

## **Video Games**

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### **Abstract**

Gaming has not only become a popular entertainment and leisure activity for youth. It is also one of the most lucrative cultural industries in China, targeting both players in China and the overseas markets. Because of the significant financial contribution of game companies to China's economy and their potential to incubate the new generation with Chinese and nationalistic values, despite concern over addiction to gaming, game industries are being co-opted to work side by side with the state to meet the state's agenda. Like other cultural products, such as movies and television whose contents are embedded with ideologies, game contents are also scrutinized by the state, and game companies are being asked to toe the party line, and sometimes, game companies support government initiatives, for example, by creating a "healthy game market." On the government level, since the early 2000s, Chinese cultural policy on games has also become more explicit for the purpose of censoring game content, curtailing import of foreign games, and regulating the operation of game companies. In response, particularly to reduce reliance on the domestic market and to allow more flexibility in terms of game content, China's game industries have developed "going-out" strategies to publish and distribute games overseas. As for the social implications of this, what is influential, however, is not the deliberate top-down propaganda of the state, but the nationalistic culture crystallized within the daily game culture that has developed, a phenomenon that we now refer to as the gamification of nationalism. Apart from being seen as being aligned with the state's agenda, game companies themselves are also keen to develop and publish online and mobile games with strong nationalistic themes. The daily participation of players in the nationalism-infused game culture reinforces public national identities. The recent social trend, as well as the government's support of esports, can be seen as an add-on strategy to advance such gamification.

Keywords: games, cultural industries, esports, cultural policy

### **Introduction**

China has become the largest and most rapidly growing video gaming market in the world. Over the last decade, China's video gaming revenue saw over a six-fold increase and reached 46.6 billion US dollars in 2021 (Statista, 2022), amounting to 33.6% of total revenues in the global games market. According to a 2021 December report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2021), the number of online gamers in China reached 666 million, representing slightly over 65% of Chinese internet users. Online gaming has become the core of digital entertainment for the young generation, and it was reported that 62.5% of Chinese minors often play digital games (Goh, 2021). Thanks to technological advancements such as 5G, virtual and augmented reality, and cloud games, China's mobile gaming market is expected to further expand in the near future.

Currently, China's online gaming market is concentrated in the hands of a few local game corporations in the global gaming market. Based on rankings released by App Annie in 2021, among the world's top 52 publishers, Chinese game firms Tencent and NetEase have been the top

two publishers for four consecutive years, while several other popular game developers in China, such as FunPlus, Lilith, IGG, and 37Games, are also featured. According to a report released by Sensor Tower (2022), the top 34 Chinese game publishers accounted for 35.6% of the top 100 game publishers' revenue in December 2021. Moreover, Tencent and NetEase occupied over 60% of the domestic mobile gaming market. In 2021, Tencent's top two grossing games, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG) Mobile* and *Honor of Kings*, occupied the top-earning mobile games worldwide. This clearly indicates that a manufactured public world led by top China's game companies is emerging.

With China's ambition to extend its soft power abroad and boost its economic revenue by leveraging global capitalism, the state must ensure political correctness and profitability at the same time. The Chinese government is seen as having a love-hate relationship with the video game business. On the one hand, the games industry is a leading revenue generator and a sign of modernity, but on the other hand, it could lure youth into addiction—that is, spending too much time, money, and energy on games. Consequently, a state-market business culture has been developed in China's online game industry, in which an optimal balance between developing this lucrative creative industry and incubating a form of neo-nationalism targeting the young generation in game communities can be struck (Chung & Fung, 2013). By going through a brief history of video game industry in China, this manuscript investigates how the state-market balance comes into being. However, it is not an entirely general overview of the gaming industry; rather, it provides a critique of the expanding gaming market from the perspective of political economy.

### **Game industry in China: Control and policy**

Cultural industries in the People's Republic of China (PRC) are often under the stringent control of the authoritarian state. In the late 1990s, China's opening up to the outside world witnessed vastly increasing inflows of foreign cultures, which were considered a potential threat to the sustainability and survival of Indigenous traditional cultures as well as a sense of national spirit. As a result, cultural security was drafted into China's security discourse in 2004, in line with political security, economic security, and information security. As such, the development of China's cultural industries is not passively driven by global market forces, but also national political forces (Fung, 2014). In the context of China, theoretically, the state has strong control over the discourse of traditional cultural industries, such as the music and film businesses, and audiences only have limited access to foreign culture. But there are significant questions that have arisen. Does this state apply the same politico-economic logic to online gaming, an emerging and highly profitable cultural industry that contributes to the GDP and soft power within and outside China? Do game companies and the state share the same interests in establishing such soft power or, at least, Chinese cultural identities in the mainland and abroad?

As in the case of other creative and cultural industries, the Chinese government has kept a tight rein on its game industries, foreign games in particular. Prior to 2001, China's online game market was in its infancy because the internet was not yet widely popularized. It was only two years later, in 2003, that the market recognized that imported games accounted for 68% of the Chinese market. Faced with this, officials became concerned about cultural security, and their concern culminated in the early 2000s (Ye & Xue, 2004). In 2005, the Measures for Strengthening the Administration of Import of Cultural Products were issued to strengthen the administration of cultural product imports and enhance cultural security. Two cultural departments were stipulated to be mainly

responsible for the licensing and supervising import games. As the Measures stipulated, every foreign game was required to be approved by the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) and the Ministry of Culture (MOC) prior to “publishing,” while each China-developed game merely needed to be registered with the MOC within 30 days after its release online.

This regulatory status was renewed in March 2018. After a nearly nine-month government reorganization and suspension of game approvals, the State Administration of Press and Publication (SAPP) was appointed as the new regulator in charge of game approval, and the new restrictions on approval were tightened. Since early 2019, the number of games approved has become very limited. It is difficult for China-based game companies to obtain an online publishing service license, let alone foreign or foreign-invested companies. According to Tencent’s second-quarter financial report in August 2018, for the first time since 2005, its profit dropped because of this game approval suspension. In the two years thereafter, only 52 foreign games were approved by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA), while the number of domestic games released inside China was 999, more than 19 times higher. As such, the licensing regime helps to implement China’s internet censorship policies and also shelters China’s online game publishing market from foreign competition.

Meanwhile, the censorship of online game content and the control of consumption have been further refined in the name of fostering a “healthy game market” for players, particularly minors. The policy was meant to prevent youth’s exposure to violence and pornography as well as to protect teenagers from game addiction, which was said to be detrimental to their physical and mental health, learning, and safety (in terms of use of resources). Before 2001, the drastic Chinese policy to curb the problem was to close down cybercafés and arcades, which were accused of turning youth into “electronic slaves” (Lv, 1994). At that time, prohibition and punishment were the main regulatory approaches adopted by management departments to clean up arcade games, which were thought of as a kind of “unproductive” leisure activity (Zhang, 2013).

Since 2001, when Chinese games were recognized as a lucrative industry, the policy direction on games has shifted from one of control to harnessing gaming’s popularity for the state’s own ends. After being formally classified as a cultural product in 2003, an additional requirement to promote a national culture for videogames released in China was added. In 2004, the GAPP launched the National Online Game Publishing Project, which encouraged local game developers to produce games with Chinese historical or epic themes, particularly for players under the age of 18. In 2005, a total of 192 games published in China were developed by China-based companies, which was a huge leap forward compared with the 51 such games published in 2004 (Chew, 2019). Around five years later, the GAPP implemented the China Green Network Game Publishing Project to further clarify and emphasize the political goals of Chinese game products; that is, to ensure that the ideas to “promote the image of national culture, the heritage of national spirit, the identity of national psychology and the cultural power of national development are contained in the content of online games” (Xinhua, 2015, para. 1). By implementing such a top-down cultural policy domestically and externally, the state works in partnership with private game companies to produce and distribute games that will continually imbue the young generation with a sense of national pride, fantasy, and modernity (Fung, 2016).

Since the 2010s, constructing and advocating “green network games” has become the focus of developing China’s games industry. The SAPP specifically notes that the development of green games (or “healthy games”) should be congruent with core socialist values and put the healthy

growth of the minor first. On June 22, 2010, China's first administrative rule specifically aimed at the online game industry, Interim Measures for the Administration of Online Games, was released by the former MOC. This new regulation required "real-name registration" in games to link players' game accounts and their ID cards, a measure that allows regulators to check the identity of users against the national database. At the same time, the Chinese government has tightened content censorship and set up an Online Game Ethics Committee in 2018 for the moral evaluation of online games with any potential for controversy. The committee members are composed of experts and scholars in history, sociology, economics, psychology, and other relevant disciplines who are allegedly responsible for protecting teenager players from violent, pornographic, or reactionary content (Niko, 2018). In addition to concerns about videogame addiction and ethical issues, there have been warnings that such activity could be linked to rising levels of ill health, such as nearsightedness. According to a 2018 report by the National Health Commission, China's childhood myopia rate is among the highest in the world, with over half of the country's minors suffering from shortsightedness. In response to this, the Chinese government announced plans to impose restrictions on the hours and in-game expenditures that adolescents under eight can spend gaming online. Under pressure from local regulators, two of the largest gaming companies in China, NetEase and Tencent, have been building up their own verification systems. For example, local players of the game Honor of Kings (known as Arena of Valor overseas), Tencent's most profitable mobile game, are required to use facial recognition scans, along with their names and ID numbers, to identify the gamers' age group. At the same time, the data will be updated and stored on servers where the authorities have a right of access. In this way, in the name of protecting minors, regulators can step up their control over the ideologies of gaming and their monitoring of game corporations.

According to the 14th Five-Year Plan released by China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism in June 2021, developing globally competitive export-oriented cultural enterprises is the key to promoting Chinese culture going global, helping to establish a positive image of China, and increasing cultural consumption to boost GDP. The integrated development of e-sports and game entertainment industries becomes one of the development focuses of the state from 2021 to 2025. Video games are no longer apolitical "pure entertainment", but a form of ideology-oriented art imbued with Chinese heritage. Paradoxically, going global not only benefits domestic game companies in increasing revenues and fulfilling the mission of spreading China's soft power but also gives them a temporary reprieve from the tight regulation control at home.

### **Global expansion as a means to evade control**

Given the tight control over the domestic market that may create uncertainty in terms of market values, an increasing number of Chinese online games companies seek to explore global markets and thus diversify their risk and expand revenues. In 2021, the actual sales revenue of China's self-developed mobile games overseas reached 18.01 billion US dollars, increasing 16.59% year on year (Xinhua, 2021). The US was the largest overseas market for China-developed online games, accounting for 32.58% of the total foreign revenue of the sector. In the wave of video game globalization, game enterprises strategize to advance technological innovation and quality development to satisfy the needs of foreign markets.

The global expansion strategy safeguards Chinese game companies from being interfered with because the Chinese state has limited jurisdiction over game markets abroad. Chinese online

games in overseas markets thus behave more like technology- and market-driven corporate instruments than state instruments. However, this does not mean that these game companies deviate from state interests. In fact, the cultural specificity of the Chinese games that are produced, which are embedded with Chinese myths, martial art, historical epics, and legends, is also in accord with the state's political interests, such as soft power (Fung, 2014). The cultural proximity factor attracts Asian gamers who are culturally close to the Chinese. However, in terms of game aesthetics, character design, and visual design, Chinese game companies may act differently, strategically removing or diluting the cultural origins of a Chinese story to brand themselves as Korean- or Japanese-like games and thus appeal to a broader audience (Chung & Fung, 2013, 245). A typical example is the game *Genghis Khan*, a well-received China-developed mobile game featuring the story of the ancient leader of the Mongol Empire and his adventure to conquer the West, but the artistic expression of the game is referenced from Japanese games and animation.

In sum, China's gaming industry can be seen as a consequence of the negotiation and interaction between commercial and political forces, which is clearly an emerging state-market business model. Going global seems to be a strategy that weakens state control, but it does not imply that Chinese game companies are detached from the state agenda. As stated above, Chinese game companies perpetuate the "mission" of pushing the national culture overseas—though perhaps not in a top-down way—by injecting elements of Chinese culture into games. This is not only a profitable means of drawing upon the growing interest in traditional China, but also congruent with the government's push for "national rejuvenation."

### **Chinese national identities and nationalism**

At this point, it is important to discuss the relationship between game content and national identity. The latter is one of the most fundamental social identities (Bechhofer & McCrone, 2009), referring to a sense of belonging to a nation, with its own historical and cultural traditions, moral values, and beliefs (Liu & Turner, 2018). Benedict Anderson (1991) characterized the formation of such a nation as an "imagined community," in which members "live the image of their communion," even though most of them never know one another personally. In China, it is such that more bottom-up popular nationalism, combined with top-down official nationalism, has worked together to construct such a national identity (Jiang & Fung, 2017). Popular nationalists now regularly speak of the "motherland" (*zuguo*) and the "Chinese race" (*Zhonghua minzu*) without reference to the Party (Gries, 2004, 133). However, it is sometimes observed that, in the cyber world, popular nationalism may sometimes challenge official nationalism, if not propaganda.

Game content is exactly the vernacular everyday life culture of the people and youth through which the public develops or acquires such a national spirit. In modern China, the Chinese national identity has been jointly shaped by the digital authoritarianism of national institutions and the commercial pursuit of pan-entertainment by tech companies, including game companies (Liu, 2019). This, however, does not suggest that game companies actively participate in constructing official nationalism. It is a kind of banal nationalism that refers to the daily representations of nations that establish a shared sense of national belonging among a group of people (Billig, 2009). This involves not only the top-down state strategies but also "the active role of ordinary people in reproducing, rather than merely receiving and expressing, nationhood" (Antonsich & Skey, 2017, p. 6).

A personal episode may illustrate this point well. One of the authors served as a speaker for Tencent's training session for staff working in game development and marketing, which was offered by their human resources department in Shenzhen in 2019. A repeated question asked by both the junior and senior game development teams was how and what Chinese elements could be added to their games to disseminate Chinese culture. I noted that, at least on the level of individual game developers, they shared a feeling of national identity and took pride in propagating such a national culture. This means that, although people are born with an identity and occasionally rehearse the identity by looking at their passport, the modern understanding of national identity is one that requires molten imagination to be reminded, discovered, practiced, and (re)constructed in people's daily lives. Gaming now plays a key role in that players recognize and internalize cultural meanings and construct their sense of identity through daily practices; then, their identities become real. While the state can act through policy to increase its citizens' self-understanding, practicing in games enables citizens to create self-acknowledgement of how they are part of a nation.

On the level of game companies, while most game companies still produce commercial games, they are obliged to occasionally produce games that fit the government agenda. For example, in collaboration with the Communist Youth League of China, a China-based game company called PowerNet released the *Resistance War* in 2007 to commemorate the victory of China in the War of Resistance occurred from 1937 to 1945. Because of its patriotic theme, the game soon reached the market of the gamers born in the 1960s and 1970s, who were more familiar with the Resistance War, even if the game quality was relatively poor compared with imported games at that time (Nie, 2013). Another example is *Immortal Conquest (Shuai Tu Zhi Bin)*, a well-received mobile game produced by NetEase in 2019. It is a 2D sandbox strategy mobile game based on the history of the Three Kingdoms Dynasty of China, and it set off a wave of learning about Chinese traditions on the internet and the targeting of Asian markets, largely Japan. Because of this subtle function of incubating the public with Chinese culture and history, game companies are also very careful to pay heed to "historical accuracy" and "political correctness." To this end, Tencent invited Ge Jianxiong, a historian at Fudan University, to be an academic advisor for the popular mobile game *Honor of Kings*. However, he expressed skepticism about the game's role in spreading correct historical knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is not surprise for Chinese to see locally produced games themed with anti-corruption sentiments (e.g., *Incorruptible Warrior (Qing Lian Zhan Shi)* developed by the Commission for Discipline Inspection of Haishu District, Ningbo) (Elegant, 2007).

Online games are also designed to provide young gamers with a global community in which they express their patriotic feelings and construct their national identities through participation. For instance, Steam, a digital distribution platform for video games created by the Korean Valve Corporation, was severely criticized by many Chinese gamers because it did not suspend services during China's National Day of Mourning for COVID-19 victims on April 4, 2020. Gamers also held protests in the form of peaceful assemblies on videogame platforms to demonstrate and enhance their sense of national identity. For example, on the day of the funeral of Yuan Longping, a Chinese plant scientist known as the "father of hybrid rice," players created various farewell rituals to show respect to him. Players of *Minecraft* piled blocks into the shape of rice to bid farewell to Yuan, players of *Final Fantasy* paraded in black to give him their send-off, and

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<sup>1</sup>See <https://new.qq.com/omn/20200619/20200619A02DI000.html>.

players of *EVE* virtually exploded themselves into stars to pay homage to the academician Yuan. These cases, in which an emerging form of nationalism is being practiced and consolidated through game design techniques and mechanics in non-game contexts, can be termed the “gamification of nationalism” (Landers et al., 2018).

### **New trend of the gamification of nationalism**

In sum, in China, the control of game industries has become more advanced and complex. Instead of direct propaganda, private game corporations must comply with administrative interventions in game design and distribution, constructing a banal nationalism targeting and appealing to the new generation in a more subtle and less pronounced way. The core of this nationalism is achieved by satisfying and pleasing the younger generation (Fung, 2016). The government now realizes that perhaps the best way to obtain support from the new generation is to satisfy their desire for entertainment. However, the authorities have kept a tight rein to ensure that the games to be released inside China are congruent with Chinese ethics and the nationalistic agenda. Local game companies must learn not only how to tell the Chinese story well to the outside, but also how to justify their existence to Chinese regulators. Gamification-from-above (Woodcock & Johnson, 2018) gets solidified, subtly imposing nationalism upon the practices and beliefs of game players, especially active ones. Theoretically, we call this significant trend the gamification of nationalism, a mechanism of business–government cooperation, the process of inscribing national-cultural ideologies into game contents with the aim of gaining legitimacy at home, seeking support for global expansion, promoting the state’s soft power worldwide, and imbuing in the new generation a sense of patriotism in a subtle and joyful way. Consequently, video game has changed from “electronic heroin” to “new economy and important cultural carrier of China” (Jiang & Fung, 2017). The image of the game players changes from victims of “spiritual opium”, to culture consumers, then to vulnerable teenagers, and currently esports athletes (Cap & He, 2021).

Being politically correct is a prerequisite for a game to enter and adapt to the Chinese market. This may be self-explanatory in view of the militarization of shooting strategy survival games in recent years. *PUBG Mobile* (2017) was originally framed as a killing game and banned. Its operator, Tencent, reframed it as military training for China’s own army; hence, it became politically correct. Other games with the same themes adopted a similar approach to circumvent censorship risks. For example, *Xiaomi Gunfight* (2017) named the firefight “combat training,” and players who lose in the game are “eliminated” rather than “killed”; NetEase’s *Operation Wilderness* (2019), against the backdrop of the alien invasion of Earth, called on gamers to conduct virtual combat training in order to sort out the best soldiers into peacekeeping forces to defend the motherland (namely China); NetEase’s *Terminator 2* (2017) also set itself as a simulated battlefield in which robots, not human beings, are manipulated to fight against one another. In theory, these game operations represent the gamification of nationalism, through which meanings and discourse of gaming are rearticulated to align with national discourse. These games change from a “breeding ground for violent crime” to a “new way of entertainment” for defending the country.

In addition, the rise of esports in China has followed a similar path. Although public concerns over game addiction have long been the focus of national supervision in the name of promoting a healthy internet culture, at the same time, local governments actively encourage the development of competitive gaming and healthy esports. Since 2003, eSports has been recognized as an official

sport by the Sports Ministry, and they exploded in popularity over the following 10 years. In 2016, eSports was officially recognized as a university major. Titles such as “esports operator” and “esports professional” became official careers in April 2019. Professional eSports players are now regarded as athletes, not addicts. Those Chinese teams who win medals at international eSport competitions are called “national heroes,” whose training in eSports skills is viewed as a form of patriotism (Ismangail & Fung, 2020; Yu, 2018).

Multiple Chinese cities announced their own beneficial policies to attract eSport organizations and professional teams to develop local eSports, including Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Xi’an, and Chengdu. For example, in 2015, Shanghai announced a plan to become the “international capital of eSports.” To achieve this, the government has heavily invested in relevant infrastructures, such as fast broadband, eSports stadiums, and “Esports industrial parks.” Four years later, the government of Beijing launched an initiative to become the “international capital of online games” by no later than 2025. Big money investment in the industry attracted 4,731 professional players registered in China by the end of March 2021, as well as additional job opportunities in the eSports value chain. As China’s 14th five-year plan for cultural industry development included support for the eSport industry, these numbers are still increasing. As such, the rise of eSports in China is “a collaborative effort by the money-power alliance to use the logic of digital capitalism to realize the Chinese dream” (Yu, 2018, p. 88). In modern China, gamification functions as an increasingly important approach to promote and strengthen a sense of national identity among a new generation of gamers.

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