

Migrant gaming girls in Beijing: Urban solitude, play, and attempts to integrate

Ethnography

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Abstract

Individuals are said to be free to desire and free to choose their ‘urban dreams’ in China. This is not true. Drawing on participant observation and in-depth interviews with members of a WoW guild, we examine the lived stories and daily practices of these well-educated migrant gaming girls. The girls have usually been ‘taken’ to the metropolis, and their vulnerability lies in the fact they may not get adequate emotional or social support. It’s all because of their ‘outsider’ identities rather than lack of requisite *suzhi* (‘human quality’). A back-and-forth shuttling between popular massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like WoW and the ‘real world’ can help them regain or alter themselves. These enterprising-selves are ultimately thus accomplished. The desiring-selves part, to the contrary, is unable to be empowered by the digital real.

Keywords

migrant females, China, urban solitude, MMORPG, desiring-self

I naively wanted to be different in this big city, but actually, at that time, I didn’t even have the very qualification to be on my own. (Chen Keyi, *Beijing Joshi Zukan*,¹ 2018)

Reform Era China’s reconfiguration of the state and market has created new spaces and opportunities that have attracted millions of migrants to metropolises

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in search of freedom, wealth, and new identities (Hershatler, 2004; Kong, 2016). In traditional Chinese culture, females are expected to remain in their hometowns into old age to provide physical labor and care as ‘household laborers’ and ‘filial daughters’ (Gaetano, 2004; Robinson, 1985; To, 2015). Therefore, only those willing to risk being ‘transgressors’ can flock to the mega-cities to pursue modern identities (Yan, 2003, 2010). It is unavoidable, nevertheless, that as ‘outsiders’ to both their new cities and their hometowns (Gaetano, 2004, 2008; Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Tan and Short, 2004), solitary migrant females usually face more integration difficulty than males due to long-established gender discrimination, among other factors (Gaetano and Jacka, 2004; Pearson, 1995; Song, 1999). Above all, members of the less-educated floating populations from ‘backward’ (*luohou*) regions who have nothing but their ‘pure and productive’ bodies (Ngai, 2005), are ironically blamed for dozens of ‘urban diseases’. One such is prostitution, as migrants are accused of shamelessly utilizing their ‘menacing and contaminating’ bodies (Ma and Cheng, 2005; Ma, 2012; Sun, 2014; Zheng, 2004).

As city dwellers, however, we witnessed another group – well-educated migrant females – who have turned to massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as their urban integration strategy in post-socialist China. Our ethnography illustrates how their vulnerability is not always obvious, and most importantly, how it might be overcome.

Born under the discourse of *suzhi* (human quality), individuals in China learn to cultivate themselves from a young age (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Greenhalgh, 2010; Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Yan, 2003), to win the educational campaigns (Fong, 2007), as well as prepare themselves for the imagined western way of living. They are taught piano, computer skills, art, foreign language, sports and everything that may advance their *suzhi* at a high expense (Kipnis, 2006). They are convinced they are free to desire and free to choose anything, with adequate *suzhi*, including ‘urban dreams’ (Taylor, 2015; Bai et al., 2014; Gaetano, 2017), as well as the ‘ideal personhood associated with urban modernity’ (Fong, 2007). As long as they have adequate *suzhi*, they can even become the ‘elite migrants’ in metropolises (Dong, 2012, 2016).

Reality is often crueler, unfortunately. Most often, the metropolis in their dreams is beyond reach of their hometown and places of education.² Lacking place-based networks and kinship networks,³ they are left on their own. Joining hobby clubs based on shared interests they have long cultivated is a way to affiliate (Hampel, 2017), theoretically. In practice, however, daily long commutes to work (as long as four hours if they live in cheaper exurbs) is an inescapable constraint (Wang et al., 2017), not to mention the intense rhythm of life: working overtime has become very common in Beijing (Shen et al., 2013). They certainly have no time for attending hobby clubs on working days. Even on the weekend, they must trade-off between their hobbies and that way of social solidarity, and an always-wanted good sleep. Many choose to live alone, therefore, dampen their emotions, and recede into the status of social solitude (Coleman, 2009, 2014).

Or, playing the MMORPGs flexibly at home could be an alternative choice. By playing, they can get a sense of community, online and offline social support, and opportunities to build friendships as well as meaningful emotional relationships (Bourgonjon et al., 2015; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Domahidi et al., 2018; Ferguson, 2010; Longman et al., 2009; Snodgrass et al., 2011, 2012; Trepte et al., 2012). According to Liu (2017), the game *QQ Dazzling Dance* is an ideal place for members of the low-*suzhi* floating population to pursue their virtual and actual intimacies. However, as gamers ourselves, we have chosen *WoW (World of Warcraft)* as our site. We believe that this more sophisticated and time-consuming game is popular among well-educated migrants who strive to appear distinguished. Stories from three *WoW* migrant gaming girls will demonstrate how a flexible back-and-forth online-offline shuttling, rather than sticking to just one world, might empower them in the metropolis. In this way, we bridge urban and digital anthropology, while speaking to an issue of broad theoretical significance central to both digital anthropology and game culture studies: online-offline relationships (Boellstorff, 2012, 2016; Lin, 2008; Nardi, 2010, 2015; Snodgrass et al., 2014, 2017a, 2017b; Snodgrass, 2016; Snodgrass Jeffrey et al., 2016).

The study

WoW was released in China in 2005. At the time, the majority of the 1980s and 1990s generation were in high school or university, or had just begun their careers. As pioneers of modernity, they sought to attain elite status by any means possible, even by playing video games from the West (Fong, 2004). Thus, *WoW* is considered a collective memory for the two generations that constitute the majority of the urban migrant population.

To reach these migrant gaming girls among thousands of guilds in Beijing,⁴ we followed Biehl et al. (2007). We sought ‘new ways to engage particularities of effect, cognition, moral responsibility, and action’, by joining several Beijing *WoW* guilds simultaneously in December 2016, through the most popular *WoW* player forum, NGA.cn, as both gamers and researchers. Frequently, active guilds of *WoW* post their recruitment ads on this platform. We randomly joined several amateur guilds whose ‘leading members are colleges students or recent graduates’. We strongly believe the migrant female would do the same since it is the only way of guaranteeing there is a big enough population base whenever they are available to play. Making contact at first, however, was difficult, simply because members did not trust any ‘outsiders’, including those who self-identified as girls in *WoW*. Months passed as we merely observed play and commented online, until one afternoon when CC in one guild suddenly spoke to this article’s first author publicly in the guild’s WeChat group: ‘Could you please go shopping with me, now?’ We said ‘yes’ with no hesitation, and then we learned that she had asked every other girl in the guild privately, but had only received ‘I’d love to, but ...’ in reply.

‘I couldn’t find anyone to accompany me’, she explained, even though she had offered ‘I will buy you dinner in return’. We expected this would be the

opportunity for us to break the ice and enter CC's offline life, since talking, rather than shopping itself, was the crucial point. Luckily, we were right. CC became our key informant and began introducing us to other females and males in the guild in June of 2017. These introductions took place through official guild public gatherings, as well as through unofficial private shopping excursions. In these excursions, we would shoot videos and photos, visit each other while at work or even have sleepovers.

Like most other Chinese WoW guilds, this guild has around one hundred regular members, with one-tenth female gamers (Nardi, 2010). Before July 2018, when version 8.0 of WoW was officially launched on the Chinese servers, female membership in this guild had been stable. Four of these girls fell into our research criteria as migrant gaming girls. However, we investigated all seven of them⁵ through participant observation of their daily routines, as well as formal, open-ended interviews about their life stories (Royse et al., 2007). The first author, Chen, was responsible for data collection, both online and in person. The second and corresponding author, Wang, synthesized the material and wrote it up. In this ethnography, only stories from the three main informants – Cass, Wan, and CC – are told. We believe their lives and experiences are representative of the group as a whole. Other informants in our field agreed with this assertion. All names mentioned are pseudonyms, and all information that might lead to the identification of our informants has been deleted or intentionally obscured.

Stories and lives

'What matters to me now has to be my work'

Cass arrived in Beijing in 2010 with her then-boyfriend, who was working for an online news company. Since she had already earned all of her academic credits, she had decided to pursue her love in Beijing before getting her degree. 'It was the right thing to do', she told us.

Born in Northwest China, Cass grew up like a typical Northwestern *hanzi* (man), 'solving problems by fighting, rather than arguing'. She was convinced that 'all girls are impenetrable brainless, idiots. What they are capable of is just nit-picking.' She dressed like a 'tomboy', 'never played with other girls', but had 'smoked, drank and fought' with boys for as long as she could remember. Accordingly, when she chose to be a 'trailing girl', following her boyfriend, Cass even surprised herself.

'Maybe it was not for love at all', she confessed. Cass had met her boyfriend in an art troupe in college. They had hosted many activities together, then became romantic partners, almost unknowingly.

He was quite handsome, you know. I wanted to be with him all day. That's how I turned into a WoW gamer. We went to the Internet café, and muddled through, just like that ... But not like other girls who played healers to assist their boyfriends.

I decided to be a DPS from the very beginning. It was too difficult for a newcomer anyway, I messed up almost every time. My boyfriend was fine with that, but failure was not encouraging, right? So, I turned myself into a Goblin.⁶ I wanted to be the richest one in the guild. And before long, I was.

Cass had the best possible high school education; her parents, as local university professors, expected her to become a scholar one day, like them. Unfortunately, however, she was ‘not created for learning’. Failing the college entrance examination, she had missed the opportunity to matriculate to a Beijing university by only one point. Instead, she had to attend the local university, the one at which her parents worked, and study a major she had no prior interest in. She said that this was why she was ‘muddling through’ all day. In any case, she had received several ‘F’s her first year, and this zapped her sense of superiority.

Art troupe was one of the few places where Cass could regain her confidence. However, according to her, that may have been thanks to her good looks, rather than her hosting skills. In contrast, WoW opened up a new world in which she could accomplish tasks through her own efforts. ‘I will be the chair of this guild’, she swore. To realize this, she even became a full-time Goblin.

I had several accounts and used each of them to help me master various skills and gain game equipment for selling. When all my accounts achieved the highest levels, I easily bought ‘big birds (high riding)’ with faster-flying speed. I even imagined that they all looked at me with envy. That felt good.

Most of her peers in the guild were college students – none had the devotion or economic resources to compete full-time. She enjoyed it regardless, collecting more and more expensive game mounts and equipment. Finally, her father found out about her online gaming and forced her to quit the game and prepare for the graduate admissions exam. He incentivized her by saying that she could choose her favorite major, journalism. Although she ultimately passed the test, she found that she was not interested in journalism on account of her ‘poor knowledge foundation’. Therefore, when her boyfriend asked her if she would like to go with him to Beijing, she said ‘yes’ with no hesitation. ‘I didn’t know who else to “play” (*wan*, hang out) with’, she confessed.

Living in Beijing, however, was different from what she had imagined. She lived in a small shared apartment with her boyfriend, physically with him all day and night. ‘That didn’t make any difference’, she attempted to convince herself, ‘because I was playing the same game.’ Nevertheless, everything changed, even the game itself, when they had to join a new guild, the one at which we conducted our fieldwork. Beijing is an expensive city in many ways. With the support of neither a university nor their parents, they had to pay rent, bills, and other expenditures on their own. Cass did not want to depend on her boyfriend, thus she decided to exchange her equipment in the game for money.

All went well until she found out that her boyfriend had cheated on her. After they broke up, Cass moved out and remained in sorrow. It was other gamers from the same guild, whom she had never met in the real world, that supported her when she needed it the most.

These brothers and sisters that I played with in WoW helped me through the darkest days of my life. They invited me to dinner. They asked me out to have fun. They accompanied me for walks. They even brought me various gifts . . . They are the best friends of my entire life.

With the encouragement of her ‘brothers and sisters’, Cass applied for doctoral programs, but was not accepted anywhere. She then found a job in an online media company. She worked there for several months before losing enthusiasm. ‘I cannot feel any sense of achievement in the large companies’, she explained. ‘So I started a business of my own’.

This was a time when ‘Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation’ was being promoted by the state. Cass, who only had the experience of being a student, employee, and gamer, could do nothing but follow suit. She decided to start an online tea shop.

There were too many competitors, you know. The biggest customers of my shop were my best friends in my guild and their offline friends they referred to me.

As her business grew, so did the scheduling conflicts. ‘I’d played the game for seven years and I really loved it’, Cass said: ‘To be honest, I had to quit . . . what matters to me now has to be my work.’ Cass then turned the ‘tomboy’ again, presiding over her business as both the boss and the only employee. However, outside she still looked simple and pretty, hair-to-shoulders and artistic.

No one can help me but myself . . . I have to get up very early in the morning and work late into the night. Only in this way, orders of the day can be fully handled. While dealing with all the photographing, packaging, and mailing stuff, I have no appetite at all.

Often times, the still-single Cass was too busy to eat. However, she always found time to slow down and drink tea. She only drinks two types of tea when not working: cheap *chunjian* (spring-tipped tea) and typical Northwest *sampaotai* (a mixed tea). These were the teas she had drunk before, or in her own words, ‘it was the taste of my hometown . . . it made me feel as if I was living in my hometown’.

‘I spent almost all my waking time playing WoW’

Also from the Northwest, Wan was a veritable ‘trailing girl’. As soon as she had received her master’s degree in Hong Kong in 2016, she came to Beijing to reunite

with her boyfriend and wait for him to get his degree. What she did not know at that time was that she, a WoW amateur, could one day become a famous ‘professional’ gamer.

Wan and her boyfriend had been classmates in high school. While she completed a shorter, more course-based masters in Hong Kong, her boyfriend had to work longer, in a laboratory, for his master’s thesis. Born into a fairly affluent family, Wan had never worried about financial issues. Her parents, who had already achieved enough in their professional careers, expected nothing of Wan but a wedding and children. Wan had agreed to this ‘filial daughter’ mode of life, mostly; she also longed for true love, an earth-shattering romance. She had yearned for this since she was a teenager.

Wan got the idea from her first game, *Tokimeki Memorial*, a popular dating game in China in the 1990s and early 2000s. In her own words, ‘it is still a masterpiece.’ Wan had been a good student in middle school, but her talents did not carry through to high school. This was never a problem for Wan. ‘Sooner or later’, as she said, ‘I will go back and live with my parents. Why bother working so hard to get slightly higher marks on the college entrance examination like the others?’ She found that the only thing that could light her passion was *Tokimeki Memorial*, where ‘no matter which [partner] the girl in the game finally chose, she would have a happy ending for sure.’

Wan did secretly love one boy in her class, but not her eventual boyfriend. The boy in her class was not interested in her, nor her dating game. Yet, he would comfort her when Wan was scolded by her teachers, usually for her addiction to games. Choked with tears and lying on her desk, she would feel his hands in her hair. This encouraged Wan to make more mistakes, and get scolded even more often. From then on, she dressed in a cutesy feminine style, kept a slim figure, and talked in a sweet voice. Wan even chose her college based on this boy, fantasizing that geographic proximity might spark romance. Yet, their ambiguous relationship did not progress. Wan did not want to give up, and she attempted to follow him to graduate school in the UK. Fate was not on her side, however, and she ended up in Hong Kong. Despite the fact that it can be considered the closest part of China to the UK, Hong Kong was cold comfort.

This time, Wan had to move on. She suddenly found that everyone around her had a boyfriend or girlfriend. She was not young anymore, and she did not want to be a ‘left-over woman’ (*sheng nv*). Finally, she accepted the advances of another boy, her current boyfriend, who had had a crush on her since high school. Indeed, this man let Wan know how valuable she was: ‘I was a spoiled girl again.’ Their only problem was geographical distance. Wan decided to compromise, following him in his favorite game, WoW.

We were literally together when we were playing. He used to be a raiding-type player, like other boys. In the case of playing with me, however, we just traveled around Azeroth,⁷ collecting pets and costumes. He said I magically transformed such a masculine game into a girly dating game ... [laugh]

These online excursions reveal how much Wan wanted to go to Beijing after graduation and rent a room near her boyfriend's campus. She expected her dreams to come true, and for them to live together happily ever after.

Her boyfriend showed her around the city, taking her on dates, and surprising her. Under the pressure of his pending graduation, however, he also had to devote himself to his lab work, leaving Wan alone in their small room. Wan was upset because the relationship had never been like this in her mind. Thousands of times she wondered, 'why do I stay in Beijing even though I can't see him every day?' This upsetting idea was soon abandoned, as she convinced herself that this was a temporary state; 'once he graduates, he will marry me and go with me to our hometown.'

During this monotonous waiting period, Wan had joined a WoW guild, chosen at random, to play with others. Unsurprisingly, it was not the game itself, but playing single and flirting with the chair of the guild in her sugar-sweet voice that captivated Wan. 'It's a kind of fun, you know', she confessed. Wan did not regard this as cheating on her boyfriend, 'I just tried my best to stop revisiting my high school nightmare.'

The chair, on the other hand, had no obligation to reciprocate her feelings or desires; he was not her boyfriend. Wan found no one would take her on raids unless she had strong healing capabilities. Angry and ashamed, she quit. She was again left doing nothing, confined to their small room in the big metropolis while she dwelled on her own emotions. Making matters worse, it was at this time that the Beijing government attempted to 'relieve the "low-end" population'. Wan was still feeling blue when one morning her landlord informed her that she had to move out within 15 days.

This precarious life and her unstable relationships tortured Wan. She wanted to return to her hometown, but not alone, and not at the cost of being a 'leftover woman'. With help from her family, she rented another room. This room was in worse condition than her previous one, and was even more expensive. Her boyfriend was still too busy to be with her. Wan was left with only WoW, and even in that world, only her healing capability seemed needed.

This was when she joined our guild, where her boyfriend had previously been team leader. For the sake of remaining polite acquaintances, others would take her on raids, even when she was not capable of them. For this same reason, she could not freely flirt with other users, as she had done in her first guild. Always being a rookie and an accessory to a man was no fun either. Wan thus decided to take every opportunity to improve her gaming skills. She never missed a single raid, day or night. Six months later, when she was becoming more accomplished, the chair of the guild showed less and less interest in organizing 'group warfare', as he was allocating more time to his new girlfriend. Feeling abandoned, Wan finally quit this time.

Um ... I feel so sorry ... I really appreciated you guys generously accepting me and allowing me to raid. Every time we challenged a new boss together, I would extol the

greatness of this game, as well as the friendships you guys had provided. Every time, however, when I was fully prepared, there would be some bad news about how the activities must be canceled. Different from most of you who had other stuff to do in real life, I spent almost all my waking time playing WoW. I have nothing else to do except this game . . . I finally made up my mind to find a PFU guild [a professional guild], after much hesitation. I really appreciate the care and tolerance you guys gave to me. I'm about to leave, and hopefully, we might play together again.

These touching words were typed in the guild's WeChat group before she turned to her new professional guild as their head healer. Here, she even found her new goal in life, climbing into the Top 10 WCL (Warcraft Logs) list. 'The happiest thing every week was to be ranked higher than the previous week', she said with enthusiasm: 'my score is even higher than the boys' you know.' Her first guild chair invited her back, but she declined. She was not the spoiled girl anymore, at least not in this game.

Wan and her 'Mr. Right' were still together in Beijing, although they had had a few fights. Wan complained that he was keeping her waiting, even after his graduation, for what was just some pipe dream. Meanwhile, her boyfriend was disappointed about Wan's obsession with list-climbing in her virtual game. 'Sometimes, I even believed I didn't need him anymore, as long as I could raid', Wan confided to us, 'but we will get married and go back to my hometown, right?'

'The game is an escape from my real life'

Of the three women we interviewed, CC was the only one who had come to Beijing primarily for work. This had been her war on fate, or at least that's how she saw it when she got her bachelor's degree in 2014. She was eager for the days when she might have the right to make her own choices, in Beijing, the city of dreams.

Born into patriarchal Northeastern families, girls like CC are considered 'redundant': no matter how hard she worked, she could not change the fact that she was not a boy. CC's parents were both civil servants which meant that, in the age of the 'One-child Policy', they would not be able to have any more children or else they would be fired for excessive births. Unlike other parents who decided to hide their original patriarchal intentions in their hearts, CC's parents often expressed their frustration in front of her. With regret, her parents then made up their minds to raise her as a 'good girl', like Wan, who would get married and have children in their hometown.

As a result of her parents' frustration and resignation, CC learned from childhood to play the role of the 'filial daughter' in public. As long as her parents were happy with her manageable behavior, she could also put forward some of her own desires. Her parents ordered her to choose a local college, for example. However, she would only comply with their demands if they allowed her to study medicine, instead of their preference of public administration. With this major, she believed, she could live on her own one day. 'I would thank the [One-Child] Policy, you

know', she said. She would often comfort herself like this: 'Life would be more miserable if I had a little brother.' What life had taught her, furthermore, was that only by leaving her hometown would she be liberated from her family's patriarchal clutch.

Thus, in medical school, CC studied so hard that she barely had any time to relax.

I was assigned to a local hospital for an internship when I was a senior. I really cherished this opportunity, because my supervisor was from Beijing. If I were good, there was a chance I could go with him ... I was as busy as a bee, you know. I worked extra hours and came home late every single night, no matter what the weather was. I never took a day off, and I didn't even have time for dinner, not to speak of dating ... It was more than becoming a doctor (a technician actually), thus more effort was needed.

She succeeded, and her supervisor took her to Beijing, recommending her to a first-class hospital, per her wishes. But this was only a professional relationship. She needed more support settling down in this new metropolis. Like Chen Keyi in the popular television show *Beijing Joshi Zukan*, CC first tried to contact a high school classmate, a PhD student at an elite university in Beijing. Unlike in the show, however, they soon became lovers.

There was a time when CC's career and life were both going well, which made her think she could change from an ugly duckling into a beautiful swan. However, peer pressure and antagonism also arose. CC often overheard her colleagues criticize her as an example of nepotism, not good enough to get hired on her own merits. She was looked down upon for not graduating from a university in Beijing, her ability as an X-ray imaging specialist was questioned, and she even became embroiled in several patient-hospital disputes:

Every day when I came home, I was exhausted. I was so disappointed with the real life which was full of disease, fighting, and conflict. But every time when I attempted to get some emotional support from my boyfriend, he was busy with his experiments in the lab. I knew I was disturbed; an exit was what I truly needed. Otherwise, I was sure I would be mentally ill.

CC's exit from her miserable real life in Beijing, playing WoW in the virtual world, had actually been proposed by her boyfriend, a former member of our guild. She soon found joy in the game. It was a simpler world, with real-time rewards. CC joined our guild when a healer quit. As a rookie, all that could be expected of her was to not drag our team down. Luckily, Qin, another player in the guild, helped her patiently. Another migrant gaming girl, Qin was the living goddess of the guild. She was the most physically attractive girl involved, was from a wealthy family, had an excellent job, had married well, and, most crucially, she was skilled at the game. Though she had quit before we were affiliated with the guild, we still heard

legends of her from other members, including CC. ‘Half of the boys in our guild had crushes on her’, CC said with jealousy, ‘I will be Qin one day.’

Of the three pillars of CC’s life at that time – her gaming, her career, and her relationship – gaming was the easiest. As in her internship days, she devoted all her after-work enthusiasm to WoW. In only half a year, the aggressive girl had become everyone’s envy and a master healer. ‘I took notes for my every raid, drew lessons from the past. I watched a lot of teaching videos to learn skills . . . There were reasons for my success.’ CC regained her confidence, and everything seemed to be going better until her boyfriend broke up with her because of her obsession with the game. To make matters worse, her former internship supervisor transferred to another hospital, leaving her with no protection at work. Feeling marginalized by her colleagues, CC resigned and tried to return matters to normal, one-by-one.

Though she did not believe gaming deserved all the blame, she decided to beg her boyfriend for a second chance. In exchange, she would agree to quit the game. Later, she learned the inconvenient truth behind their breakup; her boyfriend had already moved on to another girl, another medical student, from an elite Beijing university, who was on her way to becoming a real doctor.

Sure, my educational background is not good. Still, I’ve tried my best for a better life. I might not make a lot of money, at least not as much as he would have been able to earn in the future, but it’s enough for me to live a comfortable life. Right? I can never figure out why hard work always loses out to where you graduated . . . There are a great many elite university students in our guild, right? They’ve never looked down upon me.

No matter how hard CC begged, her ex-boyfriend would not get back together. CC attributed this to her unimpressive alma mater, which was not going to change. Sorrowful and between jobs, CC decided to remould herself, starting with her appearance. She thus frequently asked out other female players in the guild to go shopping, go for manicures, or go to salons.

My parents and my ex-boyfriend always complained I behaved like a boy. I just wanted to dress casually and cutesy, you know, with my T-shirts, jeans, and ponytail . . . Now I have neither a job nor a boyfriend. I am afraid I need to change my image this time. Am I sexy in this hairstyle and skirt?

She blinked her big eyes with gold eyeshadow, begging us for an answer. With her black lace skirt and wavy brown hair, we admitted that she did not look like a college girl anymore, for better or worse. As some of her closest friends, we knew she played up her sex appeal intentionally, to regain her lost femininity. Looking at her attractive body in the glow of the sunset, however, we could not help picture her during a raid, disheveled and nervously shaking her legs. We knew that ‘You look fantastic’ was what we should tell her, and thus we did.

CC never quit the guild like she had promised her ex-boyfriend. She just got too busy to play sometimes, because she wanted to perform well in her new position in

the real world. She changed jobs twice over the following few months, keeping herself busy. Despite work pressure and challenges, however, she managed to find time to play WoW.

She did not need to notify us when she was feeling blue. We could tell from how she dressed in the game. A standard suit of plate armor meant she was still employed, just in a bad mood. Meanwhile, a bikini with expensive rainbow ornaments and standing in the main square enjoying the desiring or envious eyes on her half-naked body 30 minutes before a raid implied she might lose her job, or at least she intended to leave it. Though we observed more of the later status as time went on, CC insisted on dwelling in Beijing in solitude, in and out of the game, just as she was in and out of work.

Real and unreal

Studies suggest individuals can be either consonant or dissonant with a particular cultural norm in the real world. When this happens, individuals will choose to be either less or more attached to the virtual world (Dressler and Bindon, 2000; Dressler et al., 2007). In the latter case, an unsupported socially solitary situation in the metropolis (e.g. a virtual world like WoW) can be an escape from the ill-positioned selves in real life. It can also be a means to temporally regain the self (Snodgrass et al., 2014). Our ethnography, however, will challenge this simple consonant-dissonant model.

Firstly, migrant gaming girls are equally vulnerable in many ways, even though the *wailaimai* ('younger sisters from the outside') stigma is no longer applicable (Fu, 2009; Gaetano, 2004). Unlike *beipiao* (drifters in Beijing), the group of ambitious young people who actively decided to attach themselves in Beijing for more promising business or career opportunities (Tjia and Ho, 2017), migrant gaming girls are passively dragged into the capital city, by a paternal character, no matter how much *suzhi* they had achieved, and not necessarily for work. In unbalanced relationships where only men can make the next move, additionally, they are either cheated on or kept in waiting. Suddenly in January 2019, for example, we were even told that Wan had to move to Shanghai with her boyfriend. In their workplaces as well, they have to fight harder than men, to achieve equal approval, or at least to avoid marginalization. These problems might have been easily solved had they remained in their hometowns, or anywhere where social and emotional support was in easier reach. In such places, however, people who were generally labeled as low *suzhi* would have had more predictable lives. Escaping this monotony, even if only for a time, was their common, desperate incentive to migrate to Beijing. They believed that China's modern capital city, on the international stage, would challenge the blinkered provincial thoughts to which they were accustomed: the patriarchal traditions and the pre-determined lifestyle centered around marriage and children (Gaetano, 2004; Robinson, 1985; To, 2015). Yet, they knew from the very beginning they were not tough enough to get a Beijing *hukou* (household registration). Most probably, they would have to go back to their less modern

hometown or move to other less competitive cities someday. They were always ready to leave and regress in their life trajectories. Still, Beijing, the dream city, is believed to be a temporary escape from their predetermined fate: Cass's incapability in her study, Wan's duty as a 'filial daughter', and CC's helpless response to her parents' frustration. Unfortunately, in such a place they didn't belong, they have to escape again, from the real world to the virtual world.

To this end, the virtual world is never merely a simple escape. Though not a complete free-for-all, WoW can still be a place for migrant gaming girls to sample an alternative lifestyle, that could no way be achieved by cultivating *suzhi* itself. They do get their *suzhi* through educations and hobbies, but these do not change their identities that ultimately result in their vulnerability, as both migrants and females. Especially the latter unqualified them from being a Beijinger with *hukou*, or even a *beipiao*. But the guilds accept them unconditionally, ignoring their birth or alma mater. They actually become drifters in games, the only place where a different social and gender role might be tried.

For Cass, online gaming was her first chance to accomplish matters for herself, rather than her usual 'muddling through.' Once her entrepreneurship could provide the same masculine feeling of accomplishment, there was no need to stay in the game where she was beloved, but was hurt that she would always be reminded of her vulnerability. Only by occasionally drinking tea from her hometown could she regain some of her feminine side. But she might become a real *beipiao* someday, the only one of the three. Wan, on the contrary, had never previously experienced a masculine way of living. Thus, she naturally chose the lifestyle of housewife and 'good girl'. If it had not been for her boyfriend's unavailability, she might never have had the chance to play WoW like an aggressive boy, join her professional guild, and climb the rankings in this temporary settlement. Once started playing, however, an alternate chapter of her life opened, though this did not necessarily entail a full or permanent transformation into a professional woman. As the most nuanced of the three, CC did not take sides between the dichotomies of online-offline or masculinity-femininity. Instead, she shuttled between these two worlds, and two gender roles, and eventually developed her own mode of managing the flexible real-virtual and work-play boundaries. More than a second life (Boellstorff, 2015), the digital real empowers these girls by providing the necessary courage, confidence and energy. This allows them to regain or alter their personhood, allowing them to adapt to the real world.

Non-migrant gaming girls often describe a different experience:

I play WoW just to kill time. We native Beijingers are kind of lazy in the eyes of migrants. It is partially true, I admit. I have a place to live, a decent job, but no kids. The only thing I have to worry about is visiting my parents who live only a couple of blocks away every week. I don't have any economic pressure at all. Therefore, I might buy every single new version of this game as soon as it comes out.

This was told to us by a 38-year-old girl in our guild, who dressed like a college student. She had met her husband, a Beijing local, in college, and they had chosen

to be a DINK (Double Income No Kids) couple after getting married. Her husband played in another guild because of her inferior gaming capabilities, and she was fine with this. As a matter of fact, she never even expected her husband to come home early. She was happy to take her time playing the game in her unprofessional way, rather than being a responsible homemaker, and doing tasks like making dinner for her husband. 'It's just a game', she would say.

Migrant girls, on the other hand, treasure the digital real. To them, it was more real than the guild's official offline activities such as public gatherings. The gatherings are held randomly, sometimes every few weeks, sometimes several times a week. Attendance was not mandatory, and participants split the costs. Attendance varied accordingly. Though their presence was appreciated, the girls we knew, except for Qin, were generally unwilling to attend. This was because in the male-dominated world, the topic was always WoW or other games. Even face-to-face, people would bury themselves in mobile games while chatting. To many girls, this was just an offline raid which would not change their states of solitude. This is not to mention the fact that their real bodies, rather than their virtual avatars, would be exposed to the male gaze.

Speaking of bodies, they have to return to the physical real anyway, for the basic needs for human beings. For fighting solitude, for example, girls would like to gossip freely in small parties, about topics from raising dogs and makeup to PMS (premenstrual syndrome) and sex. CC organized many of these parties while she was unemployed, some of them in her own apartment. No matter how wide the theme, they would circle back to the topic of sex.

Wan: I haven't had any sex for the last month. He was too busy, you know ... Later when he came back, I just lost all my sexual desire.

CC: So did I! I'm tired of solving it myself [masturbation]. But I can't help it, because I hate the feeling of being lonely ... I really hope someone could hold me in their arms to sleep.

When this conversation occurred, Wan's boyfriend had been on a long business trip, while CC was still single. According to Wan, CC was sexually sensitive and easily turned on, but she also could not get enough comfort, even if Wan physically helped her masturbate when she slept over. 'I really want someone to hug me', CC yelled as we sat in a small restaurant full of people. Others glared but said nothing. 'I really don't want to go back to that empty place', she continued. This time, unfortunately, she was ignored amidst the noisy voices in the street. It might be true that urban solitude can be a positive experience and relation, 'drawing its members into an unlimited becoming' (Coleman, 2009). Games like WoW, indeed, seemed to help realize this unlimited becoming for these girls via this back-and-forth shuttling or other forms of empowerment. But becoming what? A high-*suzhi* white-collar employee? A *beipiao* entrepreneur? An escapist professional gamer? Or a devil-may-care amateur ... Nothing would change their nature as migrants and females, as well as their bodied feeling of solitude. The desiring-selves part in

Yan (2010)'s sense was never fulfilled. Neither WoW nor any other games could help.

Conclusion

Social mobility is an aspirational ideology associated with urban middle-class lifestyles (Gaetano, 2017). In this ideology, members of the adequate *suzhi* groups, like the educated gaming girls in our stories, are said to be free to desire, and free to choose anything. This includes the 'urban dreams', where even a 'sense of being at any one point in time' can be realized (Du, 2018; Gutting, 1996). However, our ethnography refutes this.

Though some of the migrant females with whom we spoke had come to the metropolis to escape parental control, most were still trying to adapt to their female ascribed identities such as 'filial daughters' or 'loyal companions'. The gender roles were always their primary mobility concerns, and they had all been taken to Beijing by another individual who had been fulfilling a male gender role. In this sense, they had never truly chosen their lives based on their *suzhi*, but instead had been forced to adapt themselves to the metropolis. They had been either cheated on or kept waiting in a relationship, marginalized at the workplace for their 'outsider' identity, either because of birth or alma mater. Lacking adequate social and emotional support as migrants, they turned to MMORPGs, like WoW, rather than some serious hobbies that they had long cultivated that might lead to a social solidarity, for help.

The game, on the other hand, was merely their escape from the real world, owing to their cultural dissonance (Snodgrass et al., 2014). Below the surface, however, the temporary escape was a means to gather the necessary courage, confidence and energy to regain or alter themselves. Only in this way could they be empowered by the digital real, and allow the status of urban solitude to become 'an unlimited becoming', as Coleman (2009) predicted. This is notable because in Chinese culture, games are generally considered improper activities that may ultimately develop into internet addictions and moral crises. Party media even encourage parents to shield their children from 'harmful' computer games, the 'spiritual opium' that can only lead to empty souls and myopia (Golub and Lingley, 2008). Ironically, it is these stigmatized MMORPGs that can and do provide these migrant females with precious opportunities to compensate for their vulnerabilities. The guild in which we did our fieldwork, in this sense, is indifferent.

Hayes (2007) has illustrated that women may use games to engage with the identities they desire in real life. However, the back-and-forth shuttling between the physical and digital real, or other forms of empowerment, can only accomplish the enterprising part of the self (Yan, 2010). On the contrary, the desiring-selves, in the sense of physical accompaniment and sexual intercourse, are more valued by modern females. Yet these are never officially or publicly fulfilled, even by realistic MMORPGs. This is likely the reason why straight women like Wan and CC cross the line by helping each other masturbate. Another option is splitting and hiding

their desiring-selves like Cass: working hard every minute, keeping busy, forgetting about the fact that she is a girl. Making as-if, or dropping off the desiring-selves, as Lamb (2018) denotes – every choice is accompanied by feelings of pain and loss. In facing this, we are all the same.

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Notes

1. A network drama adapted from the famous Tokyo Joshi Zukan that attracted much attention and discussion online, as it broached the topic of well-educated migrant girls in China.
2. Though there are many resources for higher education in a metropolis like Beijing, the competition for colleges there is intense.
3. As Yan (2003) has illuminated, in cases of sudden unemployment, a rural woman's kin or fellow villagers may provide temporary lodgings, new jobs, and even help negotiate wages with potential employers. They may also get support by marrying local residents (Gaetano, 2008; Zheng, 2004). Unfortunately, females with adequate *suzhi* usually feel they are above applying these strategies.
4. Though there were no official data on the exact number of WoW gamers or guilds in Beijing, it could be easily estimated. WoW has over 13 million users, and more than half were Chinese (Nardi, 2010). A WoW guild can hold up to 500 members. According to the Beijing share of the population (1.5%), the number of guilds in Beijing is about one to two hundred thousand.
5. Two of the others are literally migrants, but their migration had been for graduate school, while the other is a native Beijinger.
6. In WoW, a healer is a character whose primary purpose or class role is to heal and protect their allies. A DPS is a game role who is responsible for inflicting damage on others, while a Goblin is a character who is good at earning gold coins.
7. Azeroth is the name of the world in which the majority of the Warcraft series is set.

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