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Post-print: International Expansion of Domestic Games and National Image Construction in the Context of Cross-cultural Communication

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Abstract

As an indispensable and important component of a nation's cultural strategic industry, the significance of China's electronic game industry to the realization of socialist cultural diplomacy is self-evident. At present, as online games have been regarded as the ninth art form of culture, combined with their uniquely defined status as cultural art, research on online games encompasses various aspects such as their forms of expression, media, and participants. The inherent characteristics of online games themselves—their racial, cultural, and commodity nature—determine their significant advantageous role in the overseas promotion of ideological and value concepts, social survival methods, and popular cultural products, constituting a key force in our country's image construction. Although China has achieved some accomplishments in this area in recent years, difficulties and problems have also emerged. To this end, this paper also investigates issues concerning the development of overseas promotion of Chinese domestic online games, and proposes a response strategy of enhancing the overseas promotional influence of online games to support the construction of a “credible, amiable, and respectable” image.

Full Text

Domestic Games Going Global and National Image Construction in Cross-Cultural Communication Contexts

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Abstract

As an indispensable component of a nation's cultural strategic industries, China's video game industry holds undeniable significance for the realization of

socialist cultural diplomacy. In an era where video games are recognized as the ninth art form, research on games encompasses multiple dimensions including their expressive forms, media characteristics, and participant engagement. The inherent properties of video games—their ethnic, cultural, and commodity nature—endow them with distinct advantages in disseminating ideological values, social lifestyles, and mass cultural products abroad, making them a critical force in national image construction. Although China has achieved certain accomplishments in this domain in recent years, numerous difficulties and challenges persist. This paper examines the development of overseas promotion for Chinese domestic video games and proposes strategies to strengthen their international communication influence, thereby supporting the construction of a “credible, lovable, and respectable” national image.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication; International communication; Video games; Industrial development; National image

1. The Construction of Connections Between Video Games and National Image

1.1 Redefining the Nature of Video Games After Disenchantment

Not long ago, the rapid development of media platforms led to video games being vilified as a “flood of beasts,” with gamers stigmatized as addicts hooked on “electronic opium.” News stories about “internet-addicted youth” emerged incessantly both domestically and abroad, seemingly forging an unbreakable link between video games and notions of “worthlessness” or “ruin through indulgence.” However, with advances in network technology and socio-economic development, societal condemnation of games has gradually diminished. Both gaming communities and state institutions have continuously worked to disenchant video games, gradually uncovering their embedded spirit of athletic competition and cultural transmission attributes. For instance, at the 2018 Jakarta Asian Games, the Chinese team won the championship in *League of Legends*, an event widely reported and commented on by official media, sparking extensive debate about whether esports could enter the Olympics like traditional sports. In 2022, after the release of the third trailer for *Black Myth: Wukong*, both *People’s Daily* and CCTV-6 covered the game and discussed its engagement with Journey to the West culture—scenarios that would have been unimaginable at the dawn of the new century when China’s video game industry was still in its infancy.

In reality, as creative products, video games inherently possess strong literary qualities and essential entertainment-artistic characteristics. Game culture refers to the culture that developers impart to players, manifesting in all aspects of video games including historical backgrounds, themes, narratives, characters, music, artistic styles, and codes of conduct. Whether examining a game’s overall architecture or its individual components, players can perceive the life values and moral concepts it promotes, thereby comprehending its underlying spiritual

meaning. Surveying the global market, the video game industry is currently dominated by enterprises from China, Japan, Europe, and America. The rapid development of the information sector has propelled the vigorous growth of video games and the gaming culture industry. China's profound five-thousand-year history provides abundant material for game creation, and video games based on major historical events have integrated modern technological elements [1], occupying an important share of the industry—exemplified by the *Chinese Paladin* series and *Ghost Valley (Guigu Bagua)*, both widely acclaimed by global players on the Steam platform. Japanese video games also exhibit distinctive national characteristics, incorporating bushido and ninja culture, most notably *Ghost of Tsushima* and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, which draw inspiration from Akira Kurosawa's films. Additionally, the two-dimensional culture born from the anime industry has flourished, with Nintendo—the world's most renowned gaming company—standing as a leader in this domain. Classic European and American video games have similarly integrated the essence of Western civilization, such as *Kingdom Come: Deliverance*, which spreads knightly culture, and the *Avengers* series, which embodies individual heroism. These examples demonstrate that the cultural value of video games is gradually being excavated and recognized.

1.2 A Favorable Approach to National Image Construction in the New Era

The world today is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, with increasingly close relationships among various actors. The establishment and dissemination of international image no longer rely solely on conventional media such as radio stations, newspapers, and journals, but have far exceeded the scope of media brands to permeate deeply into ordinary people's daily lives. Compared to the past political imagery characterized by “rationality,” “seriousness,” and “emptiness,” national image has undergone tremendous transformation, evolving into a more vivid, concrete, and perceptible entity that more closely approximates the real world. If China remains complacent and engages in international communication passively, it will only achieve a “fabricated” image. Therefore, mastering discursive power, grasping national development direction, ensuring healthy national development, and proactively establishing a positive national image constitute fundamental requirements for advancing national development in a positive direction.

Today's youth spend substantial time engaging with anime and games. The author conducted interviews with classmates currently studying in South Korea, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom, discovering that many young people abroad rarely watch television or read newspapers, instead consuming mobile media and video games most frequently—and primarily to watch gaming content. This indicates that the influence of video games among young people may have surpassed that of traditional media such as newspapers, television, and film. As a communication medium, video games offer broad promotional scope

without prominent political coloring or didacticism, while providing strong entertainment value that audiences readily accept, thus holding significant meaning for transmitting social values and consciousness. Consequently, in modern social contexts, video games undoubtedly represent an excellent method for China's image construction.

2. Dilemmas Facing Domestic Video Games in National Image Construction

2.1 Technical Dilemmas in Game Production

Video game interaction platforms can typically be categorized into three major types: mobile, PC (personal computer), and console. In the mobile gaming sector, China has accumulated a robust technical foundation thanks to affordable hardware, early adoption of 4G/5G communication technologies, and a massive user market, with Tencent Group becoming the world's highest-valued gaming company through mobile games. However, despite mobile games having become the mainstream domain of contemporary gaming development, they exhibit low efficiency in cultural transmission contrary to their high profitability. According to the latest global gaming industry report from Newzoo, popular domestic mobile games in China, Japan, and European-American countries rarely achieve success in other nations, generating dismal revenues. Products from leading companies such as Tencent's *Honor of Kings* in China and Nintendo's *Dragalia Lost* in Japan have been unable to break the curse of difficulty in mobile game globalization. The report also indicates that compared to mobile games, AAA games achieve globalization and fame more easily through a more mature system.

In the video game industry, AAA games refer to titles developed with a lot of money, a lot of resources, and a lot of time [2]. Several internationally renowned gaming companies, including Nintendo (Japan), Ubisoft (France), and Rockstar, Microsoft, and Blizzard (USA), have accumulated decades of technical expertise in this area. However, in China's current gaming market, games meeting international AAA standards are extremely rare. Even mega-corporations like Tencent and NetEase possess limited relevant experience in AAA game development. Last year, *Bright Memory: Infinite*, developed by the domestic independent studio FYQD-Studio, launched across major platforms, cleverly integrating ancient Chinese architecture, traditional martial arts movements, and futuristic sci-fi elements while achieving AAA-level quality in both graphics and action, earning widespread acclaim from domestic and international players. However, because the developer was a single individual with limited manpower, the game suffered from a hollow narrative and a brief four-hour playtime, preventing it from competing with other titles and losing opportunities for international award nominations. A AAA game is typically comprehensive, even constituting the most realistic projection of real life imaginable within human creativity. It represents a grand systematic engineering project for a virtual world, posing major chal-

lenges across technology, art, capital, management, and funding—impossible to accomplish through individual effort alone. Just as small workshops cannot produce large products like airplanes, ships, or aircraft, individuals or small groups cannot create AAA games. Large products require support from major industrial systems; similarly, the birth of AAA games necessitates the establishment of a large-scale gaming industrial system.

2.2 Dilemmas in Cultural Connotation Expression

Edward Hall proposed the concept of high-context and low-context cultures. High-context cultures primarily rely on context to transmit information, requiring communicators to share pre-established information transmission protocols such as common customs, values, and social axioms before communication occurs. Low-context cultures mainly depend on information encoding, emphasizing logical linguistic expression while showing minimal reliance on context, consequently viewing circuitous expression as disrespectful to communication itself [3]. These differences in context make it difficult for foreign video game players to comprehend the core values expressed in Chinese history and xianxia (immortal hero) culture, causing excellent Chinese games to face natural cultural discounts when going abroad.

In early 2022, *SIFU*, developed by the French team Sloclap, launched across major gaming platforms as an action game themed around Chinese kung fu culture. The narrative follows a young Bak Mei kung fu apprentice who ventures alone into a modern city to find his parents' killer. Although the game received positive reviews among foreign players, many domestic players were unconvinced, with the most common domestic critique being that it “possesses only the form, not the essence.” Since the last century, numerous Chinese individuals represented by Bruce Lee have opened martial arts schools abroad and produced many kung fu films, formally introducing Chinese kung fu to the world. Some foreigners unfamiliar with China inevitably associate the country with “kung fu.” However, due to contextual differences, foreigners struggle to grasp the inner essence of Chinese kung fu, with many only interested in its combat effectiveness. Kung fu represents the crystallization of Chinese wisdom, the embodiment of traditional Chinese culture, and a unique “martial culture” in the world [4]. It emphasizes the combination of hardness and softness, internal and external cultivation, featuring both robust and magnificent external forms and elegant, profound internal connotations that contain ancient philosophers' contemplation of life and the universe—constituting a precious cultural heritage accumulated by the Chinese people over the long term. Consequently, *SIFU*, produced by a French company, only manifests the violence of Chinese kung fu while remaining ignorant of the true essence: that “stopping the spear is true martial prowess.”

2.3 Multi-Party Game Market Dilemmas

Strictly speaking, China's video game industry began across the strait in Taiwan Province. In 1983, Wang Junbo established Soft-World Technology in Kaohsiung, Taiwan—the first company globally to obtain distribution rights for Chinese-language games. From that point onward, video games were officially introduced to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China, marking the beginning of formal development. However, certain policies during subsequent development profoundly impacted the electronic game industry.

On June 12, 2000, seven ministries and commissions including the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, the Ministry of Public Security, and the Ministry of Information Industry jointly issued the “Opinions on Special Governance for Electronic Game Business Premises.” Because this governance measure targeted game consoles and arcades, it became known as the “console ban.” The direct cause of the console ban was the nationally sensational “Beijing Lanjisu Internet Café Arson Case” on June 16, 2000, which also epitomized the lack of management and illegal operations prevalent in game arcades nationwide, making the ban's promulgation understandable. However, at that time, video games remained an emerging industry in China, and society lacked proper understanding of gaming, causing legitimate game industries to suffer collateral damage, most severely affecting the home console game industry. From today's perspective, the distinction between arcade and home console games is quite clear: arcade games require coin insertion and feature large cabinets, such as *Metal Slug* and *The King of Fighters '97, whereas home console games use cartridges and have compact designs, such as the Mario* and *Pokémon* series. Although both qualify as games, they possess certain differences—yet to people at the time, there was no distinction. While managing illegal business premises, the console ban explicitly stipulated halting all domestic video game sales industries, causing home consoles to suffer collateral consequences. In fact, foreign gaming giants Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft had long desired to enter the Chinese market, recognizing Chinese players' consumption capacity, and domestic companies with exposure to advanced foreign gaming concepts had begun producing localized games. However, due to the console ban, foreign companies abandoned the Chinese market, and many domestic game companies were strangled in their infancy. One consequence of the console ban was China's game industry drifting further from console games, with successful domestic games rarely being console titles. Instead, the emerging field of mobile games achieved success in China, though as previously discussed, mobile games face far greater challenges than console/PC games in cross-cultural communication and national image construction.

3. Constructing a “Credible, Lovable, and Respectable” National Image in Video Games

Regarding how to “tell China’s story well,” General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed demonstrating a credible, lovable, and respectable Chinese image to the world. In the video game domain, “credible” means adhering to realist principles that reflect China’s genuine modern development; “lovable” means showcasing China’s image to enhance the recognizability and dissemination of Chinese stories; and “respectable” means achieving renowned technical excellence in game production, advancing toward becoming a gaming powerhouse.

3.1 Rooted in Social Reality to Shape a “Credible” Image

When discussing video game content, many people’s first reaction is that it is filled with “virtuality and fantasy” lacking direct connection to social reality. However, the opposite is true: games, like novels and films, can profoundly reflect social reality and ideology through their unique interactive methods. The representative example is *Disco Elysium*, hailed as “the last letter from the Soviet Union,” created by ZA/UM, an Estonian studio. Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Estonia was part of the USSR, and Estonians witnessed the entire process from establishment to dissolution of the socialist state, gaining firsthand experience of communist ideology and philosophy. The developers of *Disco Elysium* structured the game’s worldview around this political philosophy. To deeply understand its worldview architecture and creative background, one must comprehend its political philosophy—communism—derived from Marx’s philosophy of class struggle. As *The Communist Manifesto* states: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles, with each struggle ending either in revolutionary transformation or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

Therefore, in terms of game content, domestic developers need not confine themselves to virtual worldviews but should root themselves in reality, attempting to reflect China’s tortuous yet luminous modern development journey. By leveraging games’ unique interactivity and immersive qualities, they can shape a “credible” socialist image with Chinese characteristics. In this regard, visual novel and text adventure games similar to Japanese Galgames possess inherent advantages through their rich textual content. For example, *The Invisible Guardian*, released in 2019, features four main endings and numerous ordinary endings (including reformation, shooting, live burial, etc.). The narrative follows a patriotic youth returning from studies in Japan who operates behind enemy lines during the Anti-Japanese War period, navigating various forces to ultimately make significant contributions to China’s revolutionary cause. Following its release, the game received rave reviews domestically while also generating tremendous international response, with players worldwide demanding an English voiceover version. Many foreign gamers came to understand the resilience of the Communist Party during difficult periods and its greatness in always serving the people through this game’s character-driven narrative.

3.2 Breaking Through Cultural Discounts to Shape a “Lovable” Image

It is undeniable that video games drawing from Chinese xianxia and kung fu cultures have achieved commendable dissemination effects and reputations in their overseas journeys, attracting a substantial overseas audience with foundational knowledge of traditional Chinese culture. However, as the saying goes, “success is also the mother of failure,” as these very successes have branded Chinese domestic games with indelible marks of “xianxia” and “kung fu,” creating stereotypical impressions among foreign players that China only possesses xianxia and kung fu. In truth, Chinese culture offers countless narratives beyond these tropes, and domestic games should break through existing frameworks to dismantle cultural discounts in cross-cultural communication, thereby achieving a “soft landing” for the “hard demand” of cultural image construction.

Taking the globally popular *Genshin Impact* as an example, the game’s worldview consists of seven nations, each with unique artistic styles loosely associated with real-world cultures. Currently, three nations have been released, with additional nations in development. The first nation, Mondstadt, draws from medieval Europe, incorporating natural landscapes and cultural features from the Netherlands, Germany, and England. The second nation, Liyue, is based on ancient China, with architectural styles resembling the Tang Dynasty, essentially achieving “grandeur and rigorous openness.” The third nation, Inazuma, draws from feudal Japan, with four additional nations in development that may incorporate more global cultural elements. *Genshin Impact*’s success in topping mobile game charts across various countries over the past two years stems precisely from its cultural inclusiveness, enabling players from diverse cultural regions to find their own corner while exploring other exotic cultures. Therefore, only by combining cultural inclusivity with cultural output can we truly construct a “lovable” national image.

3.3 Promoting Industrial Transformation to Shape a “Respectable” Image

Although mobile games currently offer more substantial market and economic benefits, AAA games remain the crown jewel of the gaming industry. Their contribution to the entire gaming industry chain and to game development talent (including programmers, artists, planners, etc.) is incomparable to mobile games. Moreover, AAA games possess profound cultural influence. For instance, Ubisoft’s *Assassin’s Creed* series, developed over more than a decade, features maps meticulously created through on-site surveys by professional teams to achieve maximum one-to-one replication. This allows players to freely explore the scenery, customs, and cultures of Venice, Jerusalem, Constantinople, Paris, Egypt, and Greece during gameplay. The value of AAA games cannot be measured purely in monetary terms. Therefore, China’s gaming industry should accelerate its structural transformation from “only” producing mobile games to mastering diverse forms with comprehensive expertise, while promptly updating game production technologies to achieve both critical acclaim and commercial

success. Fortunately, we can already observe domestic manufacturers making efforts in this direction.

In recent years, Tencent has invested in and acquired numerous overseas game studios (such as Marvelous and PlatinumGames), while NetEase has established “Sakura Studio,” focusing on developing next-generation console games [2]. Additionally, Game Science, a company that started with mobile games, has been recruiting talent and developing *Black Myth: Wukong* since 2020. Despite only releasing one trailer annually, each update triggers global player excitement, with numerous foreign video bloggers enthusiastically recommending it to their followers on YouTube and Twitter, sparking a “Journey to the West” craze worldwide. Although domestic game companies may not develop AAA games for the domestic market in the short term, accumulating game production capabilities is always beneficial. Only by investing resources and effort in technology can cultural content find excellent carriers, thereby shaping a “respectable” image.

As a new medium, video games possess many characteristics distinguishing them from traditional media, serving both as a communication tool and maintaining a complete communication system of their own. This endows them with unique features across all stages of the communication process, including communicators, channels, and audiences. By effectively utilizing these characteristics, China’s cultural output can be further expanded through the medium of games [7]. Chinese culture boasts a long history and rich connotations; China’s five-thousand-year civilization possesses profound heritage but lacks appropriate communication methods, requiring popular and enjoyable approaches for effective promotion. Video games, with their massive market share, relatively young audience, and beautiful virtual scenes, possess inherent cultural transmission characteristics. Analyzing these features to identify common ground can serve as a starting point for using games to transmit traditional culture. Culture must adapt to the times rather than remain static; it is a process of seeking common ground while reserving differences, as well as one of absorption and re-export.

It is worth noting that China’s game industry remains in its infancy and requires attention and continuous self-improvement across all aspects to achieve better development, necessitating continuous learning from the cultural connotations that sustain Western game industry vitality. In this context, this paper selects video games as its research object, explores the connections between current domestic video games and national image construction, outlines the dilemmas they face in this regard, and proposes strategies for using games to facilitate national image construction, hoping to provide theoretical insights for issues including the overseas dissemination of domestic video games, the development of national culture, and national image construction.

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