The *Dao* of Space Piracy: Tradition, Modernity and Ethics among Online Gamers in Shanghai [Dissertation Research Proposal]

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ABSTRACT

In a modern, global, and networked society, what does it mean to be ethical in China today? Anthropologists of modernity in China have been careful to describe contemporary practices without declaring Chinese people part of a homologous global modernity, nor part of an essentialized tradition, but in doing so it is difficult to connect the past to the present and show cultural continuity. I add a new theoretical perspective to this concern by using the anthropology of ethics and classical Chinese philosophy to understand how Chinese people form ethical selves in the modern world, drawing on both tradition and modernity without essentializing either. I will conduct this study by performing ethnographic research among players and developers in Shanghai of the internationally popular massively-multiplayer online game *EVE Online*, in which thousands of players simultaneously enter a persistent science-fiction galaxy of total individual equality to build their fortunes and destroy the fortunes of others. In a technologically-constituted and politically-fraught world without rules, how do Chinese become ethical people? What do the lives of these gamers tell us about ethics in China today, and in the world more broadly? This research contributes to the anthropology of modern China by considering how the anthropology of ethics can help us talk about tradition and modernity, uses classical Chinese philosophy to inspire alternative theories of modern ethics, and uses anthropology to add a cultural component to the field of games studies.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 [**General**]: Games

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory,

Keywords

China, ethics, modernity, virtual worlds

1. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

1.1 Problem Statement

My primary research questions are:

1. What are the sources of ethical beliefs for young Chinese gamers in Shanghai?

2. What does an understanding of the ethics of Chinese gamers tell us about Chinese people's relationship with tradition, and what does Chinese tradition tell us about the ways Chinese people form ethical selves now?

3. What influence does actual-world culture have on formation of ethical selves online, and what can that tell us about the theories we have used to conceptualize virtual worlds?

First, I will attempt to identify where young Chinese gamers draw their beliefs about ethical behavior in a virtual world. Urban China is today a highly modern, global, and networked place. These recent changes have provoked concerns among Chinese about ethics in their society, particularly among youth [58, 59, 26]. By 'ethics' I mean the judgements people make as to right or wrong behavior in themselves or others, which are personal and situational, but also connected to wider cultural traditions. It is important to understand what ethics means to Chinese people not only because it is an issue of concern to Chinese themselves, but also because this will tell us something about what ethics means in culture in general. Anthropologists of ethics have said that more long-term traditional ethnographic study of ethics is needed [48] and that China provides a particularly powerful example because of the way recent transformations have become ethical problems at a social level [60]. I have selected online gamers to study ethics in China because as networked, educated, and cosmopolitan urbanites these people would seem to be, stereotypically, the least connected to a traditional past and the most connected to global movements and recent transformations of social meanings. Online gamers voluntarily participate in a technologically mediated world of ethically-fraught politics, both in and out of the virtual world. *EVE Online*, in particular, is a European game that takes pride in being a place of near-total player freedom, with highly complex systems of politics and economics, that supposedly simulates an alternative but realistic life for players. In this context, how do gamers become ethical people? How is gaming situated in the wider ethical sphere? What can this particular example tell us about the formation of ethical selves in modern China more broadly?

Second, I will ask whether ethical beliefs today are connected to Chinese tradition, and in what way. Being Chinese is highly contextual, but it is also a continuation of a 5000-year- old project

in creating Chinese identities. Recent anthropology of China has often limited its scope to the Maoist and reform periods of Chinese history, a time of great social upheaval and repeated attempts to discard or profoundly change past practices. Anthropologies of modern urban life in China show the influence of neoliberal policies on Chinese ideas of the value of the self (*suzhi*) and relationships with others (*guanxi*), for example [2, 61]. In urban China, it can appear that pre-revolution cultural forms no longer hold much meaning. Yet, anthropologies of globalization and tradition have shown us that traditional culture endures the modern by transforming, not disappearing [50]. People neither maintain an unchanging cultural essence, nor are totally consumed by global culture. I would like to know if tradition can persist in the most unlikely place - among young urban players an imported online game. To understand this, I use the anthropology of ethics to mediate between the traditional and the modern by focusing not on transcendent norms but on everyday practices of becoming a good person. Do gamers draw on traditional systems of meaning in addition to modern ones as they become ethical persons in the game? How does ethics help gamers navigate between traditional values and modern practices? To help answer these questions, I add classical Chinese philosophy to the theories of the anthropology of ethics. Anthropologists of ethics often use classical Greek sources to talk about global ethics [22, 62]. What does the classical Chinese example contribute to this theory, and how can it be used to understand ethics in modern China? What meaning, if any, does classical ethics have for modern gamers?

Third, I ask: what influence does actual world culture have on online life? Previous work on virtual worlds has been conducted primarily by Western academics in worlds with majority Western populations, and has frequently been conducted entirely in game [5, 46, 44]. There have been few sustained, ethnographic studies of massively-multiplayer online games and gamer lifestyles in a non-Western country, and few long-term studies that included life outside the game. As a result, theories of online and gamer culture have not often included the influence of culture and tradition on online life. By answering the question of the influence of actual world culture, I will demonstrate the need to ground studies of online life in the daily lives of people more broadly. Answering this question will demonstrate to the games studies community the importance and fruitfulness of conceptualizing online life as embedded and interconnected with daily 'real life'. Furthermore, classical and contemporary Chinese concepts of ethical selfhood challenge the Western-centered theory of mainstream games studies.

1.2 Literature

My research builds on three areas of existing scholarship: the anthropology of modernity and globalization in urban China, the anthropology of ethics, and the games studies literature on ethics and virtual worlds. In urban China, anthropologists have been careful to show that Chinese culture today is neither the result of an unchanging essence nor a total conversion by globalization. Anthropologists of globalization have argued that global influence is localized in ways that are meaningful, and that the global is better understood as creating "problem-spaces" for ethical action [14]. The anthropology of ethics allows exploration of the ways that people can act freely to create ethical selves that still make sense within moral systems. I use the anthropology of ethics to explore the problem-spaces of the global, modern practice of online gaming. Games studies literature has found that online games and virtual worlds offer novel and transformative spaces for the self, but have frequently ignored the influence of actual-world culture on online practices. My anthropological perspective

will build upon the games studies literature in ethics and virtual worlds by adding a cultural component that is too-often missing.

Anthropology of modernity of urban China has frequently focused on the transformations of the very recent past, contrasting the closed-off Maoist period with the 'opening up' of social and economic reforms. The young are defined by being born after Tiananmen; their culture is one of openness [21, 49]. Young Chinese are "individualizing" after the collective period [58]. Contemporary concepts like *suzhi* and *guanxi* are analyzed as products of their time, adaptations to the modern neoliberal Chinese state [52, 61, 2, 32]. The focus is on the present, to avoid any "Confucian cultural essence" [31]. However, the continuity of a cultural structure does not rely on an unchanging core, but a continuous remaking [50]. We have seen explicit links to this past in traditional practices of *taiji*, calligraphy, and medicine among older urban Chinese [20]. Can we also find continuity and creative refashioning of tradition in the highly modern, mediated, and networked practice of online gaming among urban youth in a city that has long been a symbol of Chinese modernity? Or does this practice draw more meaning from global biopolitics, or from elsewhere?

Anthropologists have long been concerned with how cultures interact and change across borders. In the 1980s, anthropologists argued that culture was not a "disappearing object", but persisted by 'indigenizing' foreign introductions [50]. In history there are "deep structures" that persist even as they are transformed [7]. People form 'other' modernities that are neither universal nor entirely particular [49]. This project continued with the anthropology of globalization, which complements the macro-level analyses of economics and political science by examining the micro-level interactions between the local and the global [30]. This perspective has been refined into the concept of 'global assemblages', which sees the global not as a transformation but as a problem-space for the question of how to live, now highly influenced by the political use of technology to influence lives [14]. I will build on the anthropology of globalization by using the anthropology of ethics to explore how the creation of ethical selves can allow us to consider the interaction between tradition and modernity.

The question of "how to live" is one that is central to the recent field of the anthropology of ethics. This field works against a Durkheimian conflation of the social with the moral, where social norms determine ethical action [33]. Instead, these researchers focus on how ethical practice takes place in the "breakdown" of the moral [62], where ethics becomes a practice rather than a norm [34]. This anthropology of ethics considers ethics as a process of occupying a subject position that is more than merely meeting norms [22]. The question becomes: if we are free to act as we will, how do we come to create selves that act within ethical systems? Joel Robbins argues that the methods of the anthropology of ethics have been successful in smaller bioethnographies and should be applied to more 'traditional' social ethnography [48]. In China, in particular, ethics and ethical breakdown is considered a social crisis [59], especially among youth who play online games [26]. My research will add to this literature by applying the anthropology of ethics to a long-term ethnography, investigating the ways that technology and politics interact with culture and tradition to create the problem-spaces for the creation of ethical subjects.

Where Rabinow and Faubion build anthropologies of ethics and globalization by drawing on Hannah Arendt [3] and Michel Foucault's [23, 24] interpretation of classical Greek sources, I will use Roger Ames [1] and Tu Wei-Ming's [55] interpretation of classical Chinese sources. For example, Faubion presents an

anthropology of classical Greek ethics and argues for a 'themical' (from the Greek *themitos*) ethics that is neither entirely original nor entirely determined. This Greek concept is not unlike the Confucian *cheng* (creativity/sincerity), which is created in discourse, not prior to experience [1]. Yet where the Greeks divided the political (*polis*) from the household (*oikos*) [2], for Confucius the household was the governing metaphor for rule. What can the Confucian and Daoist classics tell us about modern ethics in China and the rest of the world? What does a Chinese anthropology of ethics look like, and how has it changed over time?

Theorists of online games and virtual worlds have continuously had a problem with the division between the 'real' and the 'virtual' and whether one space is more or less real than the other [45]. Some treat online worlds as a simulation [10, 57, 19]. Others see these worlds as real in their own right, or even 'more real' than reality [5, 18, 11]. The ethical space of the game becomes divided from the real world by a "magic circle" [9, 28, 47]. The "rules of the game" become ethical norms [16, 42, 43, 51]. A strict division between the real and the virtual has been criticized by showing connections between the worlds [46, 35, 25, 44]. However, the "real/virtual problematic" is not relevant for Chinese gamers, for whom gaming is an activity that is part of their wider life, which includes state interventions, hybrid ecologies of knowledge and age-based moral judgements [26, 37, 36]. My research addresses this literature by showing the importance of 'real-world' culture in understanding online life by adding an anthropological perspective that considers play as both inherently meaningful and situated in a cultural context (54, 17, 39).

2. RESEARCH PLAN

The purpose of the proposed research is to determine how culture influences ethical decision-making, specifically in the context of young urban Chinese players of an online game. To achieve this purpose, the research attempts three specific objectives:

1. To identify ethical norms and controversies among Chinese players of *EVE Online*.

    1.1. The norms that exist among players.

    1.2. Behavior that is considered controversial, and different opinions held on these issues.

    1.3. Experiences that led individual players to question their sense of good behavior.

2. To discover the sources players use to resolve ethical problems and controversies.

    2.1. Where players learned values and expectations that they draw upon when making ethical decisions. (eg. parents, teachers, friends)

    2.2. Experiences in the game in which players drew on 'real life' knowledge and beliefs in order to make an ethical decision

3. To find the impact of playing *EVE Online* on the ethical decisions players make in their daily lives.

    3.1. Experiences in daily life that led players to draw on experiences in the game.

    3.2. Beliefs that players held that have changed since playing *EVE*.

To achieve my first objective, I will need to identify norms and ethical controversies among *EVE* players. This will be accomplished primarily by research in game and otherwise online. I will conduct participant observation online by joining at least two ideologically-opposed player groups who are not in direct conflict and participating in their normal objectives. For example, I might join one group of peaceful miners in a highly-secured area, and another group of pirates in low-security space. These groups can be discovered through natural game play and 'snowball' sampling - *EVE* is designed to encourage players to join like-minded groups with a simple recruitment system. This method is particularly appropriate for a virtual world study, where potential informants may be geographically separated, but have important relationships developed in game [6]. These groups will not necessarily be located in Shanghai. I will conduct at least twenty interviews with players in these groups and with others I encounter in normal game play, using voice or text chat.

I will also conduct public online discussion forums Gamers commonly discuss issues in the game in other online locations, such as the official web forums for the game. I will post and guide discussion topics relevant to the questions that have arisen during my participant observation and interviewing. This method is designed to expand upon the themes that I have discovered by presenting them to a wider audience, and allowing other people to comment on answers given. Surveys will be used at the end of my research, after I have developed a clear set of themes and topics. These surveys will be conducted via anonymous online forms that will be available to the entire population of *EVE*. The survey questions will be open-ended, and designed to determine whether the opinions and lifestyles of my direct subjects can be generalized to the larger population of *EVE* players and Chinese gamers in general. Finally, I will draw on other publicly-posted texts online such as blog posts, websites, guides or other online discussions or articles. These additional texts are evidence of the ways players normally express their opinions on the game, and will add to my understanding of norms in *EVE*.

My second and third objectives will be achieved through 'real-world' research in Shanghai, in which I will attempt to place *EVE* and its ethical problems within players' daily lives. 'Participant observation' in the actual world means I will regularly visit netcafes where *EVE* is played to play and chat with actual gamers. I will attempt to develop relationships that can go beyond the game as well, so that I can spend time with these gamers in their everyday lives. Many people who play together in the game are also friends in the actual world, and I will attempt to join at least one such group. I will be be using snowball sampling, in which additional research subjects are discovered by already-existing relationships with current research subjects. While this would be inappropriate for a statistical study, I am using this method because my project seeks to place gaming within broader lifeworlds and situate my subjects in their existing webs of relationships. Furthermore, in Shanghai, research subjects may not be located in a single location, so finding additional players through their friends is practically necessary. It is important that my research subjects have existing relationships with one another, either in the game or in the actual world, so that I can go beyond gaming as an individual practice and begin to examine it as an already socially-embedded practice.

I will use informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews in the actual world and online. Informal interviews are interviews that arise from natural conversation. I will not record informal interviews but will take notes on them. These interviews will be useful at the beginning of my research as I develop themes and build rapport with my subjects [4]. Unstructured interviews are

planned and bracketed off from 'normal' conversation; I will have a clear idea of the topics I want to cover, but will allow the conversation to flow naturally. In situations where I may not have extended access to an interview subject – like when I interview employees at CCP Shanghai – I will use a semi-structured interview. In this case, I will prepare an interview schedule with a list of topics and potential questions that I intend to cover in the interview. Unstructured and semi-structured interviews will be recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions added to my notes database.

I will analyze the data I have collected by multi-level coding [38]. This process attempts to develop common themes across a broad body of texts. The process begins with taking detailed fieldnotes which are written up into a coherent form each evening. These field notes, in addition to interview transcripts and other texts, are later read through again, and marginal notes taken to identify recurring themes. The field notes and marginal notes are entered into a computer database where they can be sorted and searched. A pool of 20-30 codes are developed by reducing the marginal notes to recurring themes. Segments of the notes (such as individual statements, interview or survey responses, or paragraphs of a longer piece) are assigned one or more codes. Then, the notes are sorted into smaller and smaller numbers of recurring themes, until all of the data can become classified under three or four key concepts. This multi-stage coding process attempts to preserve the context of the data collected while still removing the researcher's preconceptions about the interpretation of the data. To ensure my coding is consistent, I will randomly select from my completed database 15% of my entries to be re-coded as a double-check. In the writing-up phase, I will use this multi-level database to organize my analysis. At the highest level, the codes can represent potential chapters of the dissertation; lower levels indicate key themes. Codes will allow me to sort my notes by theme, but still maintain the context in which the notes were originally taken.

3. RESEARCH SCHEDULE

My research will be divided into four phases of increasing engagement with my topic over a period of approximately a year and a half. Phase I has already begun, and is a period of several months of preliminary contextual research in game, where I will become familiar with the general structure and culture of the game remotely. During the preliminary phase I will play *EVE* from my home for between 4 to 6 hours a day. I will record my observations in a notebook, keeping track of dates and times of important events, contact information for people I meet online, and my own impressions and experiences [4, 38]. This field notebook will later be coded into my database of field notes and other texts. I will also join the online community surrounding the game, including forums, blogs and other groups. I will begin collecting public texts created by *EVE* players such as blog and forum posts, and add these texts to my fieldnote database; I will continue to add public texts by *EVE* players to my database throughout my research. The purpose of this phase is to become familiar with the structure of the game, to become a competent player, and to make contacts with Chinese gamers that I can build upon when I arrive in Shanghai.

Phase II, July-December 2013, will be a period of six months of more intensive participant observation and informal interviewing in Shanghai. Upon arriving in Shanghai I will meet with people I made contact with during Phase I and spend time with them outside of the game. During this time I will play the game for between four and six hours a day and immerse myself in the surrounding culture in Shanghai by playing in netcafes and in attending social events with contacts I make through the game. I will record my observations in my field notebook, which will be coded into my note database. I will also conduct informal interviews with my contacts to raise my research questions. These interviews will not be scheduled or include a specific set of questions, but will arise naturally from my interactions with players, however I will record and transcribe these interviews and add the information to my database [56]. I will continue to play intensively throughout the research period.

Phase III, January-April 2014 will be a period of four months of unstructured and semistructured in-game and real-world interviewing. These interviews will be scheduled and planned for with a set of interview objectives and questions, but will not involve a more rigid 'checklist' of questions. The more organic structure of the interview is intended to bring out the normal thoughts of the subject, while the more formal nature will allow the questions to be more focused. I will conduct at least twenty interviews with players. I will use snowball sampling to find more informants while developing a network of gamers who have relationships with each other. I will attempt to interview players from all spheres of the game and the actual world. For example, I will interview both hardcore and more casual players of the game, players who engage in transgressive acts and those who oppose them, and players from various economic and social groups. I will also conduct interviews with the developers of the game that I have made contact with, to learn their opinions on the issues raised by players and to explore the relationship between the players and the developers. The unstructured and semistructured interviews will all be recorded and transcribed along with my interview notes [8, 56].

Phase IV, April-June 2014, will be a short period of two months of surveys and focus groups on forums that surround the game. These surveys will be conducted anonymously through online survey forms, asking specific questions but allowing players to write answers open-endedly. Focus groups will be conducted on online forums where gamers can see each other's answers to the topic and can respond to the discussion. The goal of this phase will be to generalize opinions among the player population and to stimulate discussion of the issues under investigation. This will allow me to broaden the conclusions I have drawn through discussions with individual players and my own experiences, and to gauge overall opinions among EVE players. This data will also be coded and added to my notes database.

4. BROADER IMPACTS

Ethics in the modern world is an issue for Chinese society, but it is also an issue for the world in general. My research makes a significant contribution to understanding modern ethics both locally and globally. For Chinese people who are concerned with how ethics is changing as China "opens up," my research provides empirical evidence of what becoming an ethical person means for young Chinese people. The government frequently expresses concern with the development of youth in China under the influence of global flows and new technology, especially the Internet and online games [41, 12, 13, 26]. My research in particular can address the concerns for the impact of online gaming. Is playing with ethics in a game a risk that might make gamers less ethical, or is it a positive experience that leads to more self-reflection? Should Chinese people be concerned about gaming? More broadly, my research shows how global, technological practices like gaming can become part of people's formation of ethical selves. As governments increasingly use technology to further political goals by acting on people's lives directly, how do people use this technology ethically?

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