

Li Guo, Douglas Eyman, and Hongmei Sun, eds.
Games and Play in Chinese and Sinophone Cultures

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This collection of thirteen chapters was designed to fill in the blank of “no systematic studies of game cultures in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds” in English-language scholarship (1). While readers will appreciate the originality and analytical approaches of the individual chapters, they may also have some general questions in mind. First, the use of “systematic studies” raises the issue of multidisciplinary, as most chapters are rooted in sociological *ludic theory*. Second, the distinction between “Chinese” and “Sinophone” in the book title is unclear. Semantically, “Chinese” culture encompasses broader aspects like China’s history, religion, and language, and that of overseas Chinese communities, while “Sinophone” culture specifically refers to the use of the Chinese language. Lastly, the collection lacks representation of ordinary people of different age, gender, and occupation, particularly children, who engage in games in various settings, besides digital games, in today’s everyday life, since the book title highlights “games” and “play.” Nearly all articles focus on games described in classic or elite literature and digital or internet games targeting specific age and gender groups.

The introduction effectively serves its purpose by outlining the genesis of this collection, explaining the usage of certain terms, and addressing the ethical aspects of gameplay. It connects the two primary themes: gender performance as ludic heroines in gameplay (*youxi*) depicted in classic literature, and emerging digital culture in China. The editors aimed to demonstrate how gameplay has shaped “people’s everyday life experiences in private and public spaces” (1) and contributed to “the creolization of ludic theories in a transtemporal, transnational context” (3), but the predominantly literary and sociological/anthropological interests of the authors have somewhat hindered the goal of developing “systematic studies.” This is evident in the absence of psychological and folkloristic perspectives, among others, on the role of games and gameplaying in shaping individual and group identities.

The chapters can be grouped into several themes. The first theme explores historical and archaeological cases of board game playing and migration. Chapter 1, using examples from classic texts, connects Confucian ethics of the particular gentleman (*shi*) culture to the symbolic representation of the *weiqi* game in the Neo-Confucian period. It traces the game’s evolution from a symbolic cosmic representation in self-cultivation to an art of personal identity reconstruction and ultimately a form of gambling. Chapter 2 examines newly discovered game boards (variants of Nine Men’s Morris, a traditional board game in Europe) carved on stones in Hong Kong, contrasting them with similar sites in

Macau. The author argues that these game boards were imported from Europe through commerce and intercultural exchange during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rather than being prehistorical carvings (41). Although there is no evidence of how these board games were played or if they are still played today, the author reasonably hypothesizes that they were intended for entertainment or gambling and enjoyed by both local working men and women, demonstrating the intersection of leisure pursuits and East-West contact or extension of relations (52). Readers are reminded that Macau and Hong Kong served as the frontline of contact and conflict between China and the West for the past five centuries.

The second theme focuses on board game invention by an elite individual (chapter 3) and kickball game playing depicted in the unique *sanqu* song genre of literature (chapter 4). Chapter 3 is a case study of board game design by Yu Yue, a nineteenth-century literatus. While English readers might struggle to grasp Yu Yue's significance due to the chapter's exclusive focus on his two board games, it is important to note that he was a *jinsshi* in 1850, having passed the highest level of the civil examination and holding an imperial appointment. Therefore, the games he designed were not intended for winning or gambling but rather as a means of achieving "success" through role-playing and practicing Confucian ethics. Chapter 4, through the lens of gender studies and literary analysis of *sanqu*, explores the depiction of courtesans in representative songs by three elite playwrights of the Yuan Dynasty (1234–1389). These songs revolved around the game of *cuju* (kickball), a precursor to modern football. Since the specific rules and context of the game remain unclear, the author infers that playing *cuju*-kickball held the promise of a more egalitarian relationship between courtesans and their male patrons, despite the underlying gender asymmetries (84). Readers will undoubtedly notice the vivid descriptions of courtesans with golden lotuses (bound feet) and jade bodies, along with the references to goddesses or fairies in myths, all enhanced by the author's literary and aesthetic analyses.

The third theme, explored in the next three chapters, focuses on games and gameplay depicted and invented in erotica, a prominent literary genre from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. Chapter 5 looks at the drinking games and erotic card games described and invented in erotic literature during this period. Applying the sociological theories of play, the author examines the understudied techniques and conventions of these games. Drinking games are considered as rule-based games similar to real-life ones, while role-play card games are seen as context-specific inventions. Chapter 6 applies similar theories to analyze drinking games centered around courtesans—ludic heroines—in a specific nineteenth-century erotic novel. Additionally, the author incorporates Bakhtin's notion of the carnival mode, highlights the Buddhist concepts of *qing* (feelings, emotions) and *kong* (emptiness), and mentions the use of certain folklore genres. Chapter 7 examines gambling and games between humans and ghosts depicted in three short stories by representative authors from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. These stories typically warn against the dangers of gambling addiction, echoing the ethical themes discussed in chapter 3.

The fourth theme, somewhat distinct, is explored in chapter 8, perceiving that the journey of human life can be likened to a game, or that literature writing itself is a game. By analyzing the roles of Monkey, Pig, Sandy, and Monk/Tripitaka in the popular sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), and their various media representations, the author examines the transgressive nature of the narrative (157).

This chapter serves as a bridge between the preceding chapters and the subsequent ones on games in the digital world, transcending boundaries of space, time, and culture.

The fifth theme, gameplay in the digital world, is addressed in the final five chapters. Chapter 9 employs anthropological concepts of play and deep play to analyze a treatment camp for internet game addicts who were minors and emerging adults heavily invested in *League of Legends*. The author analyzes a scenario where the campers created new card games by reimagining the roles within the existing game to symbolically represent the camp staff and their own experiences. This altered the nature of the game, making it more reflective of Chinese social and ethical life than the competitive aspects of the original. Chapter 10 focuses on the senior group, exploring how male and female players engage with games during retirement and how the digital game industry caters to this demographic. By examining their involvement in e-sports, use of WeChat, and addictions to *Pokémon Go*, the author discusses the interplay between work and play, the gamification of later life, and the process versus goal-oriented nature of gaming. This challenges existing economic and cultural theories about profit and the perceived “waste” associated with gaming.

In contrast to the foreign-made games discussed previously, the following three case studies focus on games created within China that are based on Chinese culture and history. Chapter 11 uses the video game *Chinese Parents* to explore its political potential, as well as other relevant factors such as the age, gender, and roles of the players. This game, unlike competitive titles or e-sports, is a role-playing simulation that mirrors the daily challenges faced by Chinese families, demanding knowledge of Chinese realities to be played effectively. The author highlights the game’s ambiguity in comparison to the overt ideological and political issues often associated with other video games. With its political implication, *Chinese Parents* also reflects the social and cultural realities of China, ironically demonstrating a path for parents to raise successful children through the seemingly time-wasting act of playing a child-rearing simulator (230). Chapter 12 addresses the understudy of Chinese gaming culture in comparison to other cultural contexts, examining the mobile game *Honor of Kings*, which is rooted in Chinese history and folklore. The chapter analyzes public discourse surrounding the game, including its categorization as mobile e-sports, e-opium, antihistory narrative, new digital lifestyle, resistance, consumption, and digital nationalism. It suggests that the localization and globalization of such games should be considered as key factors in digital game studies.

Through a different lens, chapter 13 tackles the complexities of translation within the localization and globalization of digital games. By comparing *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria* and the Chinese-designed *Genshin Impact*, the author discusses issues of linguistic translation, cultural translation, and transcreation, as well as bullying, racism, and diasporic nostalgia—crucial topics for translation and game studies. Interestingly, the more recent phenomenal debut of *Black Myth: Wukong* (late August 2024) might be better understood by drawing upon the ideas discussed in this theme group. This new role-play game, designed by and for Chinese audiences, highlights challenges such as retelling traditional stories, using Chinese language and narration, translating cultural nuances (for non-Chinese/Sinophone players), and reconstructing players’ personal and national identities through role-playing.

Overall, this collection makes a valuable contribution to cross-cultural studies of games and gameplay as seen in classic Chinese literature and the contemporary evolution of digital culture. The individual chapters offer significant insights on specific

topics, despite the aforementioned general questions regarding the common limitations of essay collections. For example, as a collection, it lacks consistent intertextuality and cross-disciplinary connections, and misses discussions of some traditional gender-, age-, and occupation-based games widely played by ordinary people such as *xiangqi* (Chinese chess) and mahjong, as well as nondigital competitive sports and various indoor and outdoor games. The inclusion of a useful glossary of Chinese terms, detailed chapter notes, references, website links, illustrations, and book cover images depicting females engaged in board games and digital games will undoubtedly aid interested students and scholars in their pursuit of systematic studies of games and play in Chinese culture.

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