

# Scripted Role-Playing Games and Emotional Deficit among Contemporary Chinese Youth

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**Abstract.** This article examines the rise of immersive entertainment in China, with a particular focus on live-action role-playing games (LARPs) and their commodification of emotional labor. The study aimed to explore how players experience and negotiate scripted intimacy within these games. Data were collected through ten unstructured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, and thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts. Findings show that players actively invest emotions to gain access to intense and scripted experiences unavailable in daily life. While most respondents distinguish between fictional and real interactions, some reported difficulty detaching from game-induced emotions, leading to psychological burdens. The analysis further reveals that the popularity of LARPs reflects a wider emotional deficit in contemporary Chinese society, where intimacy is increasingly mediated by commodified scripts. This research contributes to debates on emotional and affective labor by situating LARPs within the logic of capitalist commodification, highlighting both the cultural significance and the psychological risks of immersive entertainment.

**Keywords:** Emotional Labor; Affective Labor; LARP (Live Action Role-Playing); Commodification of Emotion; Contemporary Chinese Youth.

## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, consumption of entertainment in China has undergone significant shifts, with focus leaning towards “spiritual consumption”, the consumption of feelings and experiences instead of physical enjoyment [1]. Unlike entertainment in the form of films, theater, or literature, such activities are more engaging for the younger generation. This article explores a unique type of immersive game —Qingganben, which can be seen as a type of Live-Action Role-Playing Game (LARP). While LARPs have a fixed storyline, their gameplay is closer to traditional tabletop role-playing games. In LARPs, players assume different roles and interact with each other according to a pre-set script; non-player characters (NPCs) also have their own personalities and storylines, helping to advance the overall narrative. Unlike passive forms of entertainment such as movies, LARPs require active participation, transforming spectators into active players and performers. Further, industry statistics delve into the magnitude of this shift. *The 2024 White Paper on New Forms of Immersive Entertainment* reports that the size of the consumer market for the immersive industry in China stands at 92.7 billion yuan, predicted to grow to over 240 billion yuan by 2024 [2]. As of 2024, China ranks first in the world in the number of projects, market size, investment scale, and total output value in the immersive gaming industry within the 26 countries that possess a developed sector [3]. In the same manner, Xueqing points out that a myriad of factors, such as the intricacy of the plots, immersion in the narratives, and the design of character-to-non-playable character (NPC) relations that entail familial sibling bonds or romance, are catalysts for driving habitual consumption [4]. Furthermore, NPC characters lovers will perform pre-planned romantic scripts where they interact with the user by holding hands, hugging, and making confessions. While these scripted encounters are well-known to be fictional, the emotional investment players exhibit is real. Players invest emotional labor into a commodified emotional exchange. In this context, the popularity of scripted role-playing games poses the question of whether they gamify emotional labor, revealing a greater emotional vacuum within the contemporary Chinese youthful population. This article explores how capitalism transforms emotional needs into profitable entertainment products through the lens of

emotional labor and affective labor. It also explores the social and psychological impact of relying on commodified experiences in pursuit of intimacy.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Emotional Labor and the Commodification of Feelings**

Hochschild first proposed the concept of "emotional labor," referring to the regulation and management of emotions in the workplace, particularly in the service sector [5]. Employees are not only required to perform physical or intellectual labor, but also to display appropriate emotions such as friendliness, enthusiasm, or happiness. These emotional displays are subject to the demands of capital and customer expectations. For example, flight attendants are trained to remain calm and confident in all situations, while salespeople are required to be polite. Hochschild argues that this process represents the commodification of emotions, what was once considered private emotion has become a resource in economic transactions. This results in alienation, as employees may feel disconnected from their true selves when displaying emotions that contradict their genuine feelings. Therefore, emotional labor is not only an individual act but also a mechanism by which capital extracts value from human subjectivity.

### **2.2 Affective Labor in the Cultural Industries**

Hardt and Negri extended Hochschild's framework of emotional labor, expanding its analysis beyond the service sector to explore how labor not only produces goods but also social relations, collective identities, and cultural meanings [6]. Affective labor creates relational values such as trust, care, and intimacy, which circulate through communication networks and the cultural industries. This extended theory reflects broader changes in the capitalist economy, where profits from creating cultural experiences and symbolic value are as significant as those from producing physical products. In cultural industries such as music, film, or online platforms, affective labor is a crucial bond for audience interaction with narratives, performances, and celebrities. Besides, affective labor reshapes the relationship between producers and consumers. For example, fans purchase products based on celebrity appeal, spend money to interact with celebrities, and spontaneously create and share promotional content. Fans participate in the co-creation of cultural value through emotional engagement, feedback, and community building. However, this process also involves exploitation, as the unpaid emotional labor of consumers is incorporated into the cycle of capital accumulation. In this sense, emotional labor not only transforms the structure of work but also blurs the boundaries between production and consumption.

### **2.3 Immersive Entertainment and Role-Playing Games in China**

The rise of Qingganben (LARPs) in China is a unique case. RPGs are role-playing games that integrate elements of drama, gaming, and social interaction. In these games, workers play the role of non-player characters (NPCs), who are, within the game's narrative, the lovers, parents, or siblings of the players. These workers, through scripted dialogue, props, and improvisation, quickly immerse players in the scenario and relationships. These scenarios aim to evoke emotional resonance in players, who are willing to participate in this commoditized emotional simulation. In particular, the romantic relationships with NPCs within these scripts are a key driver of consumption. Many players repeatedly purchase the same script, compete for the roles that has romantic relationship with NPC at high prices, and even sell other roles at low prices or offer them for free (since most scripts have six players, but only 1-2 are accompanied with romantic NPCs). From a micro-level perspective, many participants believe that LARPs satisfy emotional needs that are difficult to fulfill in their daily lives, especially regarding love, friendship, and family. However, from a macro-level perspective, this phenomenon reveals how capital transforms people's desire for emotions into a commodity. The reliance of LARPs on pre-set emotions not only reflects the commodification of emotions but also

the alienation of emotional life, as real interpersonal relationships may be replaced by carefully orchestrated, transactional interactions.

## **2.4 Methodology**

This study uses unstructured interviews as the primary research method to delve into participants' emotional experiences within live-action role-playing games (LARPs). The sample will consist of 10 players to ensure a broad range of perspectives. Each interview will last 60 to 90 minutes, providing ample time for participants to share their emotional experiences in detail. While the interviews will consist of ten fixed questions, they will not follow a fixed Q&A format. Instead, the interviews will be informed by the expressions of individual players, allowing the focus and direction of the conversation to evolve naturally as the players' conversation progresses. The interviews will explore participants' motivations for participating, the emotional intensity of the game, and their perspectives on the commodification of emotion. For example, participants will be asked about how they emotionally prepare before entering character, how these interactions satisfy their emotional needs, and how they resolve emotional conflicts when the script does not align with their expectations. Thematic analysis will be used to identify and analyze recurring themes within the interview transcripts. The interviews aimed to gain a deeper understanding of players' experiences with emotional investment, to collect diverse experiences, to understand how emotional labor is employed and consumed in different types of LARP environments, and to explore, through sample analysis, the broader social phenomenon of emotional demands as a component of product consumption and its psychological impact on individuals.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

### **3.1 Motivations for Emotional Investment**

One of the most consistent findings across interviews is that players actively engage in emotional labor because they pursue immersive and intense experiences. Many respondents described LARPs as opportunities to step into another life within the span of 8 to 12 hours, allowing them to experience narratives and relationships that are often inaccessible in everyday reality. Players reported that the scripts provide structured opportunities for strong emotional outbursts, such as sadness, romance, or reconciliation. They might not otherwise be able to express themselves in daily life. This shows that LARPs fulfill deeper psychological needs for recognition, intimacy, and self-expression. Importantly, this investment reflects players' willingness to perform emotional labor voluntarily, highlighting the blurred boundary between entertainment and emotional work.

### **3.2 Perceptions of Emotional Commodification**

Another key issue is whether players are aware that their participation actually involves the commodification of emotional labor. Most participants explicitly stated that they were aware that their gaming experience, especially interactions with non-player characters (NPCs), was carefully designed and transactional in nature. They acknowledged that purchasing a game script essentially meant paying for someone else's emotional performance, whether scripted dialogue or improvised reactions. However, this awareness did not diminish their enjoyment of the game; many players felt that this transaction helped relieve stress. While most players could distinguish between virtual and real emotions, two participants found it difficult. They described a lingering emotional attachment to the characters, which continued to influence their daily lives even after the game ended. They would reminisce about scenes from the LARP, and because the attachment to the character extended to the actor, some even developed romantic feelings for the actor. These commodified and often deliberately manipulated emotions blur the lines between genuine and artificial emotional experiences, and the emotional distress this causes players can become a side effect of the game. Emotional commodification in LARP is not merely a transactional act; it raises concerns about players' autonomy within this complex emotional world.

### 3.3 Consequences and Psychological Costs of Emotional

Finally, the research results show that LARP both alleviates and exacerbates the problem of emotional emptiness in contemporary society. Almost all participants agreed that, due to the rapid development of the internet, even basic interpersonal communication is becoming increasingly rare in modern society. Many people satisfy their interpersonal and emotional needs through short videos and various social media platforms. This lifestyle has gradually become mainstream among young people, but it is characterized by emotional alienation and a lack of meaningful relationships. The emergence of LARP games addresses this emotional void, allowing players to not only experience real emotions but also empathize with them more efficiently and quickly. In just eight hours, players can have a partner who has loved them for ten years, a spouse willing to sacrifice for them, an older sibling who favors them, or parents who are strict with others but dote on them. A variety of near-perfect personalities appear, both for players and NPCs. Emotions ranging from happiness and joy to pain and sorrow, and even love-hate struggles, are condensed into a mere few hours in an extremely efficient manner. These games are more like instant food, heating emotions that should be slowly experienced and developed in real life, and then presenting them to players to satisfy their hunger. In summary, some players' reliance on artificial emotional experiences reflects a deeper alienation within capitalism, where even the most intimate human emotions become tools of market logic. Capital further exploits this attachment, leading players to repeatedly purchase scripts out of attachment to actors, seeking greater familiarity and interaction with them. Players are encouraged to consume emotional experiences, while NPCs are viewed as laborers selling emotional labor, both becoming part of a cycle of emotional alienation. For some players, this cycle not only brings fleeting gratification but also carries lasting negative consequences, such as emotional exhaustion or difficulty breaking free from the constraints of virtual emotions [7]. In this sense, LARP highlights the opportunities and challenges of the commodification of emotion. While it empowers players to participate in emotional experiences, it also instrumentalizes emotional life for capitalist profit.

## 4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that emotional labor in live-action role-playing games (LARPs) manifests as players investing emotions in fictional scenarios in exchange for intense emotional gratification. Within the LARP industry, the emotional labor expended by NPCs is explicitly monetized, while the emotional labor expended by players is consumed as a corresponding accessory, embodying the commodification of emotion. Capital plays a central role in transforming emotional needs into marketable products, furthering capitalist alienation in the process. Interestingly, while most players are able to consciously distinguish between fictional and real emotions, some respondents reported emotional aftereffects, such as attachment to characters or even NPCs. This phenomenon suggests that commoditized emotional labor can come with psychological costs, especially when consumers develop an emotional attachment to carefully curated experiences. Thus, the popularity of LARPs among young Chinese consumers can be interpreted as a reflection of a deeper emotional gap in contemporary life. For individuals with limited opportunities for emotional expression, LARPs provide a temporary emotional outlet in a controlled environment. While LARPs provide temporary emotional compensation and social connection, they also carry the risk of emotional dependence and disconnection from real-life relationships. Limitations of this study include the small sample size and the data collection being limited to a specific LARP genre. Future research could employ cross-cultural comparisons and longitudinal studies to better understand the social and psychological consequences of the commodification of emotion in immersive entertainment.

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