E-SPORTS VS. EXAMS
Competition Ideologies among Student Gamers in Neo-socialist China

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Abstract: Many Chinese students dislike hyper-competitive public school exams but find competing in e-sports games enjoyable. Some students are perceived to game ‘too much’ by their parents, who, anxious about gaming’s impact on their grades, send their children to treatment camps for ‘Internet addiction’. This article documents parents’ and student-gamers’ experiences of competition in China’s formal education system, online gaming, and professional e-sports. As student-gamers move between these competitive arenas, they develop counter-hegemonic understandings of what competition does and reconfigure their sense of self. Their movements reveal that, far from a symptom of neoliberal ideology, the prevalence of competition in China marks dialectical interactions between various ideologies and the lived experience of competitive practices. This finding contradicts simplistic conflations of competition and neoliberal economic models.

Keywords: Chinese youth, competition, education systems, gaming, ideology, Internet addiction, League of Legends, neoliberalism

In the counseling room of the ‘Internet addiction’ treatment camp, Chenxing, a young man of 17, stared gloomily at the floor. He recalled the traumatic memory of his father forcing him to kneel at the school gate to shame him for underperforming academically. “Of course, he thought he was right because he tried to regain his ‘face’ in front of others,” Chenxing explained, before going on:

I did not cry. Rather, I took revenge by stealing his money and staying at a distant Internet café for weeks playing League of Legends [LoL, a popular e-sports game developed by Riot, a US company, based on a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA)]. I play LoL not because I always win, but
because even if I lose, I still have a chance to win. But at school, I can never
win and please them [parents and teachers]!

Chenxing’s comparison between school and gaming reflects widely held sentiments among young people in China. Many enjoy the competitive nature of combat-oriented digital games, yet reject hyper-competitive school environments oriented toward *gaokao*—China’s annual college entrance exam taken by 10 million students over two days. These students are often labeled ‘Internet addicts’ by psychologists, psychiatrists, and their parents, who pathologize their rejection of educational competition. However, as this article reveals, ‘addicts’ play games not to avoid competing, but to participate in an alternative arena of competition that generates values and meanings they feel attached to. Chenxing suggested that his father’s actions were intended to reclaim his own sense of respectability (closely linked to his son’s education) by publicly performing his disapproval of Chenxing. For Chinese parents, their children’s competitive success at school is often very important. This emphasis, coupled with their disapproval of competitive gaming, reflects a disjuncture between parents’ views and those of their children about what competition does and can do.

This article explores how competitions develop, work, and influence Chinese society in both disciplinary and counter-hegemonic ways, examining their ideologies and manifestations across three competitive arenas: formal education, online gaming, and professional e-sports. I illustrate how Chinese youth struggle to meet social expectations for academic achievement in a highly competitive educational system. Alternative competitive arenas like LoL, designed with engaging psychological mechanisms, allow them to regard the exam-driven competitions as ‘badly designed games’. While the neo-socialist Chinese state has utilized competition as a technique of governance, as shown by the design of *gaokao* and the ‘socialist market economy’, it allows young people like Chenxing to engage in market-designed gaming competitions with outcomes that exceed the state’s subjectifying intentions.

Like Chenxing, most ‘trainees’ in this treatment camp had conflicts with their parents over school and gaming. During my fieldwork, about 40 people at the camp, mostly males aged between 13 and 25, had been sent by their parents in order to have their Internet addiction treated. Their main ‘symptom’ was that they spent excessive time playing LoL, which their parents believed negatively affected their academic performance. I interviewed 35 LoL gamers (30 men, 5 women) from 2014 to 2021, 20 of whom (all male) I met during three months of fieldwork in the camp in 2014. I also played LoL with my interlocutors to better understand their experiences of competing. Among these LoL gamers, 8 (all male) had worked as e-sports athletes. Professionals differ from amateur gamers in that they suspend their studies and earn money by playing in professional LoL tournaments for e-sports teams. The comparative experiences
of competition among student-gamers and professional players demonstrate how competing in China’s education systems, in digital games, and in e-sports careers differs at the level of practice. As people compete, prepare themselves to compete, and reflect collectively on competing, they generate ethical self-imaginaries through encounters with different designs and outcomes of competition. Moving between these diverse arenas of competition thus generates contingent outcomes, counter-hegemonic meanings, and ambiguity for competitors.

The Chinese state sees digital gaming as potentially economically beneficial yet morally harmful for players, and struggles to strike a balance between developing a lucrative gaming industry and imposing gaming restrictions on young people. To manage gaming’s dangers, the state relies upon both market solutions to Internet addiction, such as private treatments, and regulation requiring gaming companies to install surveillance systems that restrict gaming time for under-18s (Rao 2019). In most treatment camps, treatment paradigms include disciplinary military training and psychological counseling. In this case, ‘addict’ is a moral label, rather than a medical diagnosis, and is used to justify institutional control of disobedient youth adrift from the ‘right’ track of school competition. This is demonstrated by the fact that the state hesitated to write ‘Internet addiction’ into medical guidelines (ibid.). In the treatment camp I studied, professionals also used family therapy and parent training to solve communication conflicts between parents and children. However, as I observed, there are certain tensions that cannot be resolved through disciplinary actions and talk therapy. These are ideologically embedded tensions bound with the over-competitive reality and the values of social ranking that manifest in different competitive arenas across Chinese society.

By understanding ideology as the thoughts, feelings, imaginaries, and dispositions resulting from “a complex interaction between lived experience and conscious construction of dichotomies” (Haugbolle 2018: 202), the article portrays the ideological landscape of China’s youth competitions beyond the dualistic frame of ‘state vs. market’ or ‘socialism vs. capitalism’. Drawing on interviews that focus on my interlocutors’ memories of past competitions, perceptions of current competitions, and expectations of future competitions, I identify ideological formation by inferring their desires, emotions, and motivations. Rather than categorizing individuals as corresponding to distinct ideological types, I situate ideological formation within people’s attempts to navigate and move between the different competitive arenas. Data from follow-up interviews conducted over a period of seven years, during which both my interlocutors’ lives and China’s competitive environment changed significantly, allow me to address the fluidity of people’s competition ideologies within a shifting neo-socialist landscape of competition. My participant observation of LoL gaming also helped me understand how the game’s design and playful experiences thereof shape players’ competition ideologies.
By showing that ideologies are fluid and fragmented assemblages rather than totalizing constructs, the article suggests that there are ideological dispositions associated with competition beyond those of neoliberalism. Joining the other contributions to this special issue, which interrogates ‘what competition does’, this article focuses on the ideologies that inform, and arise during, people’s practices of competitions in the arenas of college entrance exams, video gaming, and e-sports. It also shows that the practice of competing contributes to reshaping the ideological formation of competition. Competition is not a singular ideological construct, a mode of relating that can be assumed to institute a particular set of values and convictions, or a political force external to the society shaping people’s lives. Rather, I argue that competition—as a dynamic landscape of dialectical interactions between ideology, practice, and experience—constitutes an essential aspect of society even when the market is not a dominant ideological apparatus.

More specifically, I argue that the diplomas, rankings, and prizes that people pursue as objects of desire cannot be reduced to mere markers of neoliberal ideology. As people compete, they respond to ideological apparatuses, such as the diploma-oriented job market, by registering a variety of ideological meanings and promises into such objects of desire. Objects associated with market competition (e.g., a college diploma) are desired by Chinese competitors, which makes the competitors appear to be ‘self-striving subjects’ conditioned by market-oriented policies. However, the object itself—in this case, the college diploma—often represents different assemblages of ideological meanings that include but go beyond the market economy. As people pursue these objects of desire, they rethink what competition is and does, and in the process reshape their competitive practices. Chinese student-gamers animate this dialectic as they tack between different competitive arenas. In the process, they reflect on and reimagine dominant ideologies of what competition does. Competition thus generates unpredictable “dynamics of order and disorder, ambiguity and authority” (Hopkinson and Zidaru, this issue).

I start by explaining what the anthropology of competition stands to gain from an engagement with the anthropology of ideology. The ethnographic sections present young Chinese competitors’ ethical and practical encounters with three ideological assemblages of competition: the ‘single-plank bridge’ in their exam-driven school life, the playfulness by design of League of Legends (LoL), and the cruel inequality in the e-sports market. I then explore the fluidity of these competition ideologies through the story of Yufei, a young ‘Internet addict’ who, in the past seven years, switched between different competition arenas in search of a sense of agency and social recognition. The article concludes by inviting anthropologists to examine the dialectical interactions between multiple ideologies of competition that occur as people compete, thus avoiding a simplistic conflation of competition and neoliberalism.
Competition as a Dynamic Landscape

Although anthropologists have long critiqued the tendency to reify neoliberal economic models as an analytic in anthropological theory (Kipnis 2007), others continue to claim that an emphasis on proliferative competition distinguishes neoliberal political-economic models as distinct cultural constructs (e.g., Gershon 2011). Some studies assume that competition, as a neoliberal imposition, has a top-down structuring power over the economy. For example, Colloredo-Mansfeld (2002: 113) takes “competitiveness” to be “both a method and a goal of neoliberal policy” that “structures ever more economic practices while consolidating cultural and community commitments.” China’s recent market-driven socio-economic reforms have been analyzed in a similar way. For instance, Hoffman (2010: 17–18) describes how ‘themes’ of competition, following neoliberal logics, ‘replaced’ the Maoist values of service and dedication in conditioning Chinese people’s lives during market reforms. However, this work struggles to capture how ideologies of competition are dynamically informed by people’s experience of competing.

Note how Hoffman’s analysis infers ‘what competition does’ based on policymakers’ expectations of competition’s outcomes. Scholars repurposed such inferences to reify competition as a hegemonic force that structures people’s behaviors, thus conflating manifestations of competition at the levels of practice and ideology. This article, inspired by anthropologists of ideology, argues that it is more accurate to understand competition as a landscape of dialectical interactions between ideological assemblages and engagements in specific competitive practices and arenas. In other words, the ideologies associated with competition cannot be reduced to state or market institutional artifice that structures economic practices and conditions people’s lives (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Hoffman 2010).

Anthropologists have long observed that ideology emerges through the lively interactions between actors within power relationships bound with specific contexts. Post-Marxists, such as Gramsci ([1971] 2021), challenged the Marxist tradition that sees ideology as a ‘false consciousness’ and focused on how ‘ideological hegemony’ is exercised, rather than designed, by the dominant class through ‘hegemonic apparatuses’ such as schools, religious institutions, and media. Anthropologists who critically adapted this theoretical tradition used ideology to study rituals. In Bloch’s ([1986] 2012) study of a circumcision ritual in Madagascar, he observes that ideology is too subtle to be plotted by power-holders. The royal ritual of circumcision, for example, was a case of “collusion between inferiors and superiors” rather than “a mystification carried out by superiors on inferiors” (ibid.: 193). This observation resonates with Gramsci’s ([1971] 2021) argument that ordinary people’s ‘popular philosophy’—their ‘disjointed’ and ‘episodic’ conceptions of the world—are also crucial for domination to work.
Following this line of thought, I argue that when the Chinese government attempts to institute certain forms of competition to subjectify people, competition and associated ideas about what it does generate an unstable and dynamic field of interaction between the state and the people. This field is mediated by families, schools, and game companies, each of which shapes desires for competitive success and the objects of social recognition that competition can yield, such as certificates, diplomas, and game rankings. People’s subjective experiences of competition, and the outcomes they associate with it, change as they compete in different competitive arenas (e.g., exams, recreational online gaming, professional online gaming). They move between these competitive spheres seeking more satisfying and pleasurable outcomes, but find each one to be limiting and disappointing in its own ways. As they move between these variously structured forums, different outcomes and subjective experiences prompt them to constantly re-evaluate what competition does or could do. In the process, they rethink what competition can do for them and reshape their competitive practices and strategies in a dialectical fashion. Particular competitive arenas, shifting competitive practices, and changing ideas of what competition does and can do combine to form dynamic ideological assemblages of competition.

As the ethnographic sections will show, some of these assemblages, such as gaokao, are made dominant when popular understandings of competition’s outcomes align with those espoused by official state structures or market entities. Others, such as online gaming competitions, may give way to alternative and counter-hegemonic perceptions of what competition does. People’s continuous self-improvement during educational competitions and gaming competitions often derives from hybrid ideological forms rather than neoliberal ideologies alone.

My interlocutors’ diverse and shifting critical reflections about what different forms of competition do indicate that Chinese young people are not ‘self-striving subjects’ who struggle between market and state in “late-socialist neoliberalism” (Hoffman 2010: 18). Like their parents, so-called Internet addicts fully understand the importance of college diplomas. However, their competitive experiences as e-sports gamers reveal other possibilities of obtaining social recognition through competition. Ideological apparatuses associated with market and state play important roles in shaping these emerging forms and possibilities of competition. But people are not mechanical actors, choosing only between these two options. Rather, they experiment with different competitive forms, structures, and strategies to achieve a sense of dignity and self-respect.

In the following ethnographic sections, I examine the social and institutional dynamics that make certain forms of competition socially desirable, obligatory, or alienating for ordinary people. I show how specific inferences about what competition does are manifested in dominant ideological assemblages, while
addressing the ‘fluidity’ (Haugbolle 2018) of such ideologies reflected by Chinese student gamers’ competitive practices.

**Gaokao: The Single-Plank Bridge**

I first met Yufei in 2014, seven months after he had finished his residential therapy. Then a 16-year-old, Yufei had been a professional LoL player for two years. His memories of school and family were not happy. His mother, a hard-working teacher at a high school that Yufei did not attend, devoted more time to her students than to him. His father was a high-ranking police officer, usually absent from home. His parents’ profiles were typical of those who sent their children for Internet addiction treatment. The most common professions among my interlocutors’ parents were teacher (including professor), police officer, and physician. People in these highly respected occupations tend to be too busy to take care of their children’s psychosocial development, and instead pressure them to study hard and earn a college diploma. These parents lived through the early stages of China’s market reforms and saw first-hand the fierce competition and wide-scale layoffs of employees at state-owned enterprises during the 1990s. Hence, as competitors themselves, they were keenly aware of the importance of a college diploma to their children’s security and social positions.

For most Chinese students, getting a diploma means taking part in the country’s extremely competitive public school system, passing the *gaokao* college entrance exam, and attending a good university. Held once a year and taken by 10 million students over two days, *gaokao* is a daunting prospect. My interlocutors described *gaokao* as “thousands of troops crossing a single-plank bridge”—a metaphor indicating the limit of choice about participating, the narrowness of the task, and the intensity of competition. For my interviewees, this expression alluded to the negative consequences of poor performance that fueled their anxiety about failure. Falling off ‘the bridge’ and failing to enter a good college would lead to limited job market opportunities and undesirable social positions.

The revival of *gaokao* went hand in hand with the revival of the market economy in China in the late 1970s. Prior to the market reform, the Maoist government was determined to eliminate property-based and intellectual-based social differences through land reforms, labor movements, and the abortion of elite-oriented educational competitions. The official screening system for job allocation and promotion made class background and fealty to Marxist-Leninist ideology its priority. However, Maoist China did not abandon competition; instead, it reassembled competitions with Marxist inspirations. These manifested in the cults of ‘labour heroes’ (Kelkar 1977) during the 1940s and the labor contests that emerged during the 1950s (Funari and Mees 2013). However, this movement turned into the Great Leap Forward, with different social sectors
aiming for unsustainable goals, which devastated China’s socialist progress. This failure compelled Mao’s successor, Deng Xiaoping, to carry out economic reforms. Moving away from the Stalinist model, Deng sought to utilize the market as a socialist tool to regulate production. Under the new banner of a socialist market economy, the ideological apparatuses of competitions were expanded from labor production to society-wide competitions based on market-driven subject classification and social ranking.

At first glance, *gaokao* competitors’ anxieties seem typical of those faced by a ‘neoliberal’ subject compelled to self-maximize but failing to obtain a desirable position in the free market. Yet this assumption disregards competition’s history as a mode of social engineering and subjectification in China—a history that pre-dates neoliberal ideology. Public investment in competitive education has been practiced since the Han dynasty (Kuan 2015: 45), while belief in merit-based competition is rooted in China’s transition from aristocracy to merit-based leadership many centuries before the emergence of similar systems in Europe (Howlett 2021: xiv). This ideological hegemony was opposed by some Confucian elites, who held that merit-based exams lack moral exemplarity, and by modernist elites, who believed that the exams’ content would undermine China’s modernization. However, today this history has transmuted into both a market-oriented governmentality and a ‘myth’ held among ordinary Chinese that *gaokao* is the last remaining institution of ‘fair competition’ (ibid.), uncontaminated by capital and corruption.

My interviews with Yufei and other interlocutors show that their aspirations and anxieties also exceed reproducing market positions. Yufei’s father often reminded him that “those who do not study well will fall from the social ladder.” As will be discussed later, the ‘social ladder’ is an ideological metaphor with which Yufei engaged in different ways. When he was 14, Yufei found it difficult to do well in required subjects, such as English and chemistry. Consequently, he felt he was not recognized as a ‘good student’ by his father, despite his effort. Moreover, he disliked his teachers, who seemed interested only in students’ exam scores and class obedience. Gradually, he lost interest in studying and often rebelled against his teachers.

Almost all my interlocutors described their competitive achievements at school as meant to please adults. Xianrong, a 15-year-old male student who attended a high-ranking public high school, explained to me why his parents sent him to the camp:

> They always want me to stay at the top. I once met their expectation. But in this school, I couldn’t sustain the expectation as many people here were crazy intelligent. I felt frustrated about my ranking and lost interest in studying. Later, I joined friends to play in the Internet cafés and performed even worse at school. My parents think it’s computer games that ruined me and turned me into a bad student.
As Yufei’s and Xianrong’s words show, China’s educational system is permeated with family-bound pressures. These pressures derive from the Confucianism-inflected patterns of social control that make parents feel morally obligated to encourage high achievement in academic competitions and to discipline children who perform poorly (Rao 2019). During interviews, trainees’ parents expressed a sense of helplessness more than a self-serving competitive ethos. The mother of Xiao, a 15-year-old trainee, told me that she had been taking mood-adjusting pills before sending Xiao to the camp: “I thought Xiao was misbehaving because I was not a responsible parent who disciplined him. When I attended those parents’ meetings, I felt terrible when the teacher called out Xiao’s ranking in front of the class. The looks from other parents buried me with shame.” Kuan (2015: 51) argues that when middle-class Chinese parents enroll their children in after-school classes and force them to spend all their free time on homework, they do so both because it is a rational choice in a competitive market and because they feel compelled to save face in a Chinese moral world that emphasizes constant ranking. Likewise, Chenxing’s father forced Chenxing to kneel at the school gate, not only to motivate Chenxing to be more hardworking, but also to manage his own shame.

Schools compound families’ stress by publicly ranking students’ test scores. My interviewees reported that those who do poorly in class are often branded as “bad students” and are subject to criticism and ridicule from their teachers—with parents themselves shouldering part of the blame. Both parents and students mentioned the strong feelings of honor and shame associated with the public posting of scores and rankings after each major exam, which reminded many of their “failures.”

In this way, competing in gaokao has given rise to the ideological assemblage of the ‘single-plank bridge’ among Chinese students and their families. This assemblage is built upon multiple competitive ‘dichotomies’ (Haugbolle 2018): success/failure, good students/bad students, winners/losers. Through their encounters with the ideological apparatus of gaokao, the parents inferred that their children’s success in a competitive public education system is one of the few well-paved ways for a dignified, upwardly mobile life. This reflective inference is associated with a collection of different ideological values, which include patriarchal responsibilities and ‘paternalistic social control’ (Rao 2019), the ‘myth’ of meritocracy (Howlett 2021), embodied memories of the socialist past, and utilitarian values of the marketized present and projected future.

Chenxing’s father vividly expressed his understanding of this historical continuity and fluidity:

It’s in our Chinese DNA that we need to strive hard to change our fates. Think about the ancient [male] elites who proved themselves after studying for so many years by passing the imperial exam, entering the court, and bringing glory to their homes. I was not a college student because [in
the 1970s] I did not have good educational resources in the countryside [because of the Cultural Revolution], but I strove hard and managed to find a decent job, bring my family to the city, and get my child into a good developmental environment. So I would want Chenxing to at least do better than me by getting a good college degree.

Therefore, the ideological assemblage of the “narrow plank bridge” (Howlett 2021: 223) is not utilized by the state simply to institute people’s perception of fairness. It is also a loosely assembled yet powerfully dominant synergy of fragmented ideologies that emerges from the market, the school, the family, and one’s relationship with oneself, others, and historical images of the nation. As Haugbolle (2018: 198) observes, ideology is “a genealogical process in the sense that political thinking affords a dialectic relation between the current situation that animates reflection and the broader political tradition in which the subject is set.” Parents’ efforts to make their families achieve a more agentive and dignified position in the neo-socialist present reflect both contemporary market logics and shifting historical understandings of the relationship between competition and social mobility.

League of Legends: Playfulness by Design

Parents’ pursuit of respectability was, however, alienating for my young interlocutors. Reflecting on his psychological challenges, Xiao confessed in a group counseling session, “My parents and teachers always told me to study for my own sake, but I never figured out what this meant outside their expectations for me to succeed.” Another trainee, Lei, a college student who was ‘successful’ in the eyes of his classmates and neighbors, was also sent for treatment as he ‘got lost’ in digital games after he entered college. He said, “I felt like a puppet manipulated by my parents. From the college I went to and the major I studied—everything was chosen and arranged by them. I sometimes thought that my life was meaningless.” Xiao’s and Lei’s accounts questioned whether their parents’ competition ideologies, and subsequent actions, were right and attempted to find meaning beyond them. This ideological reflection was slightly different from that of university students who questioned “the remunerative and moral value of university diplomas” (Hizi 2019: 493) after gaokao by cultivating other capabilities beyond exams. Critical reflections like Xiao’s and Lei’s formed synergies with other competition ideologies transmitted through their playful engagements with League of Legends (LoL).

During my fieldwork in 2014, LoL was the most popular game among Chinese students. Many of my interlocutors found it to be a more meaningful competitive arena than school, which they described as “a poorly designed game.” Based on a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), LoL became popular in
China in 2012 and has been marketed as the world’s largest e-sport, with tournaments held around the globe. The main mode of the game pits two teams of five players against each other. Each team occupies and defends half of an arena, where each team has a ‘base’. Non-player characters known as Minions are generated from each team’s Nexus, a large structure within the base, and advance toward the enemy base. Each of the ten players controls a ‘Champion’ (‘Hero’ in the Chinese version of LoL) with unique abilities and a distinctive style of play. Heroes can ‘revive’ in the base after waiting for a short interval after being ‘killed’. During a battle, Heroes kill monsters, Minions, or opposing Heroes and destroy enemy defenses, earning experience points and gold that they can use to purchase items and upgrade their powers and abilities. Meanwhile, they must prevent the opposing team from destroying their own defenses and avoid being killed by opposing players. Players must be familiar with each Hero’s unique powers and abilities, as well as each item’s features, in order to select and use them tactically. A team wins by penetrating the enemy base and destroying their Nexus. After each match, which can last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour, all ten players will have their performance statistics displayed, with detailed scores and rankings reflecting each player’s number of kills, assists, and deaths.

My interlocuters described in-game competition as “extremely engaging” because they felt like “real Heroes,” fighting and killing opponents. While LoL is designed to be highly engrossing, the intensity of attention and investment of energy that these youths dedicated to learning the game and becoming competitive was remarkable. Although there were more relaxed games available, my interlocutors ended up choosing a highly challenging arena that was no less competitive than their school lives. To win, gamers had to stay highly alert to avoid losing any small advantage. Every click of the mouse and keyboard mattered. A reaction (or a delay) of a fraction of a second could determine the outcome of a battle encounter, influencing the speed of the team in ‘upgrading’ their items and skills and thus of having a further competitive advantage over their opponents.

To improve, players had to turn all combat responses into mechanical finger memories and practice constantly to find winning strategies within a team. Such practice required a great deal of effort, but most players did not find it boring because they enjoyed the sensory rewards associated with each highly responsive action. These rewards were compounded by LoL’s excellent visual and sound effects, along with other in-game mechanisms that kept people wanting just one more game. And these synthetic sensorial modalities were registered by my interlocutors as playful engagements that produced quick and meaningful competitive experiences and easily obtained symbols of recognition.

In their daily conversations about LoL at the treatment camp, the most exciting topic was caozuo, a tactical and playful combination of mechanical
moves capable of producing contingent and often dramatic outcomes. The term *caozuo* (lit., ‘operate’) was often used to highlight the technical skills of the gamer to outplay others. For example, Xiaobao, a 13-year-old boy still in primary school, would often initiate exciting conversations about his *caozuo*:

The last time I played KaTe [Katarina, an LoL character], the opposing team’s XinDeLa [Syndra, another LoL character] tried to ‘oppress’ me with her longer attack range. With a ‘shorter hand’ [less advantageous attack range of KaTe], I knew I would be ‘oppressed’ if her combos reached me. But! I had the spell ‘Flash’ [KaTe’s ability to move instantly], so when XinDeLa used ‘QE’ [player clicks Q and E on the keyboard to cast a spell combo], I used ‘E’ [clicked E on the keyboard] to move to the back of her and ‘oppress’ her instead. This wave of *caozuo* worked as I ‘traded blood’ with her [using KaTe’s higher strength as a cost to consume XinDeLa’s lower strength]. Then I used another set of combo and outplayed her.

Here, Xiaobao’s quick reactions and skillful play led to his success in an encounter where he initially seemed to be at a significant disadvantage. A fantastic *caozuo* like this may not kill the enemy, but it will be a surprise and grab everyone’s attention, making the game more exciting. While a successful *caozuo* gives a player’s team an unexpected advantage, a failed *caozuo* puts the team in danger of losing more advantage points. As another student who joined our conversation pointed out, if Xiaobao had encountered a more experienced player who could have predicted his move, his character might have been killed.

In Yufei’s words, “*caozuo* is what makes LoL sport-like,” as it requires “a fast-running brain that calculates the enemies’ reactions and coordinates the finger movements.” It also adds the fun of contingency, as it disrupts the normative rhythm of gaming by creating advantage positions from seemingly (or normatively) disadvantaged positions. Moreover, *caozuo* implies a philosophical tension between the rules and contingencies generated by a combat-oriented digital game. The players must be extremely familiar with the machinic orders and game rules, while creatively interpreting them to carry out surprising moves and contingent effects to outplay the enemies. When asked why people enjoy *caozuo* in LoL, Liang, a 17-year-old student-gamer, replied, “Well, it is impressive! Even if I lost the game, people would still remember the exciting moments brought by my *caozuo*."

Malaby (2009: 211) argues that play is “a disposition toward the world” which, as a mode of cultural experience “intimately connected with a disordered world” (ibid.: 210), can be differentiated from the cultural form of “a game-like activity” (ibid.: 209) that is rule-bound. While most competitors find it comfortable to follow the rules provided by the game designers, some seek the excitement of outplaying their opponents that comes from mastering
implicit rules beyond the designers’ intentions. Therefore, *caozuo*, associated with a contingency-driven competitive ethos, makes the actor an agent within social processes. The agency is not confined by individual intent or measurement, but allows for the “unintended consequences of action” as people “effectively make a bet” (ibid.: 211) that the (unclear) consequences of actions will be to their advantage. When *caozuo* works for the team, as Liang commented, “it appears like a magic that signifies hope in a disadvantaged situation.” This magical capability contributes to the player’s identification with the heroic character and respectability within the team. When expressing their enthusiasm about *caozuo*, my young interlocutors were relating to experiences of competition that can be enlivened through practices leading to a magical contingency of hope and a desirable heroic subjectivity.

The culture of *caozuo* also offers an ethnographic window to understand MOBA competitions beyond being a ‘neoliberal utopia’ (Lin and Zhao 2020) that normalizes neoliberal order. This becomes especially clear when LoL competition is contrasted with the dominant ideological assemblage of *gaokao*. For example, Yufei explained that, through *caozuo*, what he enjoyed most about playing LoL was the ability to save the whole team from a disadvantaged position and enjoy a feeling of achievement and respectability—like a super-hero. For him, the super-hero self-imaginary was composed of both the individualistic capability to mechanically outplay enemies and the collectivity-oriented help, recognition, and respect among peers. This imaginary could hardly be experienced in the school lives of Yufei and other student-gamers. When comparing school life to their game experience, my interlocutors doubted that teachers want students to make friends at all, except to motivate one another to get higher exam scores. Jiang, a 14-year-old trainee, captured this concisely: “Study brings me rivals, but games bring me friends.” School exams also afford little space for disordered winning based on contingent strategies. The ‘right’ answers to most exam questions are predetermined, reflecting a strictly order-bound competitive arena, whereas the *caozuo* afforded by a game indicates an indefinite number of possible ‘right’ answers.

Although LoL games also produce a publicly visible ranking system that motivates players to work harder, the consequences of these rankings are represented and experienced differently. As Chenxing explained, “I don’t have to please the adults with my game results.” In MOBA competitions, although the system could also cause shame, these feelings are managed by another algorithm-driven player-matching system that maintains the hope of winning among less skilled players. Players who lose frequently are matched with players of similar or lower skill in future sessions. The matching system mitigates the sharp winner-loser dichotomy and the shame associated with losing. In school, however, there is no system to keep the ‘losers’ on track. If students continue to fail, they are either further shamed to increase their motivation or
‘abandoned’ by teachers. As Chenxing commented, “I play LoL not because I always win, but because even if I lose, I still have a chance to win. But at school, I can never win and please them [parents and teachers]!”

While the dynamics of play further contribute to the fluidity of competition ideologies, they also shape another ideological assemblage around gaming. As China opened the market, the engaging game mechanisms—with balanced designs and diverse choices of characters, skills, and roles—transmitted liberal market ideologies to Chinese youth through the creative and addictive gaming experiences they facilitated. Game companies’ drive for profit went hand in hand with children’s desire for a better competition experience that provided them comfort, recognition, friendship, and temporary freedom from the restrictive competition of schooling. Although my interlocutors understand that a university diploma can help them achieve stable and recognizable social positions in the long run, they have discovered an alternative source of social recognition through the shifting, playful dispositions encouraged by a game’s design. The recognition and the ideological promises of success offered by MOBA games are, ironically, felt as more stable because they are designed to be more accessible, expectable, and visible than the ideological promises of social positions offered by *gaokao* and preached by adults. School competitions and gaming competitions resonate with each other by promising the competitors a moral connection with stabilized social recognition in neo-socialist China through symbols of success and dignity, although these symbols are associated with different ideological assemblages, competitive experiences, and imaginaries of self and others.

**E-sport: The Cruel Inequality**

Despite failing to achieve recognition from his parents, Yufei built rapport with his gaming peers and realized that he was a good LoL player. He also identified with LoL stars in the media, whose success differed from his parents’ vision of success. As his parents were absent during summer vacation, he decided to suspend his studies and join a local LoL professional team as an e-sports trainee without notifying his parents. As Long and Moore (2013: 6) argue, achieving engenders “new forms of imaginative engagement with self and others that are transformative, profoundly affecting and highly diverse.” In Yufei’s case, his achievements in gaming and failures at school have reproduced what Bateson ([1972] 2000: 336) calls a symmetrical relationship (a competition-oriented relationship) with self and others, bearing a “symmetrical pride” (a strong determination to win) toward the environment. Yufei made a daring decision to join a socially visible competition business, denounced by his parents, to prove himself a winner to his teachers, peers, and parents.
This ‘symmetrical pride’ was fully realized when Yufei entered the e-sports team. As he recounted, “At the age of 14, I could already make 4,000 yuan per month as an e-sports athlete, the average salary of the city I lived in.” He tasted the happiness of receiving recognition from adult team funders and winning over peers through his athletic skills of caozuo, in contrast to his miserable memories of judgment at school. However, a career in e-sports is not only about gaming. Unlike traditional sports, the development of e-sports has been infused with capitalist interests from the very beginning (Summerley 2020). After Yufei joined the professional team, playing LoL became a routine activity in his life. To hone their skills, team members practiced LoL from 8:30 AM to 10:00 PM. As time went on, Yufei felt something changing in his body. He showed me a protrusion on the wrist bone of his right hand, which was formed by holding the mouse for long periods of time. He said that whenever he was immersed in LoL and when the sense of happiness rushed through his body, the bone would protrude against the desk. After playing too many times, the bone did not retract again. Gaming thus led to physiological change as the playing body became a laboring body under a ludic disciplinary regime.

By joining the capitalist competition process, e-sports players who hoped to wash off their addict identities also got the chance to reflect upon their social position in the competitive market, which shaped their self-imaginaries in ways different from the amateur gamers. The identity of the ultimate winner in an international e-sports tournament is typically associated with the patriotic ideology of national honor (Szablewicz 2020). Yet receiving prizes at different tournament levels (municipal, provincial, national), which most e-sports players described as their life goal, is no longer viewed as a despicable “counter-revolutionary mindset” (Brownell 1995: 272), as it might have been considered in Maoist China. Rather, it is seen as the cruel inequality of competition that has been made desirable through the prizes’ high cash values and symbolic fame. In Lin and Zhao’s (2020: 592) study, a professional gamer revealed the bleak income inequality in the e-sports industry: “Very top players may earn tens of millions per year while most ordinary players may just earn about RMB 5000 [about US$728] per month.”

Kai, an e-sports athlete I interviewed in 2018, was disillusioned about a career in e-sports after training for one year:

Most people came with a dream of becoming the star player who earns millions. But the fact is, only one in ten thousand players could fulfill this dream. A teenage player usually starts as a trainee. But many trainees like me will ‘retire’ by their early 20s without the chance to play in national tournaments. If you cannot stand out at a young age, you will soon lose your competitive strength. It’s simply too competitive! You think you are a good player at your school. But when you are sent into a pool of excellent
LoL players, you feel the ceiling soon. And after you ‘retire’, you have no competitive skills besides LoL, not even a high school degree!

E-sports athletes in Szablewicz’s (2020) study made similar critical reflections about the dramatic shifts between winner and loser subjectivities. The winner-loser dichotomy in the e-sports industry increases pressure among e-sports professionals because the result it symbolizes is more stark—untold riches vs. poverty—than the results of *gaokao*, where a lower-ranking student can still enroll at an average college.

The assemblage of competition ideology in professional e-sports differs fundamentally from that of amateur gaming. Although it is still fun for the professional gamers to play LoL, those who fail are left little agency to mitigate the sharp winner-loser dichotomy. This is in clear contrast to the algorithmic matching system of amateur LoL gamers, who are able to win irrespective of their skill level. Many e-sports players I interviewed chose to also attend *gaokao* while they pursued an athletic career. But unlike Yufei, most did not manage to find a sense of creative agency in either school exams or professional e-sports. Meanwhile, as people’s visions about the future were shaped by their engagements with ideological apparatuses, most middle-class families struggled between e-sports and exams as if these two were the only reliable paths to social recognition. However, as Yufei’s story in the next section shows, there are certainly other roads toward a neo-socialist success, although they are not well-paved.

**Social Ladder: The Dynamic Neo-socialist Landscape of Competition**

After the summer of 2013, Yufei continued his e-sports career. Displeased, his father used his strong social capital to contact the director of the Internet addiction treatment camp. The director agreed to ‘pick up’ Yufei by pretending Yufei had been invited to participate in a research program for e-sports athletes. After Yufei met the director, he became immediately ‘controlled’ by the drillmasters and sent to the treatment camp.

At the beginning, Yufei resisted the therapy, asserting that he was an ‘athlete’, not an ‘addict’, and attempted to manipulate the counselor he was initially assigned to. He said, “At that time, people gave me the nickname ‘counselor killer’, recognizing my achievement of making my counselor, a male in his thirties, cry in front of me. I didn’t think these counselors could give me any help.” He continued to imagine himself as a skilled player who would outplay the counselor through what he called “calculations of human nature,” and was thus transferred to Doctor Zhu, who handled the most ‘difficult’ cases. To avoid establishing a competitive relationship with Yufei, Doctor Zhu sent
him to Morita therapy, a one-month period of solitary confinement without any entertainment. During the ‘therapy’, things began to change.

One night during his confinement, Yufei dreamt that he was playing LoL. He felt “the genuine excitement of getting immersed into the fierce competition and killing spree.” The excitement gradually escalated as the game progressed and finally woke him up. The moment he awoke, he could not tell if the game was a dream or reality. The thrill of the game still occupied parts of his body and drove him, as he gradually realized that it was a dream, to return to the game. Yufei described his initial feelings after the dream as not only excitement and craving, but also a revelation. Despite refusing to be labeled an Internet addict, he was shocked that his unconscious was imprinted with the emotional and corporeal memories of game play.

The dream represented a nostalgia for his previous experience of competing as an e-sports athlete, where he played as a ‘hero’. But this surrender to the pure joy of gaming could also represent to Yufei an ‘addict’ identity despite his denial. In the long Morita diaries Yufei wrote following his dreams, the previous narrative of a glorified athlete became a storyline of a morbid gaming addiction. Yufei expressed his determination to embrace the ‘reality’ of the social ladder imposed by his father, go back to school, and stop being an e-sports athlete, which he now believed lay “at the lowest social rank.” When I asked Yufei what made him classify e-sports athletes as “the lowest rank,” he explained:

Have you looked at their eyes when these people get high on games? Their eyes are aimless. Their life is without a purpose or meaning, and they make so little money. In many ways they are like migrant workers. Their job is not well-paid, not esteemed by the public, and they do not have a recognized social role. You are a good student. So even if you play games in your leisure time, it is acceptable because you have kept your social role. But these people don’t, which makes them the lowest rank.

Yufei’s journey of reform puzzled the director of the camp, who, as a psychiatrist, did not expect that such a ‘difficult’ case would ‘recover’ so quickly. However, I understand Yufei’s ‘recovery’ as the contingent outcome of the interplay between ideology and experience in the dynamic competition landscape. Yufei’s resistance against the ‘single-plank bridge’ not only sent him deeper into engaging e-sports competition, but also cultivated his heroic self-imaginary and competition-oriented self-other relationships, making him assume the role of a professional e-sports athlete and take every institution—even the treatment camp—as a competitive arena where he outplays others. Yet, ironically, after he was ‘beaten’ by his own uncanny dream, he reidentified with the powerful ideological assemblage of the ‘social ladder’ imposed by his father: that one needs an officially designated role to succeed.
Despite renouncing gaming, two years after Yufei left the camp, he quit high school and became an award-winning professional LoL player. For fear of losing ‘social position’, he still attended gaokao without a high-school diploma and was enrolled into a local tier-two university. But after staying there for two years, he again decided to quit the university and go back to the e-sports industry, as he found university boring. This time, he became an e-sports entrepreneur involved in the lucrative business of athlete trading. Riding on the e-sports boom around 2018, he became a millionaire and invested in several other trendy businesses in the video game industry. In his own words, he had “managed to win on a different athletic track.” The last time we met in 2021, at a luxurious restaurant, Yufei talked about his million-dollar investment projects in other industries, following state regulation of the gaming market. To my surprise, however, he still admits that he is an Internet addict who would spend thousands of yuan at one time, quickly leveling up and becoming the top player in a mobile game, simply to enjoy the sense of purchased superiority. This time, there is no shame involved in his expression, as the addictive game play no longer represents weakness for a successful business competitor with ‘social position’.

Yufei’s fluid competition ideologies could only develop from the dynamic competition landscape where, since the 1980s, China’s ‘neo-socialist governmentalities’ (Palmer and Winiger 2019) loosened the totalitarian ideological control in Chinese society, opened up new and diverse competitive arenas, generated new power relations, and created spaces to contest dominant ideologies. New ideological assemblages of competition constantly emerge through people’s encounters with a rich reservoir of symbols that represent ideological promises, which constantly furnish and refurnish their knowledge of competitions. Individuals identify with multiple ideological assemblages at different times, yet still make some consistent meanings out of them.

When reflecting upon his successes in entrepreneurship, Yufei said:

My parents always wanted me to take the normative highway they had prepared, but it turned out that the undiscovered lanes excited me more. I could have become a PhD like you. But whenever I returned to the normative track, I would be impatient. I felt like I am born an athletic competitor and enjoy the excitement of uncertainty. Till today, my father still does not get why I could become successful. And I never asked for any support from him.

Yufei still wished to be recognized by his father, who imposed on him the ‘social ladder’ imaginary. However, he found that the ‘social ladder’ had become differently assembled from his father’s outdated view that one needed an officially designated role to succeed. He identified with emerging roles that were not entirely ‘officially designated’ and discovered the implicit rules of
an increasingly complicated neo-socialist social game, in which he could still ‘outplay the others’ as he had learned in LoL. While the rules of any competitive arena stabilize certain social processes, they shift since the social processes themselves are open to changes and contingencies. As the competitive gaming market developed, Yufei found capital-enabled playfulness and a stabilized source of recognition beyond the shame-filled institution of gaokao, the fantastic world of LoL, and the stressful labor of e-sports. Yufei seeks to find more agency in Chinese society by tacking between, and creatively adapting, different competition ideologies.

**Conclusion**

This article presents the dynamic and fluid landscape of competition in neo-socialist China. For the state, competition can be a productive force for development, but it is unwieldy because it can make young people less willing to stay on the designated track of state-sanctioned competition. For young people, competition can be a stressful experience, but it can also be utilized as a medium for developing counter-hegemonic values and a sense of creative agency. There is no ‘best way’ to resolve the tensions that emerge between different competition ideologies. However, this does not stop people from imagining and seeking out ‘better’ competitions, or alternative competitive ways of achieving a sense of dignity and social recognition.

Student-gamers seek such alternatives as they move between the arenas of formal education, recreational gaming, and professional gaming. Across these spheres, competition results in subjective experiences of joy, excitement, achievement, and hope, but also shame, frustration, loss, and disillusion. Such experiences lead student-gamers to develop and revise their expectations of competition, both in specific arenas and in general, in ways that sometimes align with and sometimes depart from normative ideas of what can be achieved by competing. In other words, they discover that the stakes of competition entail not just diplomas, prizes, status, or the loss thereof, but also existential questions such as what is worth competing for, how to compete, and the extent to which competition enables a fulfilling life. Shifting ideas of what competition does or could do for them prompts students to try out different competitive forms, strategies, and practices, which in turn leads to further changes in their understanding of the possibilities that competing offers them.

These findings contradict simplistic conflations of competition and neoliberal economic models (Colloredo-Mansfeld 2002; Hoffman 2010). Such analyses assume that state actors impose competition upon populations with certain expected outcomes, and that populations therefore come to share state actors’ expectations of what competition does. By contrast, this article has shown that
competition—as an ideological assemblage of expectations, practices, strategies, and structures—is not singular, fixed, or imposed from the top down. Rather, ideologies of competition are multiple, constantly morphing, and recursively revised following the unexpected outcomes people experience as they compete in, and move between, different competitive arenas. Future analyses of competition would do well to take a page from the anthropology of ideology and approach ideas about the social consequences of competition as continually emerging from the interplay between established expectations of competition’s outcomes and the lived experience of competing in practice.

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Note

1. In China, League of Legends is translated as yingxiong lianmeng (lit., ‘league of heroes’).
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