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Inside the Chinese boot camp

By Zigor Aldama

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Chen Fei is nervous. His parents had told him that they would be travelling to Beijing once school broke up for the summer, but had been clear that this would not be a holiday. He has found himself in an inconspicuous building that was formerly a technology institute in Daxing, a working-class district south of Beijing. There are 70 adolescents milling about in military-style T-shirts. These slight, mostly bespectacled teenagers are in direct contrast to the burly men that appear to be serving as their guards.

In a small room inside the centre, while her son waits outside, Chen's mother is crying as she explains to a psychiatrist why they have travelled more than 600 miles from their home in the central province of Henan. 'Our son's addiction to the internet is destroying our family,' she says. 'About two years ago he started going to cybercafes to play online, but we gave it little thought. He was a good student and we knew he had to relax. Yet the sessions became longer and he began to play every day. His schoolwork suffered so we tried to convince his teachers and classmates to distance him from that scene, but about six months ago he completely lost control and spent more than 20 hours in front of a computer.'

It is decided that Chen will be committed to the centre for a period of three to six months – perhaps longer if he does not respond positively. He will undergo a therapy treatment designed by Tao Ran, a psychiatrist and colonel in the People's Liberation Army, that combines military discipline with traditional techniques to overcome addiction. A doctor explains to Chen's parents that their son will be denied access to all electronic devices, will be prohibited from having any outside contact, and will have to follow all orders.

Chen will be one of 6,000 boys and (occasionally) girls to have entered the centre since it opened in 2006. When his mother breaks the news, he looks at her with repressed anger but does not utter a word as he is led away by one of Daxing's psychologists.

'Internet addiction leads to problems in the brain similar to those derived from heroin consumption,' Tao says. 'But, generally, it is even more damaging. It destroys relationships and deteriorates the body without the person knowing. All of them have eyesight and back problems and suffer from eating disorders. In addition, we have discovered that their brain capacity is reduced by eight per cent, and the psychological afflictions are serious. If someone is spending six hours or more on the internet, we consider that to be an addiction.'

China has the greatest number of internet users in the world – 632 million as of July 2014 – and the government believes that 10 per cent of its internet-surfing minors (24 million) are addicted.

A Chinese anti-videogame activist and university lecturer, Dr Tao Hongkai, has led the opposition to Daxing's practices. Another doctor, New Zealander Trent Bax, wrote his PhD about Daxing and considers Tao Ran's methods a form of torture. They both contest Tao's assertion that internet addiction is comparable with drug addiction as the withdrawal symptoms are not linked to the taking of substances. They believe internet addiction should be considered a social deviation, and not a medically 'curable' condition.

Tao Ran intends his treatment to become standard practice for internet addiction. He claims a success rate of 75 per cent since 2008, though there is no way of accurately substantiating this. But there are already about 300 clinics in China that incorporate elements of his model – mainly the military discipline. His manifesto has been published in 22 languages

Tao considers a patient cured if they are able to use the internet for less than six hours a day six months after leaving the centre. There are plenty of familiar faces at Daxing. Twenty-two-year-old Li Wenchao is a repeat patient, and although the specialists have discharged him he has decided to stay on. 'I am afraid to go back to a normal life,' he says. 'I fear I will become addicted again. That is why I have asked to stay longer, until I develop enough confidence to deal with life.'