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DIGITAL GAMES AND HETERONORMATIVITY: THE CASE OF CHINA'S 'LOSERS'

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The events of #GamerGate in the United States have shed a renewed light on issues of gender and representation in video games. In the past year, feminist game designers, journalists and academics have become the target of vicious name-calling and death threats online. The charge of the so-called “gamer-gaters” is that game critics are unfairly favoring games with feminist content and attempting to rob gamers of the pleasure of playing the (sexist) games they love. According to Chess and Shaw (2015), the issues unearthed as a result of #GamerGate are a symptom of a much larger problem within American video game culture. They argue that “sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchal undercurrents” have served as a “constant guidepost for the video game industry” (p. 208). While this claim may be accurate with regard to the games industry in the United States, less is known about issues of gender, representation and sexism as they pertain to Chinese digital gaming culture. Thankfully, there is no direct parallel to #GamerGate in China at this time, but the issue of gender and sexuality within Chinese digital gaming culture is nonetheless a complicated one. While the games played by Chinese gamers often perpetuate the very “sexist, heterosexist and patriarchal” representations discussed by Chess and Shaw, the forms of sociality that develop through and around digital games are reflective of the unique socio-cultural context from which they emerge.

This paper offers a preliminary analysis of the existence and function of sexual slang within Chinese digital gaming culture, suggesting a link between gaming culture and the pressure to achieve heteronormative success within contemporary China. Methodologically, I rely on a combination of ethnographic observations and data from informal interviews conducted at a number of Chinese e-sports events, as well as at ChinaJoy, China's largest digital games expo. Additionally, I draw data pertaining to the definition and application of these slang terms from popular Chinese media, BBS, and web television series. I will argue that the slang by which gamers render themselves masturbatory ‘losers’ who ‘act gay’ and shut themselves indoors to play games is in fact indicative of a sense of disillusionment with a society in which they lack socio-economic mobility. By contrast, by queering games and gaming culture, Chinese gamers may effectively open up a space of what I call “sideways mobility” through which they challenge the “normative” and allow for alternative lifestyles and fantasies.

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Heterosexuality, Homosociality and Digital Game Culture

Homosociality is a concept that has existed for some time and is meant to refer to “nonsexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex” (Bird, 1996). Far from challenging traditional gender norms and power imbalances, homosociality, argues Bird (1996), can in fact be used to reinforce hegemonic masculinity. With regard to game culture, feminist scholars such as Taylor (2011) have noted that digital gaming fosters “homosocial spaces” that are nonetheless often “strongly ‘policed’ in order to maintain and re-affirm participants’ heterosexual identities” (p. 236). Similarly, game scholars Sundén and Svengisson (2011) reference Eve Sedgwick’s (1985) notion of homosociality in which the aim is to “create an intimacy between men by excluding that which is not defined as manly” (p. 48). In observing the actions of a guild of digital gamers, Svengisson remarks on the abundance of “jokes and make-believe performances that make fun of homosexual desires and actions.” Through joking banter, male gamers call each other “bitch” and pretend to “pimp” each other out for (homo)sexual favors. Writes Svengisson, “neither the woman nor the fag fits into the collective, and so they are symbolically disarmed and made innocuous so that the men can create a phallic domination which cannot be questioned by the new sexual practices” (p. 49).

While acknowledging the ways in which homosociality can be employed to reinforce hegemonic masculinity, Sundén and Svengisson also suggest, via Sedgwick, that homosociality and homosexuality may exist on a continuum, thus problematizing distinctions between “straight” and “non-straight” and opening up an avenue for discussions of queer desire and intimacy within the game space. Other scholars have since suggested that homosocial relationships need not always reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Hammaren and Johansson (2014) theorize that a form of “horizontal homosociality” can be more “inclusive” and refer to relations between men that are based on “emotional closeness, intimacy, and a non-profitable form of friendship” (p. 1). By closely examining some of the ways in which sexual slang is employed online by Chinese gamers, this paper aims to add a nuanced and culturally specific analysis to this discussion of homosociality and sexuality within game culture.

‘Diaosi,’ ‘Gaoji,’ and Other Sexual Slang on the Chinese Internet

Digital game culture in China, like game culture everywhere, is riddled with sexual slang. In a previous paper (Szablewicz, 2014), I have discussed the phenomenon of ‘diaosi.’ The term, which is adopted from Cantonese slang, roughly approximates to ‘penis hair,’ but is more commonly translated as ‘loser.’ As I note within my article:

“Depending on the source, *diaosi* may embody some or all of the following traits: they may be poor, short and ugly; are of rural origin; and have a low education level, low income, blue-collar job, no house, no car, and no girlfriend. Their leisure activities include playing video games, spending a lot of time online, and excessive masturbation. They are also sometimes described as nerds who rarely leave the house.”

One thing that remains consistent throughout the various applications of the term is the notion that the ‘diaosi’ male is the opposite of the ‘tall, rich and handsome’ man; he is not ‘the second generation of wealthy families’; he does not enjoy the privileges of ‘the second generation of officials’ families.’ He cannot date, or even successfully converse with, goddesses. “Simply put, the *diaosi* are at odds with popular representations of the successful, heteronormative male” (Szablewicz, 2014).

Similarly, the term ‘gaoji’ originates from Cantonese, in which ‘ji’ is pronounced ‘gei,’ and is a phonetic translation of the English word “gay.” The term has multiple usages. Originally referring to homosexuality, the term retains this connotation, and sites and message boards devoted solely to the subject of “jiqing” or gay love, often contain homosexual content. The term is also used to refer to Japanese manga in which homosexuality between young male characters is an acknowledged theme. Indeed, when searching for the term “gaoji” or “jiyou” on Baidu’s search engine, an image search unearths quite a few references to Japanese Yaoi culture¹. But the term has since been adopted as a form of Internet slang for young men who form close bonds through digital games. The vast majority of these young men still identify as heterosexual, despite admitting that they are “gay friends.” According to the definition of “gaoji” on Baidu Encyclopedia, the term may be used to connote homosexuality, but it is also used as a form of self-mocking and Internet slang. The entry states the following:

搞基多指两个男性有过于亲密的行为举止，旁者用来调侃。如今随着网络游戏深入以及 IM 的交流影响日趋扩大，搞基渐渐地从基友里面发展出来 并形成一个词汇，他们基本都是在网络上熟识，聊得来并且有相同的爱好，例如网络游戏。也有很大一部分年轻人，尤其是青少年喜欢用搞基来代称玩游戏。搞基一般出现在游戏组队的称呼比较多，比如寻基情队友来搞基，等等显示亲密的意思，可以配合得很好。

“Gaoji can also be used to refer to two men who exhibit excessively intimate behaviors and mannerisms, as a form of ridicule or mocking. Nowadays, due to the penetration of digital gaming and expansion of IM sociality (‘gaoji’ has gradually emerged from the concept of ‘jiyou’ to become a new word), the term is used to refer to those who become well acquainted through the Internet, and who, through conversation, discover similar hobbies, for example Internet games. There are also a large percentage of young people, especially teenagers, who like to use the term ‘gaoji’ as an alternate name for ‘playing digital games.’ ‘Gaoji’ is generally used more as a form of address among gaming teammates, for example “searching for ‘jiqing’ teammates to ‘gaoji,’ etc., and is used to express ‘closeness,’ and the idea of a harmonious match.”

¹ Yaoi, also known as “Boys Love” is a particular subgenre of Japanese manga that features romantic relationships between two young male protagonists. Notably, in many of these tales, the two men do not overtly identify as homosexual. This subgenre has gained limited popularity in China, and is often read by females, who are known as “Rotten Girls” or 腐女.

Notably, this definition is accompanied by an image depicting the logo of the Real Time Strategy game Defense of the Ancients (DOTA), thus making clear the link between game culture and this particular form of slang. In this regard, the terms gaoji or jiyou are commonly employed in game-related message boards, for example as follows:

大家可以在一起做个朋友一起开黑，一起搞基（咳咳咳）

“Everyone can become good friends together, create a custom game lobby² together, act gay together...(cough, cough).”

The popularity of sexual slang has also become the subject of many popular web series. In “撸友派” (which might be loosely translated as *LOL Friend's Clique*), the series continuously pokes fun at gender norms and sexuality. The opening skit of the web series depicts three young friends, one female and two males, each engrossed in a game of LOL on his/her individual laptop. The girl is the first to look up, exclaiming in frustration “I hate people who are better at LOL than I am!” The chubby young man next to her looks up and states, “I hate people who are better looking than I am,” and finally, the third friend, a skinny and slightly effeminate young man, looks up and states “I hate people who have boy... I mean, I hate people who have girlfriends!”

Reinforcing Gender Normativity?

In employing the phrases, “diaosi,” “gaoji” and/or “jiyou” as a form of ridicule and self-mocking it must be acknowledged that this phenomenon perpetuates the notion that homosexuality is something to be viewed in a negative light. Homophobia remains a problem in China, and the use of “gay” in this joking and derogatory manner may in many ways perpetuate the stigma surrounding those who do actually identify as homosexual. In this sense, we can see similarities between the phenomenon and that of the Western notion of ‘bromance,’ which simultaneously describes a homosocial interaction while reinforcing stereotypes about masculinity (the “bro”). In such cases, men are expected to bond with each other while also upholding certain gender norms. Any indication of transgression of these norms is qualified by the remark, “no homo,” suggesting that homosexuality is something to be avoided at all costs.

What is more, while being a ‘jiyou’ may indicate strong emotional bonds between men, it does not preclude the objectification of women. The spaces surrounding digital gaming in China also mark themselves as heterosexual via the presence of booth babes (at live events) and pages devoted to ‘meinü’ (beautiful girls) on gaming websites, including one on the aforementioned www.jiyou.tv. In both cases, women featured in these live

² There is no direct English translation for the Chinese term “kaihei” but, according to Baidu and gamer forums, the phrase refers to the process of creating a team of players who are closely connected through either physical location (playing in the same Internet café, for example) or connected via voice chat platforms such as YY. This custom built team maintains close contact with one another and has a general advantage over teams that were randomly selected or paired by the computer. Most specifically, the phrase may be a reference to the black “lobby” window that appears when players attempt to create a custom team/game.

events and these online photos and videos are scantily clad and overtly sexualized. This is in many ways consistent with Western gaming culture. As noted by Taylor, Jenson and de Castell (2009), the so-called “booth babes” can be interpreted as “guarding an intensely ‘homosocial’ (Willis 1991) space from homosocial desire” (p. 248). Indeed, given the predominately male nature of digital gaming culture, women who do take part in gaming often become fetishized objects of desire. Ironically, however, these women are also often marked as “unobtainable” “goddesses.” As such, there is a distinct separation between the fantasy created by “booth babes/meinü,” which effectively reproduces sexism and gender normativity, and social reality, in which a much more complicated and “queer” form of intimacy has developed between male gamers.

Discussion

The sexual slang employed on the Chinese Internet clearly targets the multitude of ways in which young Chinese males grapple with societal pressure to achieve heteronormative success according to a narrow definition of the term. The Chinese “losers” are known for their lack of money and their inability to get the attention of the Chinese ‘goddess.’ Instead, gamers, in loneliness, are left to masturbate to images of sexy ‘booth babes’ and ‘meinü’ who they cannot ever hope to successfully date. In such cases, acting “gay” seems to have the potential to serve as a form of compensatory intimacy along the lines of the “horizontal homosociality” discussed by Hammaren and Johansson (2014). At the same time, however, many of the signs of hegemonic masculinity discussed by games scholars such as Sundén and Svengisson (2011), Taylor (2011), Taylor, Jenson and de Castell (2009), and Wu, Fore, Wang and Ho (2007) seem to remain. What are we to make of these seemingly mixed signals? In this case, a further discussion of both technology’s role in socio-economic mobility and the equation of heteronormativity with success may be useful.

Cara Wallis (2011) suggests that mobile phones have provided migrant women with a kind of “immobile mobility.” By this she means that mobile phones permitted migrant women to “overcome limited and limiting economic, social and spatial conditions,” but that, despite this, the people these women would interact with via cell phone were generally “like them”; i.e. migrants from the same town, classmates and family members—people with whom they likely would have been in contact had they stayed at home in their rural villages. Before the widespread use of the cell phone, such local ties would likely have been severed when the migrant women left home. Through this discussion, Wallis draws our attention to a different type of mobility—social mobility—and notes that cell phones, while overcoming physical distance, do not permit young women to bridge socio-economic gaps, and instead reinforce their social standing as migrants.

As noted by Fengshu Liu (2011), many youth in China turn to the Internet when they feel that “the pressure on the self in ‘real’ life [is] too great” (p. 89). This pressure, though shared by both men and women, is particularly acute for young Chinese men. States Liu (2011): “The sense of achievement and being in control may be especially relevant for boys and men, who are supposed to achieve something in life according to the traditional gendered expectations still very prevalent in today’s China” (p. 90). With

regard to digital game culture specifically, consider the following statement, offered by the director of one of China's most famous machinimas:

“In this day and age of growing pressures, we choose to play games because of our feelings of helplessness with regard to our real economic power. Try to imagine, if I had money to travel and surf, why would I shut myself at home in front of a computer to play games? Because the vast majority of youth living in today's world of high rents and low wages don't have that ability...”

In tying digital game culture to economic disempowerment, the above statement shares much in common with the rhetoric of the Chinese 'diaosi.' Such 'diaosi' often profess that they turn to the 'spiritual homeland' of the game-world due to their inability to achieve what is expected of them by parents and society—the white-collar job, house, car, and girlfriend.

Unlike the case of cell phone usage by migrant workers, however, digital games do provide young men with an alternative and new form of sociality. I would like to refer to the mobility offered by games as “sideways mobility.” The concept of “sideways” movement draws upon the work of a number of different scholars, one of whom is queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), who writes of the queer child and the concept of “sideways growth.” Stockton notes that a child's growth:

“has been relentlessly figured as vertical movement upward (hence, 'growing up') toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness. Delay, we will see, is tremendously tricky as a conception, as is growth. Both more appropriately call us into notions of the horizontal— what spreads sideways—or sideways and backwards—more than a simple thrust toward height and forward time” (p. 4).

Stockton's discussion of growth seems here equally suited to a discussion of young men in China who find themselves in a state of suspended animation (delay) when confronted with realities such as the lack of job prospects, and hence, the lack of marriage prospects. They are, in essence, not allowed to “grow up” in the heteronormative sense of the word. Similarly, the scholar Judith Halberstam writes about “heteronormative common sense, “ the kind that “leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct and hope” (p. 89). By contrast, “subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique,” (p. 89) all of which seem to align well with the lifestyle choices of the 'loser' who chooses to 'act gay.' Importantly, conceiving of sideways growth and “failure” as viable ways of life empowers those who are otherwise disempowered by dominant conceptions of success. By actively choosing to identify themselves as 'losers' and 'gay friends,' male gamers may reclaim a sense of agency and identity. Though marginalized within dominant Chinese culture, they effectively carve out a niche in which their way of life is both acceptable and common.

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