Signals:
"I Was A Chinese Internet Addict" (*Harper's* March '07)
Li's *Tao of Creativity* presentation

The following is a summary of my understanding of social/cultural signals from the *Harper's* article, which may inform Li's *Tao of Creativity* exploration:

Discussion:
The meat of the article appeared, for me, in the author's discussion of "Internet Addiction" as a symptom of a broader cultural malaise in China that coincides with the maturation of a generation of one-child families. Can the tenets of collectivist culture survive in a microcosm of the one-child family?

As Priscilla discussed in her presentation, the traditions of collectivist culture instruct each person in that culture to be an individual without airs of 'self', (the "self"-less individual) and that each person's most noble calling is to respect and honor the will of authority figures, including their relatives and ancestry, and obligations to obey greater societal norms.

However, in a single-child family, all the hopes, aspirations, obligations and instructions from every source are downloaded to the shoulders of a single "self"-less individual, the child. The "self" is meant to be invisible to the child, who is but a vessel for the dreams of others. But as a singular entity in the family, the child is a highly visible, highly significant object to the family itself. And one small set of shoulders may be too tenuous a base for such an unwieldy load. We may witness a generation of Chinese adolescents collectively buckle under this weight, for in the absence of self, there is no mechanism to buttress the individually internally against such external demands.

Meanwhile, Western cultural, economic, and ideological influences are percolating rapidly into the East. (The reality is of deep cultural cross-pollination from West to East and back again - there is exchange afoot - but this discussion focuses on ground effects experienced in China.) The invasion of Western individualist cultural ideology, the explosion of communications technologies, and a generation of only children are combining to cause a serious ruckus across the pond.

Communications technologies are about connection to others and outlets for personal expression. The "self"-less child must connect with others to experience belonging in a collectivist culture. When the only-child - raised in a two-faced family environment of both outrageous coddling and outrageous expectations - experiences these outlets for connection and self-expression simultaneously with the sneaking influence of Western individualist culture, it's safe to say that business as usual is over for traditional Chinese values.

There is an ideological tug-of-war happening to this generation of Chinese. They bear the brunt, as single children, of family pressure for both achievement and conformity - while simultaneously feeling pulled by individualist culture that speaks the language of their (relatively) coddled reality. This conflict plays out in the communication and interaction opportunities afforded in the online world.

Technological connectivity is the necessary condition to enable *emotional* connectivity for this generation. I venture that this is true of Chinese adolescents to a degree that surpasses all other cultural groups currently and historically.

We know, and the author's cogent observations reinforce, that the technology of "the internet" is but the vessel for the addictive behaviors. We must examine what behaviors underlie this "excessive" engagement with the medium, and understanding the pressures and pains of these "addicts" is a good start.

Harper's article here (subscription required):
http://www.harpers.org/archive/2007/03/0081438

Kelly Seagram
(cc) 2007 Beal Institute for Strategic Creativity