From *Wangba* Back to *Wangka*: Ruination and Renewal of the Chinese Internet Café

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**Abstract**

This paper takes a particular angle that begins with the drastic decline of internet cafés in China and their receding yet still evolving presence. This project aims at delineating the history of internet cafés as urban spaces in relation to the different roles they played in various stages of Chinese modernity. The particularities of local development, as directed by trajectories of Chinese modernization, has led to a contempt for the ‘low quality’ of internet cafés, on the one hand, and a nostalgic sentimentalization of its ruination, on the other. Internet cafés are situated in the present moment of transition as a reflection of larger transformations of urban renewals and ideals of modernity. Drawn from both ethnographic research and existing literature on internet cafés, this paper theorizes the space that Chinese internet cafés have produced in the past 25 years.

**Keywords**

China – gaming space – internet cafe – modernity – production of space

**Introduction**

The emergence of internet cafés in Asia and their spatial divergence from counterparts in other parts of the world has attracted much academic attention. Jin (2010: 36) points out that ‘PC bang (the Korean version of the internet café) affected the rapidly changing online game system’ in the Korean context. Chee (2006: 231) describes ‘PC bang’ as ‘the site of numerous significant social interactions’ as ‘places of psychological comfort and support’ (ibid.: 230), and
as locations ‘to escape the various constraints of domestic environment’ (ibid.: 232). Meanwhile, Lindtner and Szablewicz have written extensively on internet cafés and emphasized the distinctive features of Chinese internet cafés, or wangba 网吧 (net bar) in Chinese, as ‘shared sites of nostalgia’ and part of a ‘collective identity’ (2011: 92). In her ethnography of Chinese internet cafés, Liu (2009) presents the subject matter as a ‘heterotopian third place’: firstly, it is, in direct reference to Foucault (1997), ‘heterotopian’ because the space of the internet café serves as ‘a means of escape from authoritarianism and repression’ (Liu 2009: 171); secondly, it is a ‘third place’, referencing Oldenburg (1999), in the sense that internet café patrons ‘escape from the daily stress of modern life’ and, more importantly, ‘facilitate the equal interactions and free communication essential for social democratisation’ (Liu 2009: 172). Wang (2011) similarly argues that internet cafés are ‘third places’ and ‘important sites of social interaction.’

All of the above works built solid ethnographic foundations for a contextualized history of internet cafés as social spaces. However, unlike these previous works on Chinese internet cafés, which were mostly conducted during the period under which internet cafés were considered as either an anthropological novelty or a contested space (Zhang 2013), I am writing in a period in which the whole business of internet cafés is under the simultaneous process of ruination and renewal. Many internet cafés are rendered urban ruins in new waves of re-development, while others are renovated and transformed based on the new ideals of urban life. Through various discursive and material ‘traces’ of internet café history, we can reveal the trajectory of urban development as well as transformations of ideals and practices of urban living in different historical phases in China.

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork that explored the state of Chinese internet cafés from December 2013 to March 2014. I initially surveyed eleven internet cafés in Shanghai and Wuhan. The majority of the fieldwork was conducted via participant observation of ten regular customers in one internet café, Xinyue Wangba, in Wuhan. My approach is to present theoretical reflections on the history of internet cafés in the context of Chinese modernity, and these reflections are partly built on my fieldwork and partly draw from existing literature.

**Ruination of Chinese Internet Cafés**

In the beginning, at a [fairly] luxuriously furnished internet café, there were many fancy cars parking at the front door. As the place is gradually
run down, extravagant vehicles at the door are replaced by ordinary and cheap cars. In the end, only bicycles can be found in front of the internet café. (Interview with a 25-year-old regular internet bar patron, Wuhan, January 2014)

I shall begin with a very brief chronology of events during the last 25 years to provide a background history. A widely circulated Chinese op-ed article called ‘Looking back at the rise and fall of Internet cafés in China’ (Dong 2014) explains the history of internet cafés in China. Firstly, the article identifies 1996-2002 as the ‘Golden Age of the internet café.’ The main activities in internet cafés were online chatting via OICQ (‘Opening I Seek You’ is the early Chinese copycat of ICQ, which later became the popular platform QQ) and web browsing. Internet cafés were initially expensive spaces only for the knowledge class and information technology elites. It was reported that regular patrons spent hundreds of RMB each month vising internet cafés, while the average wage at the time was around three to four hundred RMB. As many internet café owners boasted at the time: ‘If you want to be rich, open an internet café’ (Dong 2014).

Initially the licence for opening an internet café was available for free, as it was officially encouraged to spread internet connections. The subsequent expansion of internet cafés into ordinary use has gradually changed the main group of patrons from the middle class to the working class in the mid-2000s. According to Rolandsen (2011: 117), the turning point was in 2002, when ‘a change in management policy is said to have been initiated in the wake of an accidental fire in a Beijing Internet café in 2002’ and subsequently ‘in 2003, the central government ordered the local authorities to stop issuing licenses to independent Internet cafés.’ 2003 to 2009 marked the ‘Silver Age,’ when profits in this business were still soaring despite stricter controls and crackdowns on ‘black’ (illegal) internet bars (hei wangba 黑网吧). During the same period, internet cafés became the dominant space for PC gaming, in particular MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games. This period was also the period in which most of my participants, who are now in their mid or late 20s, became familiar with internet cafés and PC games. This particular age group has experienced the shrinkage of the internet café business most intensively, because they entered the sphere of internet café gaming during its heyday and were still attached to the space when it started to decline.

From 2010 to 2013, the number of internet cafés in urban areas declined despite more relaxed regulations on leasing business licences. According to an official report on the condition of the internet café industry, there were 136,000 registered wangbas across the country in 2012, ten thousand less than in 2011. The report estimates that there would be a further slump from 2014. In 2008,
57.5% of Chinese youths (ages 18 to 25) went to internet cafés to play games; this figure went down to 49.4% in 2009, to 34.3% in 2012, and to 27.4% in 2013 (CNNIC 2014). The slump in the total number of internet café visitors during the five years from 2008 to 2013 was noticeable; the ‘Dark Age’ of internet cafés had arrived. The former prosperity was no more, and China had now entered the ‘sunset era for internet café business’ (interview with an internet café owner, Wuhan, December 2013).

In order to write a history of internet cafés as a space, allow me to go back to the context of the production of this space. As Lefebvre (1991: 31) writes, ‘every mode of production with it subvariants […] produces a space, its own space.’ Space needs to be contextualized within the respective epoch’s mode of production. The Chinese state has its own preferred periodization for the post-Maoist era, which still contains a flavour of Socialism’s theory of ‘stages’: the first period or stage, roughly from the early reforms in the 1980s until the 2000s, focused on economic development and accumulation of material wealth at whatever cost; the second period, which started in the late 2000s and was consolidated in recent years, is meant to remedy the social frailty and environmental loss caused during the first period, and is geared towards promoting new growth of consumption beyond the former reliance on an export economy.

Here, I begin with the first phase of the post-Maoist reform period that emphasized fast industrialization and accelerated accumulation. The core representative spaces of this particular epoch were factories, as the site of production, and ‘urban villages’ (chengzhongcun 城中村), as the residential space for the migrant factory workers and transient working poor. For the past decades, these urban spaces have been essential sites of anthropological fieldwork in China because they not only play key economic roles but also because they are the frontlines of urban social struggles. In the aftermath of the first phase, as Lefebvre (1991: 55) predicted,

The way forward for socialism [in the 70s, the socialist state would] opt for accelerating growth, whatever the costs, whether for reason of competition, prestige or power […]. The inevitable consequences of this approach – namely, the aggravation of inequalities in development and the abandonment of whole regions and whole sectors of populations – are seen from this viewpoint as of negligible importance.

Hyper-development of industrial and manufacturing capitalism is followed by its equally rapid decline. Global capitalism has sought to maximize profits by relocating production and labour around the globe while the factories closed down en masse and domestic urban villages were most impatiently
dismissed as laggards of continuing urban renewal and gentrification. In recent years, along with a number of significant waves of factory closures, urban villages struggle to persist in the face of forced demolition and re-development projects that will replace these urban villages with high-rise apartments and shopping centres.

Deeply embedded in the economic, social, and spatial ecology of factories, urban villages, and the urban poor (Qiu 2009), internet cafés in these locations are hastily becoming ruins, either already demolished or quietly waiting for their eventual death. In fact, borrowing Edensor’s words, internet cafés are ‘stranded from the recent, but seemingly far-distant past, discarded and outdated, these things had abruptly been deemed unfashionable, were victims of the morbid cycle of repetition, novelty and death’ (2005: 315). The fading presence of internet cafés in these industrial hubs, which were the ‘driving forces of modernization’ (xiandaihua de zhongliudizhu 现代化的中流砥柱) in the hyperbole of a Maoist past, signifies a historical cycle of ‘repetition, novelty, and death’ similar to the ruination of Parisian arcades as demonstrated in Walter Benjamin’s rather protracted yet profound study of these ruins of modernity. By invoking Benjamin (1999), I am not simply comparing the similar ‘outmoded-ness’ of Parisian arcades and Chinese internet cafés in European and Chinese modernity, but I am hoping to articulate a particular perspective or even a strategy that is useful for understanding this history. Benjamin: ‘Overcoming the concept of “progress” and the concept of “period of decline” are two sides of the same thing’ (cited in Highmore 2002: 66). Following this line of argument, I intend to take account of both tendencies – insistence on ‘progress’ (on the side of the Chinese authorities) and sentimentalization of ruination (on the side of, sometimes formerly, regular internet café customers). On the one hand, internet cafés are purged of attempts to envision a celebrative future; on the other hand, they become spaces of nostalgia where the patrons seek to resist the present.

First, the present moment of transition for the disappearing internet cafés is a result of the ‘progress’ brought about by the arrival of urban renewals and new ideals of modernity. In the official rhetoric, China has been obsessed with terms such as progress, modernization, and modernity for the past decades of momentous development. Exactly due to this acceleration and sole emphasis on quantitative growth, the cycle of repetition and the process of ruination are also accelerated and amplified. In this cycle, the novelty of the internet café and its immense popularity in its prosperous days, often accompanied by its notoriety and its detractors, has ended, or at least is in the process of disappearing. The internet café is outmoded due to the emergence of a new mode of modernity/production. Its former role of serving the urban residents (especially the
poor) as the main facilitator of internet connection is finished. The expansion of national broadband, fibre internet, and 4G mobile connections, as well as hardware affordable to ordinary families, has rendered the original material foundation of internet cafés – the rarity and high cost of personal internet connection and personal computers – ashes of history. As internet cafés now struggle to keep up with the incessant Chinese consumerist thirst for novelty and new forms of entertainment, they exist in a time when their existence has been ‘superseded, outmoded’ (Highmore 2002: 65). The internet café has lost the aura of novelty, but an examination of its current state will reveal that ‘different temporalities exist side by side: the latest version alongside last year’s model’ (ibid.: 61). As Edensor (2005: 311) has demonstrated in his study of British industrial ruins, the process of ruination also contains ‘rich potential for re-interpretation.’ Hidden behind the glorious triumphs of modernity in burgeoning mega-urban societies, the crisis of internet cafés may reveal a micro-history of Chinese modernity.

For instance, the specific history of the internet café Xinyue Wangba, where I conducted most of my fieldwork, can help concretely illustrate the process of ruination induced by continuous modernization. The internet café is located in the centre of an old danwei (work unit) residential block. The neon sign of the internet café ‘Xinyue Wangba’ is buried among many other signs of restaurants and hotels that congregate in the same area. The adjacent road is under construction and the opposite side of the road consists of danwei-style residential buildings. In fact, the very building, whose interior is now occupied by an internet café and an hourly hostel, was a food market during the Maoist
era (now under renovation to be a ‘modernized’ supermarket on the ground floor) when food distribution was still planned rather than commoditized. The food market was a product of the Maoist collectivist past. The internet café and cheap hostels nearby represent the early experimentation with privatization and commercialization of leisure in the reform era. Finally, the revamping of the old street and shops in an old workers’ danwei district symbolizes the new directions that Chinese development embarks on, i.e. to replace the ‘temporary’ necessities of modernization and to remove the cultural and material ‘waste’ produced in the process of hyper-modernization. This juxtaposition of history and the present reveals much about the transformation that China is undergoing and, referring back to the allegory of ruins, about the physical and ideological marginalization of internet cafés.

Second, many Chinese gamers in their late 20s and 30s, who grew up playing in internet cafés and now sentimentalistize these cafés, often vividly narrate stories of internet cafés with a strong sense of loss and nostalgia. My participants often juxtaposed ‘entering society’ (jinru shehui, 进入社会) with the relatively carefree student life that they once had and enjoyed. ‘Entering society’ means taking up family and work responsibilities, which reduces their free time, space, and sociality (i.e. friends to play with) for gaming. I met a 32-year-old male office worker at Xinyue Wangba. He spent a lot of time on many different PC games and he intensely identified with the habit of going to internet cafés regularly. Seeing the fading of these cafés, he had a painful sense of detachment from his memories of gaming. He said during the interview (Wuhan, February 2014) at his office that ‘back in my days in college, we, the whole crew of dorm-mates went to an internet café and spent the entire night there playing Chuanqi (Legend of Mir, a Korean MMO), screaming at each other and having tons of fun; but these days, everyone is scattered and busy with their own stuff.’ He often played 16 hours a day during his student years and he is still playing six hours a day despite having a full time office job. Although games constitute almost the entirety of his leisure time, his wife was relatively considerate as she was a very dedicated gamer as well. They met in an MMO guild and eventually got married. However, after the marriage, his wife’s and his interests diverged: his wife became more occupied with ‘real life problems’ while only playing League of Legends casually; he was still spending a lot of time playing games that required more concentration and effort such as DotA and Chuanqi. He ended up going back to the internet café just to escape home and enjoy the atmosphere of gaming that reminded him of college days with his gaming friends even though none of them were in the internet café anymore. As Lindtner and Szablewicz (2011: 92) write:
Reminiscences of Internet cafés serve not only to preserve the memory of a unique period of time in China’s Internet development, but also to define and unite groups of young Chinese around shared experiences.

This ‘unique period’ is the period of rapid industrialization that I discussed earlier at length. Many of my participants habitually returned to the internet café for the nostalgia of a shared leisure time, ‘the good times’ that they are now rhythmically detached from due to work and family. There is a ‘painful sense of detachment’ from the ‘physical presence of the past’ (Cockain 2012: 34) because urban development always erases undesired histories in order to establish the latest novelties and sensations.

The Disdained and Liquidated Past: The Former Role of Internet Cafés in Chinese Modernity

During the burgeoning years (2000-2010) of the internet café as a mainstream leisure place, which roughly combine the previously discussed ‘Golden’ and ‘Silver’ ages, many internet cafés were completely full at all hours, to the degree that patrons sometimes needed to queue for a seat, which gave rise to illicit internet cafés embedded in domestic houses, warehouses, and residential buildings. This was the period when internet cafés became normalized due to their ubiquitous existence in industrial hubs and large cities. It is important to clarify that the period I am referring to in this section is when internet cafés had already descended into common leisure places, predominantly for the underclasses, after their brief initial existence as a space for the early elites. The moral panic over ‘internet addiction’ only became prevalent during this decade of growth, especially among parents, teachers, and ‘Internet addiction experts’ (Szablewicz 2010: 463). Internet cafés gradually developed into urban spaces that were always under some kind of supervision. School patrols (against students who escaped class to visit internet cafés) as well as parent groups, advocating against the internet and for a real name registration system and for prohibiting underage users, only began their activities during this period.

Often buried in generic narratives of the past twenty years of internet cafés, I argue that internet cafés played an important role during this phase of hyper-modernization and mass rural-to-urban migration. Internet cafés to some extent served a similar role as pubs did for the British working class, both providing a haven for ‘drifters’ (piao 漂, often associated with big cities;
for instance, bei piao 北漂 means ‘drifters in Beijing’) such as migrant workers, the working poor, students, and those without access to better urban facilities. Both also provided a temporary means of containing potential risks, controlling and ‘immobilizing’ the ‘special population’ in ‘place and time’, and, crucially, keeping them away from the streets. As Watson (2002: 221) writes in her discussion of everyday modern British life, the pub played the role of ‘a kind of anti-world, a bracketed space where normative relationships of the real world were suspended or inverted, though only temporarily. Its cultural function was to achieve that status and to control it; to limit [it] in place […] and time.’

The rhetoric of ‘havens’ and ‘means of containing’ seems to be contradictory. First, ‘means of containing’ often signifies the vision of a prison. In practice, containing often entails providing an alternative space for the distrusted, not to directly discipline them, but to divert them away from the open area to an enclosed area for better supervision. However, internet cafés were by no means initially conceived of as a space for containing distrusted migrants. As I have stressed, internet cafés were originally constructed as spaces for the elites since internet connectivity itself had only just arrived in China. However, when the growth of such affordable spaces in industrial areas expanded, the main group of patrons became the suspected bodies of migrant workers, and internet cafés came under the spotlight of official scepticism. Solinger conducted long-term research on official scepticism towards ‘street life’: hawkers, idlers, teenage loiterers, and gamblers. In the earlier reform period (in her periodization: c. 1980 to 2000), the motivation behind official regulations and crackdowns on street activities ‘lay not so much in a desire of officialdom to keep the city pristine (as is the case today) as it did in an ambition to reserve urban commerce for the state’s cadres to manage and to keep the still-suspect private sector at bay’ (Solinger 2013: 9, emphasis added).

I would like to trace this ‘keeping-at-bay’ to the politicized distrust of crowds. A crowd of ‘low-quality’ urban residents in public areas is always a potential threat. Crowds, unless officially organized or approved, are thus often viewed negatively, as indecent, or, in the Chinese term, as low suzhi 素质 ‘gathering behaviours’ (juzhong xinwei 聚众行为). As Bakken (2005: 13) writes, ‘there might even be a growing distrust of the “masses” among the police. In recent police manuals the person on duty is asked to immediately disperse the crowd if an incident of disorder occurs in the street.’ One of the best examples demonstrating this growing fear of crowds is a documentary called Cai Qian directed by John Rash (2014). Near the end of the documentary, the director took a stroll on a square with the construction workers he had been filming for months. These workers were quite in the mood so they decided to have a photo with the director. Before they were able to prepare for the photo, the police had
already arrived at the scene and immediately dispersed the aggregating crowd. The appearance of a foreigner with a large group of migrant workers caught a lot of attention from on-lookers, which then provoked the police, stationed in the square, to act. In this case, the threat is the aggregation of low suzhi people, i.e. migrant workers who are to be supervised and controlled, often not only by ‘the rule of law’ but also by straightforward police brutality, urban exclusion, and particular policies that only apply to people of such transient status. Apart from the discursive and bio-political policing practices, this fear of aggregation of bodies in public spaces is also present in urban planning. As Cockain (2012: 47) notes, universities are relocated ‘from relatively central urban locations to either suburbia or satellite university towns. Within such “pseudo cities”, the dangers of urban life are removed.’ The mistrust and subsequent removal of students from the centres of urban space also verify a consistent effort to avoid possibilities of chaos in systemic urban planning. As Farquhar and Zhang (2005: 350) note, ‘avoidance of chaos’ has been a central theme of policymaking in the reform era.

I have discussed two types of distrusted urban residents: transient migrant labourers and poor students (student status alone does not usually induce official supervision because social class also plays an essential role). Both are main patron groups of internet cafés. Among a series of other spaces, such as mah-jong parlours, poorly lit salons, and game arcades, internet cafes are conceived by the authorities as spaces that keep undesirables away from the façade of the main streets and that consequently need to be under constant surveillance. Internet cafés were often located in the vicinity of factories, schools, universities, old residential areas (such as danwei-assigned collective housing), old shopping arcades, dilapidated backstreets, and centres of urban villages. All these spaces represented the coarse, uncultivated, and undeveloped leisure life of the recent but forgettable past and the vulgarity, or in the Chinese term luan (literally chaos), of the urban working poor, transient migrants, and other subalterns. The average internet café goers are often popularly stigmatized, with a fair amount of socially engineered stereotypes and middle class biases, ‘as poorly educated, lacking in self-control, and as youth of low cultural competence’ (Rolandsen 2011: 124).

In the case of the internet café, the overt concerns and insecurities over luan-ness of the space can be seen as the middle-class desire to distinguish oneself from the ignorant, uncontrolled, and possibly violent ‘Other’. Security and exclusivity in the forms of frequently sanitized clubs, VIP private rooms, security-guarded apartment compounds (xiaoqu 小区), and membership-based communities are not simply results of fear, but also prestigious symbols of elitism. A friend of one of my participants, a 26-year-old man from a very
wealthy upper-middle-class family, was very reluctant every time his friends invited him to visit internet cafés. However, it was not games that he loathed, as he regularly spent hours at home 'raiding' in World of Warcraft. It was the internet café that he loathed. Often dressed in branded shirts, leather shoes, and a long scarf wrapped around his neck, he did not want to align himself with, nor situate himself in, this perceived unhygienic space that he deeply disdained. Similar ‘distinction work’ can be seen in Lindtner and Szablewicz’s (2011) discussion of the disapproval that ‘Killer Game’ players harbour against internet cafés.

Second, continuing from my earlier discussion of internet cafés as ‘havens’, such cafés are spaces of inclusion rather than exclusion. The moral disgust over the ‘low quality’ of internet cafés may also prove to be the source of freedom for those who frequently visit internet cafés. The frequent patron belongs in the internet café, relatively speaking a limitless environment where there is no closing time and he or she is allowed to be noisy and inconsiderate without receiving scorn or complaints. Although internet cafés are often seen as a disorderly spaces, I argue that the internet café customer, borrowing Lefebvre’s words, ‘conforms to the “consensuses” or conventions’ (1991: 56) – it is simply that the consensus inside the internet café is different from the one outside. This consensus is ‘a tacit agreement, a non-aggression pact, a contract, as it were, of non-violence. It imposes reciprocity, and communality of use’ (ibid.: 56). As Lefebvre elucidates further (ibid.):

A space of this kind presupposes the existence of a ‘spatial economy’ closely allied, though not identical, to the verbal economy. This economy valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafés, cinemas, etc.), and thus gives rise to connotative discourses concerning these places; these in turn generate ‘consensus’ or conventions according to which, for example, such and such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area where people go peacefully to have a good time, and so forth.

Internet cafés contain many undesirable vulgarities: smoking, bodily obscenity, violence, anger, rude talking, various vernaculars, frustration, cunning playfulness, and ecstasy, all within the interior, instead of on the street, where everyone just appears indifferent and ‘normal’. The internet café has a different consensus, or a different relationship between people, compared to the street where these low-suzhi behaviours are always under suspicion, or compared to other ‘civilized’ and exclusive spaces where acts of vulgarity are prohibited. The authorities certainly want to limit and regulate this space of various
vulgarities as they promote such an image in the media, but they also need this space to exist – the social milieu of the internet café is never intended to extend beyond the internet café, especially not to the streets. The internet café was a temporary spatial solution to a low-*suzhi* population, which was needed as labour but difficult to manage, as this population was not properly educated by the urban consensus. One internet café owner summarizes the government practices during this period: ‘they open one eye and close the other. As long as you don’t extend the chaos (*luan*) onto the street, they do not care what you do’ (interview, Wuhan, February 2014). The precondition of the continuing existence of internet cafés is that they are able to offer this space of regulated transgression while not extending this space beyond its designated realm.

**Redefining the Internet Café or Wangka: Its Renewal under the Banner of ‘Spiritual Civilisation’**

In the new phase of development that followed the previously discussed first phase of economic modernization, the language of ‘modernity’ has not yet lost its aura. The acceleration of growth has slowed down and the rhetoric of development has to find its momentum somewhere else. The present priority is not only modernizing the economy, but also ‘the people’. While *suzhi* often points to a behavioural dimension, such as disciplining unruly migrant bodies as discussed earlier, the concept of civility also has a cultural implication. The perceived ‘low qualities’ of the Chinese population have led to massive governmental efforts to construct narratives for advancing the ‘cultural sphere’ as well as promoting the ‘spiritual civilization’ of ordinary urban citizens. In this context, to be ‘spiritually civilized’ is not simply an elevation of incomes and quantifiable standards of living, but is a matter of lifestyle, particularly in the form of cultivated leisure activities, positive qualities, and ‘intrinsic values’ (*neizai jiazhi* 内在价值) of everyday life.

In 2014, shortly after my arrival at Wuhan, the city underwent a mass campaign for the honorary title of ‘spiritually civilized city’ (*jingshen wenming chengshi* 精神文明城市), ‘which assesses cities based on a wide range of “civilised” criteria’ (Barmé 2013: xix). During the campaign week, all citizens – or at least those the government institutions could reach – were mobilized to participate, first by memorizing President Xi’s signature formulation for a new urban ideal of Chinese-ness, the ‘Chinese dream’, and then being randomly selected to recite it for the patrolling examiners; second, by going home straight after work or school instead of wandering the streets during the campaign week; third, by avoiding certain undesirable places such as internet cafés. Most
residents of the city I talked to hardly concerned themselves with the honorary title of ‘being spiritually civilized’. While reportedly being stopped by the doorman from entering his own apartment because he was neither aware of the slogans, nor able to recite them, one interviewee scorned the campaign as, in his words, ‘a bureaucratic campaign that outrageously disturbed the daily lives of ordinary citizens’ (interview, Wuhan, January 2014).

I was not surprised by the predictable style of the propaganda campaign but impressed by the slogan for the campaign: ‘Wuhan, Different Everyday’. At first, I thought the slogan was rather radical: instead of propagating the institutional changes (such as anti-corruption) and economic changes (such as productivity boosts) seen in the usual political campaigns in the reform era, it demanded a different everyday. However, as Lefebvre (1991) already wrote in the aftermath of the fervent times of the 1960s in France, the utopian slogans seemed to have degenerated into political slogans. The slogan backfired when the needs of the everyday were subdued by bureaucratic campaigns. The incongruity between the campaign slogan and its practices aside, this event is a reminder of how important it is to review the Chinese mission of ‘spiritual civilization’ in the light of its disciplinary strategies of the urban everyday: its abhorrence of disorder and its inability to initiate any genuine changes in everyday life. In the end, the campaign did win the city of Wuhan the honorary title but did not produce any actual changes of daily lives since all ‘normal’ (from the perspective of ordinary citizens) as well as ‘chaotic’ (from the perspective of official rhetoric) everyday practices resumed after the termination of the campaign: squares were once again occupied by dancing old ladies with loud speakers and internet cafés were again visited by underage school children.

There is a distinctive disparity between an officially conceived ‘high quality’ (gāo suzhi 高素质) everyday and a lived everyday in which people simply get by regardless of any standards. This disparity is also evident in the history of internet cafés. The space of the internet café, as I discussed earlier, is not ‘just the place of conflict, but the object of struggle itself’ (Elden 2004: 183): a struggle between the conceived role of the space and the space as lived by its inhabitants. The discourses of ‘spiritual civilization’ and suzhi (which are deeply connected) are, in fact, spatial codes that can be useful in understanding the changing role of internet cafés in a historical transition. ‘If these codifications have been produced along with the space corresponding to them, the job of theory is to elucidate their rise, their role, and their demise’ (Lefebvre 1991: 18). The conceived project of ‘spiritual quality of everyday life’ thus means replacing undesired and ‘backward’ spaces such as internet cafés with cultivated consumption and spatial experience.
Newly built high-rise apartment complexes, chain stores, and entertainment complexes take over as the dominant urban ideals. For instance, the earlier discussion of the surrounding areas of Xinyue Wangba has demonstrated the ubiquity of re-construction and renewal of old urban districts. Buck-Morss (1989: 89) writes with regard to Haussmann’s project of regulating urban Paris:

As a classic example of reification, urban ‘renewal’ projects attempted to create social utopia by changing the arrangement of buildings and streets – object in space […] Haussmann’s slum ‘clearance’ simply broke up working-class neighbourhoods and moved the eyesores and health hazards of poverty out of central Paris and into the suburbs.

As I discussed earlier, gentrification of ‘urban villages’, which were known as the residential areas of the industrial working class, represented an overall strategy of sanitizing the urban centre by both cleansing the trash, which includes the architectures and people, and erecting new urban spectacles. For internet cafés, the former role as the facilitator and representative leisure space of the lower classes declined with the associated dominant mode of production, i.e. phase one industrialization. With the rise of phase two re-urbanization (as the process of urbanization was already underway during phase one but urban ideals as the dominant ideology only came to the foreground in the second phase), the former space of the internet café collapsed and the only way to survive was to reinvent the ‘codes’ in accordance with the new ideal of urban leisure and identities. This reinvention is primarily driven by the ‘civilizing’ intention of the state, as the strategy shifted from strictly disciplining the space while promoting its existence to legally relaxing the restriction (by lifting the ban of issuing new internet café licences) while forcing the space to the margins of urban society. The changing strategies of how the state and its social engineers and urban planners conceive the space ‘have a practical impact, that they intervene in and modify spatial textures which are informed by effective knowledge and ideology’ (Lefebvre 1991: 42). The process of reinventing the spatial codes of internet cafés is embedded in the changes of spatial context and texture. It begins with the name itself.

It is commonly known that internet cafés are called wangba 网吧 in the Chinese context (cf. Szablewicz 2004). Wang 网 means ‘net’, ba 吧 is a loan-word of ‘bar’; thus, the literal translation of wangba should be ‘net bar’ instead of ‘internet café’. Ba seems to refer to a ‘gathering place’, or a leisure place for socializing that provides certain services such as snacks and drinks, as many of my research participants confirmed; this included three long-term internet
café owners active in the scene since 1999. This is also apparent from terms like ‘book bar’ (shu ba 书吧) and ‘paste bar’ (tie ba 贴吧), the latter referring to the most popular discussion board service in China, hosted by Baidu. In both cases, ba refers to a gathering and leisure place: shu ba is usually a place like a bookshop with sofa chairs and drinks where people can read and socialize; tie ba can be seen as a virtual gathering place for hobby groups. However, the meaning of ba became obscured through abuses as a fashionable catchphrase in the early 2000s, when it was connected to many different kinds of spaces or even objects. For example, ‘oxygen bar’ (yang ba 氧吧) is an air-filtering device for an interior space, usually domestic, where people can gather and breathe ‘fresh air’. The device is not exactly a space but it is still connected to the idea of a space (in the same way that a bonfire creates a virtual space surrounding it). The term wangba originates in such a context.
Wang is a constant since it means internet, but the word following it is not. Chronologically, in 1998, the first generation of Chinese internet cafés that opened in Shanghai and Beijing were predominately associated with the knowledge class and were fashionable only among the rich and educated. The name used back then was wangluo kafeiwu, literally: internet café. Tracing back to the origin of the internet café in China will complicate the orientalized term wangba in the Chinese context as it points to Chinese specificity. Instead, we can see a class dimension in the different names given to the space of the internet café (Qiu 2009). Since internet cafés were not initially named wangba, I speculate that the term wangba was later adopted at a certain stage of development, as evidenced by three interviews with long-term internet café owners. At any rate, the adoption of the name wangba took place during the boom period of the internet café industry, which was also the period of rapid growth driven by the export economy and migrant factory workers.

Now not only the whole business has been declining progressively, the associated meanings of ‘internet café’ are also transforming. According to my conversations with internet café patrons and owners, ba, unless used in the original context of bars that serve alcohol, has degenerated as a term and now signifies out-of-fashion-ness, backwardness, the rural, and the undesired. In addition, it seems that names such as wangluo kafeiwu – or wang ka, an abbreviation of the former (which is also what internet cafés are called in Taiwan) – and wangluo huisuo (literally internet clubs) are resurfacing as newly-built internet cafés attempt to disconnect the business from its former reputation. Many owners of internet cafés today believe that high-end internet cafés, which are not necessarily a space for gaming but contain a diversity of themes and purposes, are the future of the business. Internet cafés are in the process of being ‘civilized’: after their initial attachment to the middle class, they fell out of favour with this group and became popular leisure spaces among industrial workers who migrated into the city; now it seems that the industry insiders and owners have decided to rebrand the space for the cultivated leisure of the middle class. This ‘rebranding’ also partly removes the former controversies. In addition, as disciplinary practices such as real-name registration are consolidated, there are few official incentives to police such places. The former intensity of moral panic associated with internet café seems to be diluted, and this is reflected in five interviews with parents of university students that I conducted. One mother of a 22-year-old son said, ‘I think internet cafés are quite ok. It’s way better than going to illicit places (guihun 鬼混, literally wandering like a ghost) such as brothels and clubs [which are in fact] very common leisure places today’ (interview, Wuhan, February 2014).
Why do Internet Cafés Persist in Urban China?

Merely ‘deciphering’ the internet café’s name reduces that space ‘to the status of a message’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 7), which evades practices and complexities of everyday use of the space. In other words, we cannot reduce the history of internet cafés to only the analysis of what they were and are called, even though this analysis does point to a change in the ‘spatial code’ of Chinese modernity. The sanitization of space is by no means only a response of internet café owners to the new spatial code of Chinese urbanism as demonstrated by the changes of the title. Space as perceived and lived is also impacted by such transformations. ‘Urban brilliance and luxury were not new in history, but secular, public access to them was,’ as Buck-Morss (1989: 81) writes on the early democratisation of urban leisure spaces in Paris. In China, there is a similarly massive expansion of formerly luxurious leisure activities into the realm of commonplace pastimes, while new entertainment facilities can hardly satisfy the voracious consumers. People frequent cinemas, cafés, amusement parks, mahjong clubs (which are not just parlours anymore), pubs, bars, shopping arcades, and massive entertainment complexes. The leisure industries have abused the ‘shock of the new’ to a degree that people are now increasingly deprived of the sensation with which they first encountered the cultural industry and new urban architectures. In the latest developments, cinemas, department stores, restaurants, and arcades are all merged into massive entertainment complexes (especially those built by the Wanda Group). However, in these ‘machines of living’ (Lefebvre 1995: 119), the ‘transition from interest to tedium’ (165) takes only an instant. ‘The new town is the epitome of modern boredom’ (Gardiner 2012: 52). Similar to Liu’s (2009) and Cockain’s (2012) findings, my participants told me they felt there were only a limited number of places for them to go to in the city, despite frequent erections of new towns, entertainment centres, department stores, and shopping malls.

Internet cafés today can no longer simply reply on the basic provision of internet connection and desktop computers, which are now commonplace. The new urban scarcity is space; affordable, sheltered, and comfortable spaces. For instance, sofas have become common, if not compulsory, furniture in internet cafés today. The new sensation of internet cafés is likely to be soft and snug sofa chairs. One participant told me how he once went to an internet café with his girlfriend so they could watch a movie together (many internet cafés have a few double-seat sofas so close friends or couples can stay closer). When I asked why he did not go to the cinema, he said:
There are not enough [good] movies in the cinema even though tickets are dirt cheap these days. If you date twice a week and only go to cinemas, there are not enough movies for you to watch. After a while, you need to think about alternative places to go. I have considered KTV (Karaoke), but I don't like singing, Mahjong rooms but I can't take my girlfriend there, parks but I cannot take the cold weather and polluted air. There really aren't many indoor spaces for me to visit with my girlfriend, unless we just get a room in a hotel but you can't do that every day. So in the end, we can go to a decent internet café with a nice sofa so we can watch a decent movie of our choice. (Interview, Shanghai, February 2014)

His experiences again confirm my argument that there are only a limited number of places for young people to go to in the city, and that internet cafés remain an attractive option, even for those who do not go there for gaming. In the face of this crisis of defining a meaningful leisure space, especially among the young, the internet café, as an ‘old-fashioned’ leisure place, actually provides a suitable space, especially for gamers, compared to many other costly, even if not overpriced or unaffordable, leisure places. It provides indoor shelter, air conditioning, a snug sofa of your own, and videogames with which to pass the time. In parallel with Benjamin's *Arcade Project*, one crucial point he made was that ‘the appeal of the arcades is not only that they exclude the undesirable elements of the Parisian population but that they provide *shelter* in bad weather’ (Moran 2003: 171). The appeal of the internet café in China today is due less to the monotony and inactivity of the rainy weather and more likely a result of the rampant pollution across cities. The air is humid with floating visible substances and it is suffocating to breathe on the street. On hazy days, the internet café is often busier than usual. Most internet cafés never turn off the air conditioning and some are even equipped with air filtering devices. It is an affordable indoor space seemingly protected from the dangers of pollution outside.

Internet cafés represent one of the temporary remedies to the tedious urbanity. In fact, going to an internet café may be a relatively enduring antidote due to its low entry fee and relatively intervention-free environment that allows patrons to ‘kill time’. I once went to dinner with my participants after gaming with them in an internet café. By the time we walked out of the restaurant, we had no idea what to do next. In the end, we started walking towards the bus stop while discussing options of leisure places we could visit. I mostly responded to the conversation instead of giving my own suggestions as I was not able to
give any ‘constructive’ suggestions because of my limited knowledge of these places, and I wanted to reserve a degree of distance while observing my informants. Here is a list of the possible leisure places or activities we went through and subsequently cast aside: karaoke bar, pool, bowling, massage lounges, pubs, cinema, and mahjong rooms. On a freezing-cold Saturday evening, we loitered at the bus stop for half an hour discussing the next destination and finally my participants decided to go back to the internet café, where we stayed until midnight. During the course of this discussion about our next destination, one of my participants said, ‘I find nothing is fun anymore even though there are new places opening every single day. After all, the internet café is still fun to stay at, compared to other locations, which are really not worth it.’

The other appeal of internet cafés relates to nostalgia, especially for the predominantly middle-class males in their 30s who grew up with the habits of escaping to such places. Most newly furnished internet cafés today strictly enforce the age restriction. Many middle-aged adult patrons go to the newer places, even though they often have far superior gaming rigs at home. In contrast, underage kids can only go to older, unfurnished internet cafés with outdated equipment hidden in dilapidated residential areas, because otherwise these internet cafés will not have any customers. "Qifen" is the most frequently mentioned word when I asked my participants, who are all men in their 20s and 30s: ‘why did you go to internet cafés?’ "Qifen," literally meaning atmosphere, refers to a kind of ambience that can be phenomenological, psychological, social, and sensual. In the case of the internet café, qifen primarily connotes the materiality of the space – its smoke, sweat, flatulence, crowds, and noise. The intoxicating effect of the interior environment of the internet café ‘produces an aura, a magic, an atmosphere that never ceases to grip those of us who live in it on a daily basis’ (Robinson 2011: 145). In Liu’s (2009) discussion of internet cafés, qifen was similarly emphasized: in her words, people went to the internet café ‘all for the qifen’ (ibid.: 177). Smoking in indoor areas used to be common practice in China. However, following recent anti-smoking campaigns to ‘civilize’ the city (as smoking indoors gradually becomes unacceptable in many major cities), smoking is explicitly banned in many indoor spaces including internet cafés. Internet café owners usually put on a show: ‘no smoking’ signs could be seen everywhere in the Xinyue Wangba while ashtrays were also placed next to every keyboard. In fact, the personnel could stop people from smoking if they really enforced the rules as they actually had enough staff on duty. However, the administrators did understand many patrons’ need to smoke. According to one participant, smoking was an essential component of the everyday internet café experience (interview, Wuhan, February 2014). At home, many young married men like him are restricted by their wives from
not only playing video games for too long but also from smoking. Sitting in the internet café, immersed in the scent of cheap cigarettes, really is part and parcel of the gaming experience many gamer-smokers want.

**Conclusion and Future Prospects: Putting the ‘Café’ Back into ‘Internet Café’**

All of my participants perceive the *wangba*, or net bar, to be a distinctively Chinese phenomenon, even though very similar online gaming spaces can be found in Korea and other Asian countries. However, the trajectory of development of the *wangba* in China has been deeply grounded in the transformation of Chinese modernity. The irony of history is that Chinese modernity has outmoded the term *wangba* itself. The *wangba* was a product of the recent industrializing past and was thus repudiated by the new course of development of 'spiritual civilization' that Chinese modernity has embarked on: the word ‘café’ has returned to the internet café in the phrase *wangka*. In the face of the unprecedented crisis, the internet café industry is undergoing a transformation not only in terms of its infrastructural facilities, but also in terms of the meanings of the place. This is apparent from the reinvented meanings in the newly built/renovated *wangka*, which distance themselves from internet cafés' former notoriety. As new internet cafés are increasingly sanitized and cleansed, the new cafés will likely attract more middle-class consumers. Conceiving the future of internet cafés, one of the recurring proposals from many ‘industry insiders’ and ‘cultural experts’ is that internet café should move beyond the past images of being chaotic places towards a future transformation of the space into a ‘cultural space’ where desktops connected to the internet are only one of the necessities among a diversity of other ‘civilized’ activities, such as drinking coffee, reading, and playing board games. The idea of the café is increasingly re-introduced to lavishly furnished internet cafés where a variety of *fresh* coffee, drinks, and snacks are served next to the latest model of desktop computers.

**References**


