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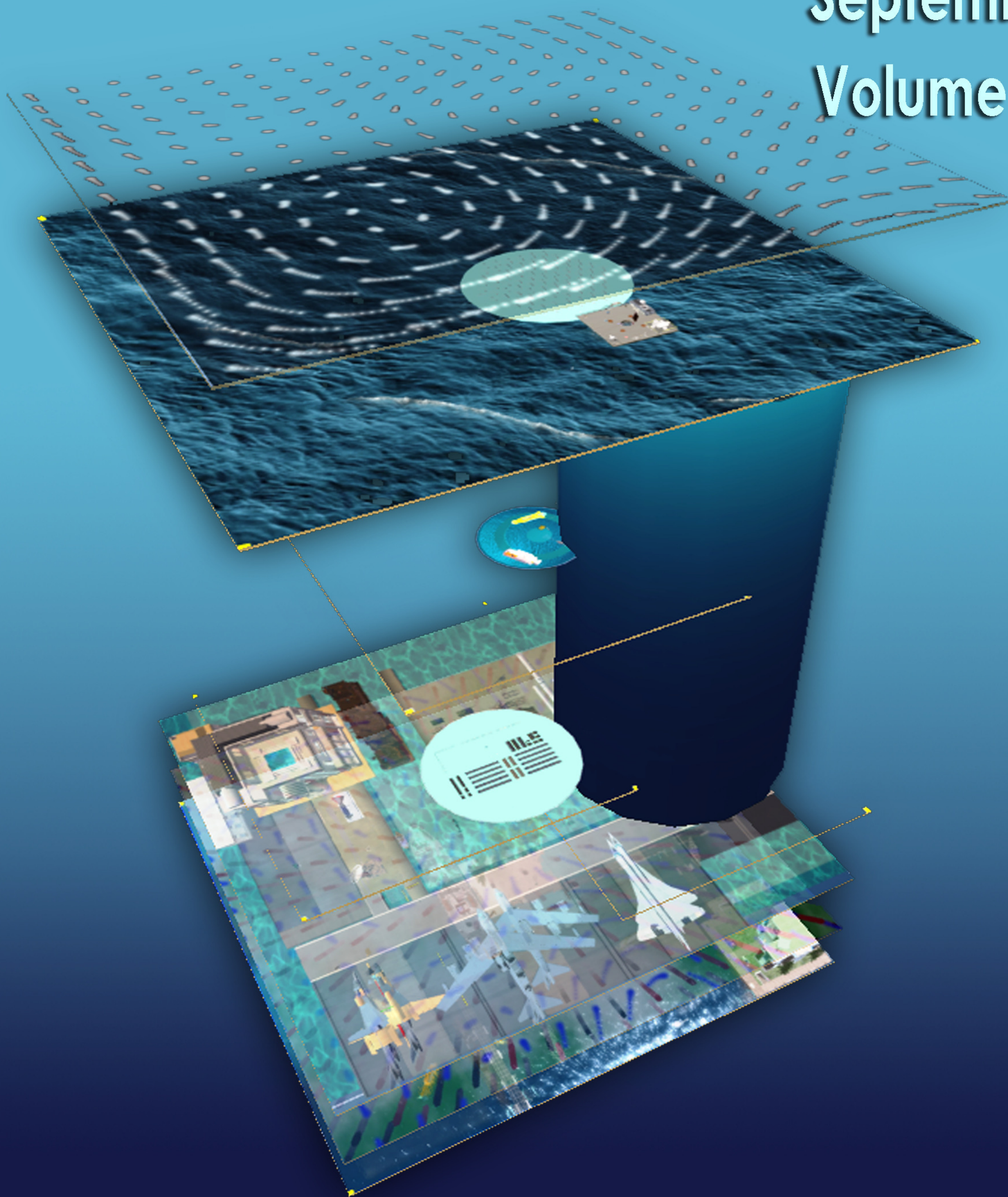

Sky layers of the Abyss

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Escaping the World: A Chinese Perspective on Virtual Worlds

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Abstract

Virtual worlds and 'the Internet' in general are highly popular in the People's Republic of China, yet the approach of Chinese people to such spaces is worth exploring for the sharp divide assumed by Chinese between online and the offline spaces.

The article employs Bakhtin's writing on the carnival to show how Chinese usage of both the Internet and the online 3D world *Second Life* is shaped by the assumption that online spaces are not 'real'. They are seen as carnivalesque spaces, in which it is permissible to rebel against 'normal' rules of behavior, where users can escape their restricted, and often stressful and boring lives without having to think about the consequences of their actions. Such an interpretation of online spaces contributes to a high attractiveness of the Internet to young Chinese, but makes it difficult for them to take online events seriously.

The article will conclude that the framing of anything online as separate, carnival spaces free from the restraints of the 'real world' means that any utilization of virtual worlds for 'real' purposes, e.g. marketing, education, etc. will have to carefully establish the connection between the offline and the online for Chinese Internet users, while also emphasizing the 'reality' of virtual spaces.

1. Escaping the World: A Chinese Perspective on Virtual Worlds

The Chinese Internet has grown tremendously since it was first connected to the World-wide Web in 1994 to become the largest online 'space' with over 500 million Internet users by early 2012 according to the Chinese Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (2012: p. 4). However, different from most of the non-Chinese Internet, the Chinese government owns and controls the access routes to the Internet, and only allows private enterprises and individuals the rental of bandwidth from state-owned entities (Herold, 2011).

This allows the state to exercise a far greater level of control over the Internet in China than elsewhere, especially in combination with the few and closely monitored connections between the Chinese and the non-Chinese Internet (see e.g. Fallows, 2008), which mean that "China is not on the Internet, it's basically an intranet" (Sherman So as quoted in Fong, 2009). The vast majority of Chinese Internet users do not access the Internet outside China (Roberts, 2011), as it is plagued – from their perspective – with frequent time-outs, very slow speeds, and content in languages other than Chinese.

As a result of this relative isolation from the rest of the world, the Chinese Internet has developed its own characteristics that set it apart from the non-Chinese Internet, e.g. Chinese websites tend to use different color-schemes from non-Chinese sites, and contain larger amounts of text (Li, 2012). Chinese netizens (InterNET + citIZENS) also differ from their non-Chinese counterparts. They are younger than non-Chinese Internet users, with almost 60% under the age of 30, and over 80% under the age of 40 (CNNIC, 2012: p. 19) – compared to the US where the average age for frequent Internet users is 42, and for infrequent users 56 (European Travel Commission, 2012). In China's southern Guangdong province, "80 percent of the 1,000 primary and high school students polled started surfing the Internet before they turned 10" (China Daily, 2010).

In addition to these age-related differences Chu argues "Chinese Internet users, whatever their background, are strongly influenced by their cultural context", as "the 'relational self' and *mianzi* (face), which are core elements of Chinese culture, are reinforced via ICTs." (2008: p. 34) In other words, Chinese Internet users like to connect to other netizens and place a great value on their *online* identity or presentation, which is, however, separate, different, and not easily connected to their *offline* identity as Farrall pointed out (Farrall, 2008; Farrall, & Herold, 2011).

This paper looks at some of the consequences of these cultural differences for the attitude of Chinese Internet users towards virtual spaces. To this end, the next section will introduce the concept of the carnival as discussed by Mikhail Bakhtin, which will be followed by examples from the Chinese Internet, and from the author's interactions with students in and about the virtual world *Second Life* that demonstrate the carnivalesque nature of virtual spaces as they are understood by Chinese Internet users. The paper will conclude that Chinese netizens have conceptualized *virtual* spaces as *not real*, as well as *separate from, but connected to* offline space, and will outline some of the implications of this frame of reference for the use of virtual spaces with Chinese Internet users.

2. The Online Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher and literary theorist, became very popular following the translation of his works into English in the 1980s. Academics from a wide variety of disciplines have applied his ideas to their research areas, e.g. anthropologists (Weiss, 1990), educationalists (Ball, & Freedman, 2004), linguists (Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005), philosophers (Beasley-Murray, 2007), or psychologists (Akhutina, 2003).

For this article, his description of the wild and even grotesque *carnival* of Europe before the 19th century will be used to discuss how and why the behavior of *offline* Chinese youth changes when they become *online* netizens. The *carnival* and its relationship to 'normal' life offer an elegant metaphor for the behavior of Chinese Internet users, and its embedding in the Chinese socio-political context.

A carnival is a time, a space, an event in which normal societal rules are set aside by general consensus and official fiat (Bakhtin, 1984b: 10). It is a loud, riotous space in which ordinary people engage in 'extra-' ordinary activities with the purpose of entertaining themselves. The carnival can impact 'normal' life, as it is not 'too' separate from it, which explains the ambivalence of authorities towards it (Bakhtin, 1984a: 127-130).

> It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, *two lives:* one was the *official* life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism, reverence, and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square,* free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter. (Bakhtin, 1984a: 129)

The "life of the carnival square" is the antithesis to the boring and ordinary lives people live outside the carnival, thus offering them an escape, albeit temporarily, from their drudgery (Bakhtin, 1984b: 8f). The carnival 'space' and 'time' are set apart from 'normal' life, and none who enter them escape its influence, as "by its very idea carnival belongs to the whole people, it is universal, everyone must participate in its familiar contact" (Bakhtin, 1984a: 128). The carnival offers entertainment, freedom from rules, universal good will, etc. in contrast to the oppressive reality of people's lives. Chinese cyberspace appears to play a similar role in the lives of Chinese people, who engage in relatively anonymous, wild, and fun activities whenever they are online, which are thought to be disconnected from their offline lives and identities but nevertheless have an impact on Chinese society offline.

> Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life.* (Bakhtin, 1984a: 122)

The Chinese Internet is less about performances, and more about *performing* in the online spaces. Individual Chinese Internet users have fun online, they often engage in questionable activities, they laugh at themselves and other users of Chinese cyberspace, and they do appear to become different people when they are online. On average, they spend almost 19 hours per week online (CNNIC, 2012: p. 18) indicating that online China is less about the consumption of ready-made contents, and more about 'living' online.

Not only the relationship between 'the establishment' and 'ordinary people' is changed in the atmosphere of the online carnival, but also personal relationships, as interpersonal distances are erased and new – online – relationships are formed, changed, etc. that only exist online, and are not accompanied by an offline 'reality'. In Chinese cyberspace, the rich and powerful do interact with anonymous youngsters, and groups of anonymous Internet users have managed to hold *offline* Chinese from school children to politicians accountable but most of the interactions online take place between anonymous, unimportant, and ordinary people.

> All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people.* […] People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers

> enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square. […] Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals,* counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. (Bakhtin, 1984a: 123)

The notion of the carnival thus appears an elegant theorization of online China, and of how Chinese Internet users imagine the online spaces they access as the examples discussed next will show. Chinese cyberspace is a fun place, a 'game' or carnival in which 'normal' rules don't apply, while the existence of the online carnival does not invalidate the rules of 'normal' space. The carnival can influence offline life, but no overlap is supposed to exist – in online China, or in Chinese understandings of a virtual world like *Second Life*.

3. Playing Games on the Chinese Internet

3.1 Some Background

The young Internet users of China go online to enjoy themselves, as "[t]here's nowhere else to go" and "say they are excited about the Web […] because it gives them a wide variety of social and entertainment options" (Barboza, 2010). While the cost of tickets for the cinema, entrance fees for discos and night clubs, etc. have exploded in China, the Internet still offers cheap entertainment. The top uses of the Internet for young people in China include listening to music, watching movies, playing games, and interacting with other Internet users while doing so. (CNNIC, 2012: 29)

As Fong discovered "for the vast majority of Chinese, Internet means play, not work" (Fong, 2009). Most Chinese Internet users regard cyberspace as "fun" or a "game" (Barboza, 2007), and the logical assumption following from this conviction for many of them is that whatever is done online will not impinge on offline life, i.e. online actions do not have consequences *for them* in the offline, 'real' world.

> [F]or Chinese youth the virtual world provides a venue for expressing autonomy that is not available to them in the real world. In the virtual world, Chinese youth can do as they choose without concern about the impact of their behavior on others. (Jackson, *et al.*, 2008: 285)

Although most Chinese Internet users access the Internet from home or on their mobile phones, almost 30% still use Internet cafes extensively (CNNIC, 2012: p. 18) – there are even many young people who overnight at their favorite Internet cafe (Fauna, 2009a). Many of these Internet cafes provide anonymous access to the Internet despite government regulations to the contrary – either because they are illegal, 'black' Internet cafes, or because they want to avoid registering their clientele and thus their earnings (Chang and Chu, 2009; Ding, 2009; Hong and Huang, 2005: p. 378-380; Liang and Lu, 2010: p. 113; Liu, 2009). In these cafes, clients are permitted to go online, play online or offline games, watch movies, chat with their friends, etc. – all for very little money, making Internet cafes one of the cheapest forms of entertainment in China, while at the same time giving young Chinese the feeling of being able to access the Internet anonymously.

There is evidence to suggest that Chinese netizens like to be anonymous online, and that the Chinese Internet largely accommodates their wishes despite repeated campaigns by the authorities to introduce 'real-name registration' systems. In surveys, Chinese Internet users called the "disclosure of personal privacy the most disgusting online experience" (Kong, 2007: p. 159 – see also the discussion in Wang, 2002: pp. 559-563 and Yao-Huai, 2005). As a result, relatively anonymous Bulletin Board

Services (BBS) or online forums are still more popular in China than the identity-based social networking sites on the non-Chinese Internet, e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.

On the online auction site Taobao – China's equivalent of EBay – this preference for anonymity online clashes with the desire to establish the trust necessary for a financial interaction with interesting results (see table 1).

Buying an item on EBay	Buying an item on Taobao
1. Finding the cheapest item	1. Finding the cheapest item
2. Checking the reputation of the dealer	2. Contacting the seller to discuss the item, delivery choices, potential discounts, etc.
3. Purchasing the item online	3. Purchasing the item online
4. Paying for the item online	4. Paying the agreed amount into an escrow account
5. Waiting for the delivery of the item	5. Waiting for the delivery of the item
	6. Deciding whether to keep or to return the item.
	7. Either: Releasing the money, Or: Returning the item
6. Rating the seller online	8. Rating the seller online

Table 1: Differences in buying behavior on EBay and Taobao

EBay and its online auction site is built on trust, and on a sense of continuity between online and offline. Often the buyer and the seller have no direct communication, and the purchasing decision is taken based on the information provided in the virtual space of the EBay site. Buying anything on Taobao, though, requires a 'real' connection between the buyer and the seller beyond their virtual contact, and the transaction is more easily comparable to an offline purchase in China than to EBay. The buyer will contact the seller and talk about their transaction either via voice mail, or via the telephone, or at the very least via the built-in chat client. During their conversation, a bargaining process takes place that includes all the details of the transaction. Finally, the buyer only makes a binding decision on the purchase *after* having inspected the merchandise *in real life*, with the money held in escrow as surety for both parties. This suggests that Chinese Internet users are willing to look at virtual offers in the online carnival, but prefer to spend *real* money in the *real* world.

Between a preference for anonymity in accessing the Internet, and the much larger numbers of Internet users in China, individuals accessing the Internet are far less easily traceable than in other countries. While it is possible for the authorities to identify individuals via the IP address connected to specific online activities, this usually requires an *offline* visit to the site of the computer with that IP address, and the identification of a specific user of a specific machine at a specific time. Unless the authorities have an urgent reason for it, the identification process is not worth the effort. Individual users are allowed to disappear in the sea of Chinese Internet users, who in turn are also only dangerous, important, politically-relevant, etc. in large groups. The Chinese Internet user is thus merely an attendee

at the online carnival, having fun, and being allowed to behave or misbehave with the tacit approval of the authorities who only interfere, if the noise of the carnival gets too loud (Herold, & Marolt, 2011).

3.2 Playing Games

In conversations with Chinese students, computers and the Internet often come up as recreational tools. Chinese students tend to talk about "wan diannao", "to play with the computer" rather than about "using a computer", and think of the Internet as a separate place that has little or no connection with the world offline. The Internet is a place to meet and chat with friends and to have fun, but – according to their statements – not a cause for worries or dangers, as virtual spaces cannot possibly affect the 'real' world.

Young Chinese regard the Internet as a game, an extension of 'games' they play offline. It is a place for them in which to brag of their deeds to other Internet users, or to find support for their goals. They do not seem to perceive that they are exposing themselves to danger, nor that their online actions might harm others. Their online 'games' are taking place in a 'virtual' setting, not in 'reality', which means they in turn are only 'virtual' and not 'real'.

In a fascinating discussion of 'online marriages', Wu and Wang point out that many young Chinese play at having relationships or even getting married online, but that such relationships stay online 'in the game', and do not affect their offline lives. Young Chinese see these in-game weddings, marriages, divorces, etc. as safe practising grounds for their 'real' lives, but not more. The online relationships are taken very serious within the online games – to the point that game developers in China now add 'marriage' functions and services to every new online game – but the relationships do not impinge on individual user's offline lives (Wu, & Wang, 2011; see also Wu, Fore, Wang, & Ho, 2007), which are further distanced from their 'online games' by the relative anonymity of the Chinese Internet.

The online carnival of the Chinese Internet provides an environment for wild play, and users are encouraged to pursue online activities by their often dreary offline lives, and the restrictions people face in today's China. While most young Chinese appear happy to merely 'blow off steam' when online, some have made use of the carnival space to become performers, revelling in the freedom cyberspace provides for them – and benefitting financially from their performances.

3.3 Carnival Performers

Some Chinese Internet users discard their anonymity and become famous online by catering to the needs and desires of their young and anonymous fans. A few of these turn their online performative notoriety into financial gains, thus reinforcing the interpretation of Chinese cyberspace as a non-serious carnival space in which the wild or the grotesque becomes famous.

China's most famous Internet user is a 30-year old race car driver, novelist, high-school dropout and blogger called Han Han, whose fame derives from his criticism of established values and practices. Rather than discussing the general political situation, or calling for political reforms, Han Han usually posts about his own life and specific problems he has encountered, or criticises specific people on his blog by talking about university education, 'politeness' in Chinese society, etc. He uses fairly simple language, never gets too serious, has little respect for 'established' people, and has become the idolised spokesperson and role model for Chinese born after 1980, as well as one of China's most influential people – according to e.g. Time Magazine (Elegant, 2010). His refusal (so far) to take part in *offline* protests, while at the same time continuing to criticise government officials *online*, underlines the divide that many young Chinese see between their online and offline identities.

Even less serious, but almost as famous are two young men who perform under the name 'Backdorm Boys' (= Houshe nanhair). They became famous with ever more elaborate performances while still at university by uploading several lip-synching videos to video-sharing sites inside and outside China. Their online fame led to live concerts, a record contract, and a large fan-base, despite their inability to sing (See Dormitory Boys, 2008; 2009a: 2009b; 2010). Their rise has demonstrated the 'fun' nature of the Internet for many, but also the idea that online 'fun' can be translated into offline success – if the online fun is 'wild' enough to be noticed offline. It is also interesting to note that their *offline* fame has led to their departure from *online* China – they left the carnival to pursue their careers in the *real* world, though the *virtual* spaces of the Internet had made them famous.

Many more of such performers could be listed here, but for the purposes of this article it will suffice to point out that the attraction of these 'famous Internet users' lies in the breaking of accepted rules of behavior online, either to engage in exaggerated and silly performance, or to criticize the *offline* authorities. This online flaunting of the rules does not result in negative consequences for the individuals involved. Instead, they are able to turn their notoriety into money, thus becoming 'performers' on an online stage, while their actions become 'mere' acting in virtual spaces.

The freedom of such performers to act online stands in stark contrast to others, who *break societal norms* offline, but whose actions are *reported* online. In such cases, where the 'bad' behavior occurs in 'normal' space, instead of in the carnival spaces of online China, the netizens populating the carnival use their online freedom to track down the rule breakers, who are then punished in 'normal space'. Carnival is carnival, and normal is normal.

3.4 Collisions Between Carnival and Life

In May 2008, after an earthquake devastated Wenchuan County in Sichuan province in the West of China, a young female student from Liaoning province in the Northeast of China decided to express her frustrations and anger with life by recording and uploading a five minute video to several video-sharing websites (Zhouhaichuan0, 2008). In the video she complained about the long period of official mourning after the earthquake (Tan, 2008b; and Tang, 2008b) and made highly rude remarks about both the victims and the survivors of the earthquake blaming them for interrupting the TV schedule and causing her favourite online games to be suspended during the period of mourning. Her statements were very insensitive about an *offline* event that had shocked all of China, thus it angered netizens across Chinese Cyberspace, with blogs and Internet forums deploring her behavior. An online manhunt (Chinese: "Ren Rou Sou Suo" = "Human Flesh Search Engine", RRSS) was launched and thousands of netizens analysed the video clip to find clues to her identity, which they soon succeeded in ascertaining. Numerous netizens then forwarded her details to the police, and the police detained her pending further investigation.

> Yang Zhiyan, the chief instigator of the backlash against […] Gao Qianhui, was also quick to dismiss any notion of wrong doing. 'She just had to be stopped,' the 27-year-old said simply. 'In the face of a catastrophe, we Chinese have to be of one heart. Gao Qianhui publicly defamed the State Council's announcement of a national mourning period through the fastest and most effective avenue possible [the internet] and she should be dealt with according to the laws on public order.' He added, proudly: 'It was the great netizens who alerted the police and gave them her details to arrest her'. (Fletcher, 2008)

The unthinking comments made by the young Chinese woman were not simply ignored as a harmless outburst, but instead taken as a serious insult to the people who had died and an upsetting of

public order. They led to a criminal record, and praise for the Chinese Internet users who had participated in the online manhunt.

In a similar manner, a prank by a few high-school students went wrong when they amused themselves during the earthquake. Their school had been evacuated because of the earthquake, and thinking it was only a drill, they decided to do 'silly' earthquake interviews of each other. In the resulting video (TaipingDiguo, 2008), the students can be seen making fun of the earthquake, expressing their hope that their school might collapse, wishing for an earthquake every day, so they wouldn't have to go to school, etc. When they decided to upload the funny video of their offline prank to the Internet, this caused a storm of anger online. Netizens quickly identified the school, and the individual students in the video, and proceeded to publish the students' contact information online, including their email, chat, and offline addresses, their phone numbers, etc., which led to a massive harassment campaign against the students (Tan, 2008a). A few days later, the students produced another video, offering a "teary-eyed apology" to the victims, their parents, the school, the netizens, and the country. "When something disturbs social morality, the Chinese Internet mob will police those who step out of line" (Tang, 2008a). Again, the 'perpetrators' of an offline breach of 'good manners', i.e. the norms and values of Chinese society, uploaded proof of their crime into the carnival space of cyberspace, which caused netizens to use their online freedom to produce the information they needed to punish them.

Offline misbehavior is judged by offline standards of behavior, even if proof of the behavior is only available online. Throwing stones into the carnival is an offence, but throwing stones out of the carnival is only to be expected, as a group of bored student at a vocational Art school in Beijing found out in May 2007. The students organised their own entertainment during a geography lesson, and used a mobile phone to video their actions, which included verbal and physical abuse of their teacher. Once of the students later decided to upload the video to her personal blog, where it attracted a large crowd who proceeded to post the video to both Chinese (Tudou.com) and international (YouTube) video-sharing sites (Soong, 2007; Zhang, 2007). Netizens identified both the school and all the students involved within days and began a harassment campaign against the students, the teacher, and the school which led to the televised apology of the students to their teacher, and reports on Beijing TV, as well as on the national CCTV2 and CCTV News channels and a response from the central government asking netizens to control themselves and to calm down while the government appointed a commission to investigate the matter (CCTV 2, 2007; CCTV News, 2007).

Other cases of students recording their offline actions on video and uploading them to the Internet were far more problematic, and caused a lot of harm to all involved. The most infamous of these is a video that was uploaded in 2008 and showed the raping of "Kaiping Girl".

> [A] young girl had made some unkind remark to the girls, who found her in an internet bar, dragged her outside, took her clothes off, beat her up, then brought her to a hotel and called up 4 boys. While the boys were raping the victim, the girls held her down. They then proceeded to beat her again, forcing the victim to beat herself. (Bertrand, 2008)

The entire crime was filmed and shared with Chinese netizens who alerted the authorities, which led to the arrest of the four boys and several of the girls. The story is certainly horrendous, but in the context of this article, it provides a strong example of the reckless behavior of young Chinese who believe they can do anything *online*, but ignored that their 'real' misdeeds had occurred *offline*. The online carnival merely served as the hunting ground used by netizens to track them down, so they could be punished by the offline authorities.

Astonishingly, the Kaiping Girl video found many copy-cats, and since 2008 there have been several cases of uploaded videos showing girls being beaten up and humiliated. In all of these cases the guilty parties were eventually identified by Chinese netizens and harassed or brought to the attention of the authorities, but that did not stop other young Chinese from filming and uploading their own punishment videos. To list but a few examples, in November 2008, several secondary school students forced a young girl to undress and administered a severe beating to her (Fauna, 2008); in October 2009, a girl beat up a classmate whom she accused of having stolen her boyfriend, with a whole crowd of people cheering her on (Fauna, 2009b); in December 2009, a group of secondary students beat and kicked a girl with several people watching (Fauna, 2010a).

In all of these cases, the uploading of the videos was done by people involved in the incidents and seen as part of the punishment for the victims, i.e. a public humiliation of the victims, while the possibility of negative consequences for the perpetrators was seemingly not even considered. None of these young people took the broadcasting of the videos online serious, or expected to get into trouble because of the *online* display of their performance. They were merely releasing these videos into the 'virtuality' of Chinese cyberspace, not showing them to 'real' people in the 'real' world. Interestingly, the display of the videos – and most of them are still accessible online – has rarely been criticized by netizens, who nevertheless participated in large numbers to track down and punish the perpetrators of the *offline* crimes depicted in the videos.

Online and offline are conceptually separate, but connected in the thinking of Chinese Internet users. The strict rules of behavior that have to be followed in daily life do not apply in the carnival spaces of the Chinese Internet, and the freedom of online life is not transferable to offline situations. The online posting of proof for offline crimes does not excuse those crimes, it merely allows netizens to use their carnival freedom to track down the perpetrators to punish them offline, and not online by e.g. launching a Denial-of-Service style attack on their online presence. Carnival and normal space are separate, and they are to stay separate, both on the Chinese Internet, as well as in Chinese encounters with the 3D virtual online world *Second Life*.

4. Playing in Second Life

The author has taught courses and workshops in the virtual world *Second Life* since 2008, and observed many students "playing" Second Life to experiment with new identities, new forms of relationships, new activities, *because* they regarded the virtual environment as a safe, and largely irrelevant space, in which to go against their parents' wishes or rules, e.g. by having their avatar wear very revealing clothes, or by choosing a dark-skinned avatar (for details, see Herold, 2009; 2010, 2012). These little 'rebellions' excited many of the students, as they allowed students to continue to feel safe in the knowledge that they had not 'really' rebelled, while providing them with the satisfaction of having 'virtually' rebelled.

Students have found it hard to accept that Second Life could be used as a valuable environment for teaching, and in their discussions of Second Life they have emphasised that they saw Second Life merely as "*a game*" that offered an escape from "reality". Normal rules of behavior do not apply in this virtual space, and students did not feel constrained to 'behave' themselves as the following quotes from students show:

> In my opinion, using Second Life is a means for people to escape from real life or to prevent themselves from taking up any responsibilities like in real life.

> I feel this game seems that can be a good entertainment for people to spend their leisure time but I don't think the time the first people spending on this game is suitable. I think she [a person the student met in Second Life] should not spend much time on entertainment because I think she needs to concentrate on her work.

> People using Second Life generally have an ideal self or a wish. The wish is probably about being rich, being beautiful or having a relationship with somebody. In Second Life, they can create all these as they wish without sacrificing anything in real. More than that, they like using Second Life because they can do something that they do not dare to do in real life.

> In the game, people are not liable of what they have done. It is because that is not a real world. So that people may do or talk something they fear in the real world. In the game, it is a good opportunity to let them show their real face of themselves. For example, I always tell lies in the game, because it is just a fake character in the game, not a true me. I do not need to take any responsibilities of what I did.

According to the students, the virtual spaces were fun, but not 'real', thus anybody entering them could do whatever they pleased without having to think about the consequences of their behavior, without being "liable of what they have done". In Second Life, people and their avatars are not supposed to have any responsibilities towards others they meet in the virtual space, an attitude that caused the author a few problems as he had to try and ensure that the students did not offend any of the other Second Life residents. On one memorable occasion, several students visited an art gallery and started chatting with the owner's avatar, but according to their chat log they were relatively rude and left abruptly as soon as they had gathered what they considered to be enough information for a task they had been given. The author later visited the gallery to apologize to the owner, but was asked to ensure that no students visited the gallery again. The students had simply ignored that the avatar they had met represented a 'real', retired French woman, and had instead merely interacted with a *game character*. Obviously, they did not need to be polite in such an 'unreal' situation.

Similar to the way the Internet in general is perceived, Second Life is seen as a place in which to have fun, and to let off steam. A *virtual*, and *separate* space that allows all who enter it to forget their *real* life with all its problems, and to interact with their friends in a stress-free environment, as the following student quotes indicate:

> People that hate real life is a major kind of people in SL. I think SL is a good place for people to express their stress or sadness. In real life, people always suffer a huge amount of pressure. Hence, SL is a good place for them.

> People use Second Life because most of their friends use that. If they use SL, they can have the same topic of conversation. People do not want to be isolated by their friends, so they use SL under the peer pressure. Also I think that people who are introvert, self-abased and tired of morals standard may use SL. In SL, you can create yourself and act as a person who is totally different form your real life. People do not need to follow the rules of real life, they can do anything they like without getting trouble.

> People there are social people. However, I cannot guarantee that in the real world they act as same as in the game [= Second Life]. In my opinion, I think people will tend to be more active in the game because it is unreal. Because it is unreal, people could do something that they cannot do in the real world, for example, adult party.

> I realize that some people use Second Life because they need to maintain their own image in the real life and they are care about how people think of them. They can only do anything crazily in the Second Life and do something that they won't do in reality. Therefore, I think that Second Life is a good place to make dreams come true and I also enjoy doing whatever things I like in this virtual world. Second Life makes the users feel happier as it fulfils our wants.

Second Life was seen by students as 'not real', and not connected to the 'real world', hence people were free to enjoy themselves without having to "care about how people think of them". Students expressed shock when they were shown a documentary about Second Life that portrayed the stories of several couples who had met and begun courting in the Virtual World before adding an offline component to their relationships. Such 'crossovers' between online and offline experiences are not supposed to happen, as the online, carnival 'world' is thought to be virtual, i.e. unreal, and separate from 'normal' space. As several students argued:

> Real life is where you are and second life is virtual. You cannot mix them.

> Second Life is more special from the other online games as it pretends as a real life. The users can do anything that can also been done in the reality such as shopping and chatting with others. Although they know that the Second Life is a virtual life, they still find it interesting to hang around in the Second Life.

> In my opinion, the people in Second life are the people who felt stress out and being pessimistic in real life. They want to portray another character that they always hope to be in their own mind. It is because Second life is totally different from the real world.

> Second Life can only be a reference as it is not really reflected the real life in the society. In fact, Second Life cannot show the real society because this is only a game which created by some human beings but not all the citizens in the world. Although it imitates the real world, it is impossible to show the fact and the culture as there are many untruths inside.

This attitude of the students towards Second Life had the consequence that in their opinion, the game Second Life could not possibly teach them anything of value in the 'real world. They had to be convinced of the educational value of Second Life during each tutorial session with direct references to the content of lectures or readings. Each educational activity in the 'virtual' world had to be carefully embedded into the offline 'reality' of the course, and each 'virtual' task had to be explained and defended by reference to the 'real' benefits it would bring students, as they did not perceive the carnival space of Second Life as having a 'serious' impact on the normal space of the 'real' university.

5. Conclusion

Chinese attitudes towards virtual spaces, including the Internet as well as virtual worlds like Second Life, are characterised by an unwillingness to accept the 'reality' of virtual spaces, events, actions, etc. Online spaces are regarded as 'virtual', i.e. 'unreal' spaces, in which Internet users can 'play games' without having to fear the consequences of their actions.

This attitude towards online spaces persists among young Chinese, despite their exposure to and varied use of the Internet, and is not even changed by having to engage with residents of Second Life. Even university students who have been exposed to examples demonstrating the 'reality' of online

worlds or sites for those who use them refused to accept that this was relevant to their own experiences with the Internet.

Online virtual worlds, games, blogs, forums, etc. continue to be seen as spaces that offer young Chinese the possibility to escape their own 'real' lives and the pressures they are facing every day. Online they can play games, watch movies, get married or divorced, take part in 'virtual' manhunts, engage in the harassment or bullying of 'evil' people, and be entertained by it all, before returning to their 'real' lives.

This cultural predisposition against anything 'online' being 'real' has a profound impact on the use of virtual worlds, or even Internet sources with young Chinese. Unless such use is carefully embedded in an overtly blended environment for well-explained reasons, with clearly defined aims, the effort will largely be wasted, as most of the young Chinese will not take the online 'game' serious.

With a careful embedding, Chinese users can benefit from virtual worlds, or the Internet in general, in the same way other users can or better, but their culturally influenced attitude towards all things 'virtual' requires additional planning and greater clarity. A teacher or manager responsible for delivering information, knowledge, etc. to young Chinese will have to overcome their bias against virtual spaces and demonstrate for each new setting that such spaces can be 'real' and 'useful', and will have to provide them with additional support to continually remind them of the reality of the virtual.

The carnival of Chinese imagination has to be brought down into normal space for young Chinese to begin to take it more seriously. Whether such an undertaking would really benefit them if it were to entirely change their culturally based view of virtual spaces, requires further study, though, as this would deprive them of one of the last 'free' spaces to which they have access. As Sidorkin put it:

> I maintain that no society can afford to live in total, utopian freedom permanently, and no form of democracy can free us from domination. As long as this is true, there is a need for carnival. (p. 235)

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