary for drug abuse, nor did these programs frame excessive online gaming as a national public health issue with corresponding government interventions.

In China, IA discourse is mostly related to whom the "gaming disorder" label aims to cover: young people whose social functioning is affected after spending excessive hours playing online games. Yet the label "Internet addict" is more moral than medical, as it reflects the broader moral panic that views digital games as "electronic opium."[7] This panic expresses collective distress regarding the disruption of social control systems that emphasize family hierarchy and relational obedience and reveals anxieties about changing cultural practices impacting both family and consumer society.[8] Children are drawn to games not as escapes but as connections with an

alternative, competing reality that they feel more attached to, compared with highly pressured and alienating school competitions.[9]

In 2014 I conducted three months of immersive fieldwork in an IA treatment camp in Beijing, after which I stayed connected with some informants through social media. I conducted thirty-five interviews with young gamers outside the institution from 2015 to 2021 to understand the continuing development of the phenomena. The larger project aimed to understand the shifting patterns of social control and gaming cultures under China's rapid market reform, one-child policy, and digitalization. The ethnographic data on gaming and gamification collected in the treatment camp is used to reveal the broader context of power mechanisms of youth gaming and the meanings of play in contemporary China.

Disciplining Gamers: Anti-immersion Systems and Competitive Reality

The Chinese government responded to the moral panic over Internet addiction in several ways. In 2002 the government issued legislation forbidding Internet cafes from allowing entry to minors. In 2006 the Law on the Protection of Minors was revised to include new clauses requiring the state and the family to guide minors' online behavior. "Indulgence in the Internet" was for the first time placed on par with other misbehaviors defined as bad for the physical and mental health of minors, such as "smoking, excessive drinking, vagrancy, gambling, drug abuse, and prostitution."[10] All these attempts started as a response to the public outcry about parent-child conflicts over online gaming, but they ended up strengthening state control over the Internet industry.

The term "green online game" was invented by the government in 2008 to refer to "pure, healthy, and non-addictive" online games.[11] These games do not use sexually arousing pictures or violent activities to attract players but aim to promote moral standards for children. The state requires online games to set a limit on playing time for minors with an "anti-immersion system." It also tries to enhance parents' power through technology. In 2009 the Chinese government requested that software called "Green Dam Youth Escort" be preinstalled in personal computers sold in mainland China. This

software was said to help parents monitor what their children were doing on the Internet, keeping children away from obscene and dangerous content with a filtering system. But it was criticized by the public as a violation of information privacy and stopped running after several months.

The Ministry of Health organized a research group in 2009 to explore the medicalization of IA. In 2016 a lawmaking group formulated the Regulations on the Protection of Minors Relating to Online Behaviors and tried to incorporate IA into a legal framework. Both attempts failed because of strong social controversies around the reported violence and the use of electric shocks in the treatment camps. With continued implicit permission of the treatment camps and a general guideline of avoiding violent treatment, the state began another round of economic regulation with the Notice on the Prevention of Online Gaming Indulgence among Minors issued in October 2019 in answer to changing behaviors of youth online prompted by the popularization of mobile games. The regulation forbids online games, including mobile games, to allow minors to log in from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. and sets daily and monthly limits on in-game payments by minor users.

These regulations are only part of the social control project to funnel middle-class "game addicts" into a normative and competitive track. Many ethnographies present contemporary Chinese youth as impacted by heavy pressures, conflicts, competitions, and social differences under the rapid transformation of Chinese society marked by decollectivization, market reforms, and the one-child policy.[12] The pressure caused by severe competition is felt by youth from preschoolers to college graduates and their parents. On the other hand, the most popular games in China are based in an equally competitive, combat-oriented virtual world. Almost all "Internet addicts" in the treatment camp I researched were high-level players of a game called *League of Legends* (*LoL*).[13] Rather than saying that they were addicted to the Internet, it might be more accurate to describe them as living in a fantasy world. For some, *LoL* was the first and only game they played. Even when they were not playing, they were watching videos uploaded by global *LoL* players, surfing *LoL* forums on mobile phones, talking with their friends during and after class about the game experience, and thinking about *LoL* on their way home or to the Internet café.

League of Legends was launched in China in 2011 by Tencent. Developed

by Riot Games, a US company, the game is based on a multiplayer online battle arena where players select and control virtual "champions" to form leagues, destroy rivals' defense towers, and kill the champions of other leagues. The performance of each player is calculated, summarized, ranked, and recorded after each match, just as students are evaluated in Chinese schools. Every player knows his rank in every "season" and is awarded medals at different levels. Professional teams are also formed and subsidized by digital-equipment companies to battle other teams. When the competitive game world threatens to take too much time from adolescents' competitive school education, many troubled Chinese parents have searched for various ways to control their children's gaming behavior. The treatment camp is usually their last resort.

The Base

The institution where I conducted my fieldwork is referred to by all residents as "the base." Once attached to a hospital, the base became independent in both finances and administration in 2011. At the time of my fieldwork, a comprehensive therapy consisting of psychological counseling, education, military training, family participation (parent training and family therapy), and medicine was gradually being developed.

Though IA was a major reason why most young people were sent to the base, it is only one of the "adolescent problems" that the base aims to treat. These problems include not only medicalized disorders such as mood and conduct disorders but also issues not formally diagnosed, such as IA, truancy, and defiance of parents. In short, the trainees come from families in which parents do not know how to deal with their children's "abnormal" or defiant behaviors and cannot obtain useful support from doctors, counselors, or teachers. Most residents were between fourteen and nineteen years old. Some were over twenty. Many were students at various levels before they came to the base, but some were also young adults attending graduate school or working. Regardless of age, trainees are all referred to as "children" that need "psychological growth" by the governing adults. Some came voluntarily. Many more were brought by their parents through deception.

The average length of stay was six months. Parents, most of whose

backgrounds were at least middle-class, paid around ¥14000 (US$2000) every month. Parents were not merely consumers. They, too, were subjects to be reformed, and as such were required to abide by the base's rules. They were strongly advised to attend therapy and parental training throughout the six months, though they were free to come and go at any time. They were also able to cease treatment and take their children home by stopping payment at any time during the process.

Within the base, six units worked together to carry out the comprehensive therapy. The first and most important unit was the psychological group, consisting of nine psychological counselors from different schools and backgrounds. The second unit was the drillmaster team, consisting of around ten drillmasters (eight male and two female), whose role was to supervise trainees' everyday activities and lead their behavior training. The third was the clinical unit in charge of trainees' health and the prescription of drugs. The fourth was the nursing unit, taking care of trainees' hygiene and other living conditions. The fifth was the leisure activity group, responsible for all group activities outside of training and psychotherapy. The sixth unit was the parents' group, managing issues related to the parents. As parents were required to stay in the institution to grow together with their children and watch the whole treatment process, the staff needed to help arrange their accommodation.

Everyday Discipline and Resistance

Trainees were ranked as in military camps. There were squad leaders and platoon leaders. All trainees were grouped into squads of five to seven; five squads formed a platoon. The position of squad leader was taken in turns by squad members. For some trainees, it was a challenge to live an independent life away from parents for the first time. They had to learn how to wash their clothes, clean their beds, fold their quilts into perfect "military cubes" like tofu (which needs a lot of practice), and to sleep and get up at scheduled times. Trainees had to get up very early to do morning exercise—rain or shine, winter or summer. The sanitation in each squad room was checked by a nurse, a drillmaster, and squad leaders every morning. They collectively evaluated conditions with scores and ranks. The ranking of hygienic conditions determined how early the trainees in a squad could

get their food during mealtimes. For example, the trainees from the squad with the best hygiene would be the first in the queue to get food on their plates. This sequence mattered because though people started eating at different times, they were all required to finish eating at the same time in answer to the mustering whistle.

Time on the base was highly rationalized. One was expected to do what was scheduled and ordered at a certain time and in a certain place. Anything not on the schedule needed to be preapproved by governing adults (drillmasters, doctors, or counselors). To be excused from training, for example, a note from a doctor or counselor was required. Among these activities, military training was resisted the most, especially when the sun was hot during midsummer. Lectures were also resisted because they reminded the trainees of school lessons, which they found boring, repetitive, and sometimes difficult to understand. But they could not simply sleep with their heads on their desks or leave the room, as they did in school, because the drillmasters were always watching them. The favorite routine activity among many trainees was counseling, as it allowed for self-expression and did not require much physical labor.

Controlled pleasure and delayed gratification were used in training so that trainees would gradually get used to a life without instant rewards. It was everywhere in one's encounters with the institution beyond military training. For example, daily consumption was highly restricted, and certain objects were forbidden to trainees. Contraband included snacks, soft drinks, cigarettes, books unexamined by the counselors, digital devices such as phones and laptops, and other objects used for entertainment. Despite the strict controls, these things still entered and circulated in the base through various means. Sometimes trainees were allowed to have a short outside visit accompanied by their parents if the counselor thought it would be helpful for their therapy. When trainees came back, their belongings had to be checked by the nurse. If they brought in something forbidden, it would be confiscated except with counselors' special permission. For example, trainees were usually not allowed to bring books into the base. But textbooks, nonfiction books, or comic books that the counselors considered psychologically healthy and educational for that person might be allowed. Men's magazines, game magazines, fiction, manga, and publications with dubious content would never be approved. I never saw newspapers or news

magazines in the base. The purpose here might be not only control of pleasure but also the creation of a space for self-reflection without exposure to many external influences. I once helped Doctor Huang, the counselor I worked with, to decide whether sentimental pulp fiction could be permitted for a female trainee in treatment for self-harm and rebellious conduct. We decided to let her keep only one book at a time, a way to both control the pleasure and reduce the uncertain influence. Yet many forbidden books were still snuck onto the base. An informant told me that he succeeded in smuggling a men's magazine called *For Him* (Nanren Zhuang) into the base at the cost of some snacks that were confiscated during the check. He put the snacks in the outer package of the bag to capture the attention of the nurses in the hope that they would not pay additional attention to the inner package where he kept the magazine.

Defiance and transgression (overt resistance) were the most identifiable behaviors of resistance. Defiance could simply be foot-dragging when answering commands or a refusal to participate in training and therapy. "Toilet excuse" was frequently used to escape a boring lecture or avoid group therapy. Keeping silent was also a way to show defiance. Some trainees intentionally starved themselves by refusing to go to the dining hall. Transgressive behaviors included hiding and using contraband such as cigarettes or mobile phones and fighting with peers. Contraband use was punished heavily, although some hidden materials (such as mobile phones) were said to be in wide circulation. Brawling was common among both male and female trainees. It was often punished with *yueshu* (bodily restraints with ropes) or, in severe cases, punitive long-term isolation. It was uncommon for trainees to attack drillmasters. When it occurred, the drillmaster would not hit back. Their usual reaction was to push the person away and control them with the help of other drillmasters.

"Prison breaks" happened from time to time. Such escapes were intolerable system errors and a reason for absolute suppression and punishment. But for the trainees, the escape, or even the imagining, discussing, and planning of it, was meaningful resistance or part of the game. In their constructions, the escape became an exciting, romantic, and heroic endeavor. The success of the escape was narrated by the residents as the result of sophisticated calculation and bravery—an influence of the cultural constructions in TV dramas, movies, and video games.

Gamifying the Base

Trainees were allowed to play nondigital games, and they were encouraged to play certain types of games, such as sports on the training ground or in the gymnasium. In many ways, game playing alone cannot be interpreted as resistance because it was also a form of permitted pleasure. But sometimes, when I walked through the corridor, I found that these games could not merely be reduced to "legal pleasures" because trainees were not satisfied with playing the simple, traditional, and unchallenging card or chess games. They constantly sought a stronger sensual reward by adapting regular games using more complicated rules and inventing new games to make the combat more exciting and engaging.

With a fifty-two-card deck, players could set up various games with new rules. The most popular poker game in the base was a game called double-up (*shuang sheng*). One needed clear thinking, quick calculation, and good team consciousness to play the game well because the rules required one player to cooperate with another to fight against another team of two. Another popular game was the famous board game Three Kingdoms Kill (San guo sha). In the standard mode each player selects a historical character from the Three Kingdoms to play. Each character has certain skills and attributes derived from the stories in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Everyone is randomly assigned a role (monarch, minister, rebel, or traitor) to play. To win, players must follow the rules set up for each role. For example, the rebel wins by killing the monarch, and the minister wins by killing rebels and protecting the monarch. The game ends when the monarch is killed or all the rebels and traitors are killed. The game progresses as players take turns drawing cards. There are different types of cards, such as action cards (strike, dodge, heal), equipment cards, and scroll cards.

At one time drillmasters thought Three Kingdoms Kill was too addictive to be allowed because trainees responded to the muster whistle more slowly than usual when they were playing this game. So they confiscated the game and allowed trainees to play it only on weekends. In response to that, trainees created a new board game adapted from Three Kingdoms Kill and called it The Base Kill, in which all the characters, roles, and rules were drawn from the everyday institutional life of the trainees. The

characters in the game included almost all people in the base—trainees, drillmasters, counselors, and even the director! Real nicknames of people in the base were used on the character cards. For example, Doctor Wu, a very talkative counselor, appeared on a card as Auntie Wu. Xiaobao, the youngest trainee, appeared as the Invincible Primary School Student. Another character, called Four Million, referred to Jianlong, who was said to have made ¥400,000 by playing games and selling virtual products such as avatars and equipment before he came to the base. "Four Million" was the nickname people gave him as an exaggeration of his fantastic gaming business. As in Three Kingdoms Kill, every character had unique attributes and skills. For example, the Invincible Primary School Student had the skill of avoiding attacks by the character Yongtai because, in reality, Yongtai was very protective of Xiaobao and would never hurt him. This character also enjoyed the privilege of drawing an additional card in each turn because Xiaobao was the youngest (and smallest) trainee in the base.

The action cards and scroll cards were also adapted from daily activities in the base. For example, brawl replaced strike as the attack action, escape replaced the dodge action, bread (something also used as currency in the base) served as the healing action, restraint was a scroll that one could use to make a player unable to take action for a turn, note helped one ward off the unwanted effect of a scroll, and medical advice and brooms became equipment to defend and attack with. The fine details in the design of each rule and card vividly illustrate the creativity and reflectivity of the trainees as they gamified institutional reality.

Such details also reflected rich information of the community beyond the institution. For example, the cards of horses in Three Kingdoms Kill, which added or deducted distance from the others, were replaced by the cards of brand-name sneakers, such as Adidas and Nike. These were the most popular brands among residents in this institution and among middle-class teenagers in China, reflecting the class identity of Internet addicts and the social position of the institution. It is worth noticing that although trainees are required to change from their casual clothes into military uniforms when admitted, a process Goffman characterizes as a "leaving off" and a "taking on," they are allowed to keep their branded sneakers.[14]

FIG. 9.1. The character of Xiaobao (left) and the card of Nike (耐克) sneakers (right). Photography by author.

The Deep Play of The Base Kill

In the previous sections, the mechanism of the base was presented as something that negates, forbids, confines, and dominates. The rules are applied because the institution needs to reduce uncertainty and maintain stability. But rules, as Brian Massumi argues in his discussion of soccer, gradually become "an integral part of the play without ceasing to be a transcendental intervention."[15] For example, the rules in soccer give rise to many of the tensions that excite players and attract audiences. A foul made by a player on team A results in a free kick by team B. Suddenly, the free kick dominates the rhythm of the game because it may change the match results even in the last few seconds. In this sense, the rule is no longer an inhibitor. It is something that makes the game more engaging and exciting.

This argument also applies to institutional encounters. Once the rules

were learned through repetition and internalized into the everyday life of the institution, they became metainformation that the trainees could identify, symbolize, and recreate. When the institutional rules were adapted into game rules through deep play, they were no longer something that confined individual mobility and controlled pleasure. They opened bodies to contingent events. Randomness and spontaneity are in play in both institutional encounters and card games.

While playing The Base Kill, the institutional rules, roles, and boundaries stopped being interventions in reward seeking and meaning making but became the catalyst for exciting engagement in a "play within a play." This excitement is heightened when playing a game character based on a familiar figure, or perhaps even based on the trainees themselves. By gamifying the base and transforming its roles, rules, and personal relationships into a creative virtual infrastructure, the trainees cease being either the passive sites on which an efficient power mechanism operates or simply rebels against the enforcers of the dominating control. They have developed a system of their own through spontaneous, experimental interactions with the institution. The players create an "unreal" institution without jumping out of their own institution and merge the metastatement of "this is play" with the metainformation about discipline and punishment.[16] Though they do not directly change the rules and regulations of the institution, they dissolve the behaviorist meanings assigned to the restrictions and punishments behind those rules, undermining the intended disciplinary effects. The cards of brawling and *yueshu*, for example, provide commentary on the institutional disciplines against disobedience and violence. Yet they also demonstrate the possibility of living with the institutional disciplines through neither direct defiance nor nonreflexive obedience. With The Base Kill, the young people show that they can create more complex forms of play: the brawling card does not stand for actual physical violence but does denote the idea that brawling can take its meaning beyond the disciplinary framework. It is a symbol of developed human dignity, reflexivity, and creativity that claims their "misbehaviors" are appropriate while creating meanings deeper than resistance.

What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the realm of everyday practical affairs, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have

it, that it reinforces status discriminations (such reinforcement is hardly necessary in a society where every act proclaims them), but that it provides a metasocial commentary on the whole matter of sorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that system. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive: it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.[17]

In Geertz's interpretation, the Balinese cockfight is deep not due to the money being gambled but what money causes to happen: "the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight."[18] Though the enormous amount of money gambled makes the game deeper, it is not the core driver of the deepness at play. People gamble with a pursuit of "esteem, honor, dignity, respect," creating and discovering the individual and social temperament.[19] In The Base Kill, though there is no element of gambling and hardly any material gain, the play is still deep as it connotes a pursuit of the social status that the young gamers hope to interpret and reconstruct by themselves and beyond the label of "Internet addict." With an iterative process of designing while playing the institution-based game, they have adapted the institutional rules and redefined the broader social framework of winning and losing that produces this total institution. While the governing adults consider these games a nonutilitarian pastime distinct from utilitarian productive activities such as schoolwork, counseling, and training, the young people create and discover therapeutic meanings from them.

Adapting the institution into a game is itself a form of an experimental play within the institutional rules. And the finest details of the game design constitute another kind of creative play built on the globally reconfigured metalanguage of rules. It accords with Thomas Malaby's argument that games are always "the process of becoming" and filled with contingencies.[20] A developed game is ontologically closer to the institutions where rules are established not only to avoid uncertainties but also to create contingencies and meanings, while play is a creative action in-between the conscious and unconscious and thus can travel beyond existing rules and create new symbols. But only when the negating functions of the rules become strong will tensions emerge and turn contingencies into the potential for symbolic constructions against and interactions beyond material restrictions.

Before coming to the base, the trainees connected with the online game world as an alternative imaginary of competitions better than their school exams. The games they chose were usually highly combative, with fancy characters or settings and rich instant feedback on winning and losing. The games opened symbolic spaces for the players' identification with the heroes or champion avatars and for creative engagements of contingencies, producing metasocial commentaries on people's positions in the competitive reality. These young people's gaming behaviors at this stage can thus be counted as "deep play" in the Geertzian framework as their pursuits of recognition are embodied in virtual bodies and battlefields. But this metasocial commentary does not intend to create a different version of institutional reality based on a critical awareness of the current version. People reflect on their identities by mapping their pursuits onto the icons and symbols designed by the game companies.

However, when deprived of the freedom to play for longer hours under the anti-immersion systems and Green Dam, the play became deeper. The young players personified Green Dam into a cartoon character called Green Dam Girl, creating their own icons and symbols to play with. This character was dressed in green, wearing a river crab (*hexie*, 河蟹, a mockery of *hexie*, 和諧, China's "harmonizing" actions) hat, armed with a paintbrush to wipe out online filth, wearing an armband with the word "discipline" written on it. Later, the character was adapted into even more creative and sophisticated artworks such as cosplay, manga, and even computer games with "unhealthy" content. The play became deeper after the players were led to create a more implicit symbolic space based on strengthened consciousness and reflection on the existing power relationships and social rules. The institutional restrictions were turned into meaningful cultural contents. At the discursive level, like the game *Chinese Parents* discussed by Florian Schneider in this collection, the Green Dam artworks provide a politically meaningful social commentary on the ironic phenomenon.

The same process was observed in the base. In the beginning, only digital games were banned in the institution. People could play ready-made board games and sports. At this stage, the play was only deep in the Geertzian sense when some residents hoped to prove their institutional status by winning over others through certain strategies. After Three Kingdoms Kill was viewed as addictive, confiscated by the drillmasters, and allowed

only on weekends, the young people came up with The Base Kill. When their available symbolic spaces for entertainment and creativity became constrained, they were motivated to create new symbolic spaces independent from institutional permission, such as games that can be re-created by the players even if they are confiscated. They came to realize that they had not only the agency to win a game but also the creativity to construct an alternative version of the winning itself.

The Base Kill, with designs different from both competitive schoolwork and equally competitive combat-based online games, indicates an alternative way out for these young people. Both China's educational system and the most popular online game at the time—*League of Legends*—emphasized intense competition and social differences. The companies that cultivate professional *LoL* players where some of my informants worked require them to practice and compete from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily in a residential game house, embracing the very philosophy of striving in China's market temporality. The Base Kill, however, is not such a game. Though the game is also combative, it does not emphasize hierarchy and rankings. The charm of the play is beyond the reward of winning, killing, and leveling up.

The Base Kill includes these features:

1. Every character is designed to be different yet equal. There is an intentional balanced design of attributes and skills to enable sustainable deep play. For example, though the character of Xiaobao has only three "hearts" (which means that the "life" of the character is relatively weak), it has the privilege of keeping an additional card at every turn and can avoid attacks from one of the strongest characters, Yongtai. As mentioned above, this design exists because Xiaobao is the youngest trainee in the base and enjoys protection from the older trainees, especially Yongtai. This design shows that the residents have developed a sophisticated understanding of the community and respect individual differences, merits, and equality. The criteria of comparison are no longer based on a one-dimensional grading system determined by a centralized authority, as in China's public education system.

   Though trainees also created character cards of the governing adults, they did not make them negative even though they had terrible experiences with some of the authority figures. Though mockeries and stereo-

types exist in character designs, they are not directed only to the adult figures. The adaptations are based on people's shared impressions of the person without intentional offense. People also make fun of themselves while designing their character cards, which makes the game even more deep and fun. While they play, the trainees may choose to play the characters of governing adults if their designated skills or attributes are helpful for combat or alliance. In the design of the game, there is a mix of mutual mockery and appreciation. It is not a reflection of assigned social status or institutional hierarchy. Instead, it is a play of sincere, mutual appreciation as full individuals. Through the design of the character cards, the trainees show a holistic view of each individual and express their desire to be viewed similarly by the adults. In my interviews with them and through the counseling sessions I observed, the trainees clearly expressed their wish for adults to stop talking in the manner of authorities and commanders, such as *jiang dao li* (talk reasons) and *xia ming ling* (give commands). This design reflects an awakening of the individual psychological interiority among Chinese youth under the market reform and the one-child policy, which challenges the Confucianist patterns underlying China's family-based social control systems.

2. By turning themselves into characters and playing with their selves, trainees subconsciously assign therapeutic meanings to the text of the play. What matters in the play is using your own character not to defeat others, but to gain a better understanding of how to utilize the strength of the character and the rule of the game to achieve a collective win, sometimes through self-sacrifice. Unlike video games, which usually include game mechanics algorithmically constructed to propel gamers to make reductionist choices (see Schneider's chapter in this collection), board games are usually less constrained by the automating numbers that structure people's self-maximizing behaviors. The design plays down the individualistic, goal-oriented pursuit of self-achievement, as encouraged by society and reflected in Chinese middle-class anxiety. Instead, this game includes the pursuit of individual status and recognition without forsaking the pleasure of mutual connection among peers, the sense of belonging to a wider community, and the rich experiential contingencies that can make the less advantaged players feel the

winning potentials. It also resists the assigned social hierarchy and the narrow path of individualistic winning (as in school) by showing the alternative path by design. Though many of the game mechanisms were inherited from the well-designed Three Kingdoms Kill board game, including the collective tactics and contingencies, the reason for taking inspiration from Three Kingdoms Kill indicates certain unconscious collective pursuits.

The gamification of the total institution is a vivid case of "a metasocial commentary upon assigning human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment."[21] But this interpretive act is based not on the static cultural arrangement of a small-scale society but on the dynamic social fact of a large-scale, rapidly developing, modern society. The game as a virtual institution provides a metasocial commentary on the problematic relationships and power mechanisms between adults and youth caught in the "unfree" world structured with binding and escalating social competitions in contemporary China. These social competitions are bound up with political and cultural restrictions, educational and social rankings, and social and economic hierarchies generated through synergies of market forces, the state, and culturally inflected systems of social control. What young people unconsciously express through the deep play of The Base Kill is their hope of gaining the social power of play through a more equal system of competition that allows them to develop social bonds and respect each other as whole persons.

Interestingly, this gamification happened in an institution where middle-class youth are removed from the linear development of both the competitive educational system and the competitive gaming market. On the one hand, the play of The Base Kill happens as a therapeutic act outside the treatment plot of the institution. No one, including the director, anticipated this gamification. And few governing adults would appreciate or even understand it as a therapeutic act. On the other hand, there is a poem-like slogan that every trainee is required to shout out during military training, which corresponds with the trainees' unconscious pursuits. I found the following text on a piece of paper kept under the glass pane of a trainee's desk:

Every day is different, the fingerprint is different, we are mutually different;
Banana and apple, compare and compete, but harm themselves;
Come to the world, express yourself, different from others;
Courage and belief, create yourself, master the success;
Thank the world, happy and free, keep on exercising;
I love myself, accept myself, recognize myself.

Notes

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4. World Health Organization (WHO), *ICD-11 for Mortality and Mobility Statistics* (2019), https://icd.who.int/browse11/1-m/en.

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