

Postcard from Beijing

By JESSIE JIANG Thursday, Feb. 19, 2009



Patients at a Chinese Internet-addiction center submit to strict military routine.
Elisa Haberer / Corbis

Even though it was just before Lunar New Year--the most important family holiday on the Chinese calendar--Wang Hongxia was forcing her son out of the house. The 45-year-old accountant had decided to take her 12-year-old from their home in the northwestern city of Xian to a secluded military compound in Beijing, more than 700 miles (1,125 km) away. Like many Chinese parents, Wang felt she had no choice. "Things have absolutely gone out of control," she said, almost in tears. "My son just beat and bit me again this morning after I wouldn't let him touch the computer."

With an estimated 300 million Web users--the most in the world--China is struggling with an epidemic of Internet obsession among its youth. Since the establishment in 2004 of the country's first Internet-addiction-treatment facility, the China Youth Mental Health Center, more than 3,000 patients have been treated there.

The U.S.-based Center for Internet Addiction Recovery classifies the condition as compulsive behavior in which "the Internet becomes the organizing principle of addicts' lives." According to guidelines set by Tao Ran, director of the Beijing center and a colonel in the People's Liberation Army, using the Web for six consecutive hours a day for three straight months constitutes an addiction.

While the guidelines might seem overly broad--by that measure, many researchers or financial analysts who log long hours on the Internet could be considered addicts--that hasn't stopped anxious parents like Wang from dragging their children to Tao's camp, a grim four-story building in Beijing's main military compound. Once checked in, most

patients are required to stay for three months, isolated from the outside world, without access to cell phones and, of course, computers. Parents of patients at the Internet-addiction center have to stay for several weeks of treatment too, since, according to Tao, Internet addiction is often a result of "parenting mistakes." For most families, paying for this care is a sacrifice. The cost can total nearly \$3,000--almost three months' salary for the average Chinese couple.

Life in the camp, not surprisingly, is one of strict discipline. Patients get up at 6:30 a.m. and go to bed at 9:30 p.m. Their daily schedule includes military drills, therapy sessions, reading and sports. "At first, I felt like I was living in hell," says Yang Xudong, a laconic 22-year-old in his second month of treatment. "But over time, it gets more comfortable and peaceful." Despite the progress he's made, like eating a diet other than the instant noodles he used to live on while playing online games, the Beijing native admits he still gets upset too easily and is "afraid of people"--two signature symptoms of Internet addiction, according to Tao. "I think life in this camp has definitely calmed me down to some degree," says Yang.

"But I'm far from ready to get out, since I don't know what to do with my life yet."

A large number of the center's patients are well educated. Didi, a 20-year-old college sophomore who did not disclose his full name, picked up online gaming after being accepted into the distinguished Tsinghua University. He says he became so obsessed that he skipped all his classes for an entire semester and eventually received academic warnings from the school. As many as 30 students from Tsinghua and Peking University--China's most prestigious schools--have been to the camp, says Tao. "Our kids are all very special and intelligent," he notes. "It's only normal for people to make detours when they're young. Our mission is to help them get back on track before it's too late."

On the same afternoon that Wang and her son arrived, an 18-year-old boy was ready to leave after months of strenuous treatment. As part of the camp's tradition, he hugged every one of his fellow patients. "It's certainly an emotional moment for the kids," says Tao--one that can even soften the camp's chief disciplinarian. "To me, it's especially rewarding to see them step out of here with all the confidence that they deserve."