

The Public Gaming Discourse of Honor of Kings in China

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The quality and creativity of mobile games have evolved tremendously since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Compared to the first generation of mobile games such as *Tetris* (1994) and *Snake* (1997), thousands of game apps now feature more vivid graphics, sounds, and social connections. More significantly, together with mobile devices, these game apps are making virtual experience a part of our daily lives. *Angry Birds*, *Fruit Ninja*, *Pokémon GO*, and other popular mobile games are certainly being installed or uninstalled on smart phones or tablets at this moment. The same touch-based interaction, however, is available on only a few newer laptop brands. Slicing virtual fruits with our nimble fingers is more addictive than with a clumsy mouse or keyboard. Wandering streets to catch a target Pokémon in augmented reality is an unprecedented adventure for all of us. Our new and pervasive gaming experiences are more tightly bound to our mobile devices.

With the rapid growth of global mobile industries, the development of mobile gaming in Asia has attracted researchers' attention. Publications have focused on "the politics of cute customization" in South Korea and Japan, specialties of Japanese and South Korean mobile gaming culture, and the influence of the smartphone on the "transformative mobile game culture" of South Korea.¹ Chinese gaming culture, however, has remained relatively unexplored. When it comes to the Chinese mobile game market, researchers have been primarily concerned about the socioeconomic effects

of game addiction and digital piracy.² Studies have also focused on the production model of mobile games in China, factors that influence user adoption of mobile games, and the impact of mobile games on Chinese “industrial structure and creativity.”³

Little work has focused on public perceptions and uses of Chinese mobile gaming. Since China’s sociopolitical situation is different from those of its maritime neighbors, how do Chinese talk about mobile gaming in everyday life? What is the mobile gaming discourse? Case studies on the consumer perspective have investigated Chinese mobile game genres and their impacts on local consumers’ behaviors such as *WeMatch* and *Space Hunter*, the experiences of Chinese urban white-collar workers in the social games *Trading Friends* and *Parking War*, and the comparative experiences of adolescent gamers in South Korea and China.⁴ Such research focuses on Chinese consumer behavior in the mobile game market, but does not address issues of Chinese public discourse to study perceptions of mobile gaming in daily life.

A useful lens for exploring changes in Chinese public gaming discourse is the 2017 nationwide debate about a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) mobile game, *Honor of Kings* (Wangzhe rongyao). *Honor of Kings* (*HoK*) was the most popular mobile game in China, with 53.8 million daily active users by the end of 2018.⁵ The great popularity of *HoK* triggered severe public criticism that aimed to ban its sales on the domestic market. Both commentary on discussion boards and journalistic and government documents on the issue show that the survival of *HoK* in the Chinese market is dependent more on game modifications than the company’s defense against domestic criticism.

The Popularity of *HoK*: Mobile E-sport, Social Function, and Localizing Role-Play

HoK is labeled with two contradictory terms in China, “national game” (*guomin youxi*) and “pesticide” (*nongyao*). The latter term is short for “pesticide of kings” or “pesticide of the dead” (*wangzhe nongyao*), a homophone of its official name, Wangzhe rongyao, which ironically indicates tremendous social turbulence caused by severe game addiction. By the end of May 2017, the number of monthly active users (MAU) of *HoK* was 163 million.⁶ *HoK*



FIG. 12.1. Comparison of *HoK* (left) and *LoL* (right). Screenshots courtesy of Du Ruibin 杜瑞斌.

was reported to be the top iOS game in the world in the first half of 2017, earning US\$150 million.⁷

HoK was first published in November 2015 by Tencent Holdings Limited. As one of the largest international companies in China, Tencent is known for its social media platforms, Tencent QQ and WeChat, as well as its platform for publishing or licensing Internet games. In 2008, Tencent became the sole agency for *League of Legends* (*LoL*), a global strategy video game, which was published by the US company Riot Games. After purchasing and hosting Riot Games in 2011, Tencent started to develop a mobile game based on *LoL*. *HoK* shares many similarities with *LoL*: both are role-playing MOBAs in which a player controls a single character on one of two teams to destroy the opposing team's structure. They provide players with six types of roles, including marksman, mage, assassin, tank, fighter, and supporter. The two games are similar in graphic design, notably the appearances of characters and battlefields (figure 12.1).

HoK has three distinctive features, however, that contribute to its unprecedented success in the Chinese market. First, *HoK* is defined as a mobile electronic sport (e-sport). Compared to a PC, a mobile device has a smaller screen, simpler operating system, and less digital storage. These

physical restrictions provide a gamer with limited space to conduct delicate performances in digital competitions. These disadvantages, however, were transformed by Tencent into advantages. A small device provides more flexibility for players to start a competition whenever and wherever they like. To ensure that players can start games at odd times without being interrupted, Tencent, by simplifying the gaming processes, reduced the competition period from hours to only fifteen minutes on average. Another significant improvement was the virtual keyboard designed for this mobile game. By touching a screen, competitors can control their roles more directly and quickly. The virtual-device-based operation provided gamers with more intimate interaction than one based on a physical device. Overall, the game became more accessible and attractive to diverse groups, although the complexity and options for competition were reduced. By the end of May 2017, there were over 200 million players, 54 percent of whom were female, reversing the male-dominated landscape of e-sports.⁸

Second, *HoK* broadens and deepens social engagement within Tencent's platform. Reportedly, by the end of the first half of 2017, the MAU number of Tencent QQ was about 700 million and WeChat over 900 million.⁹ Only Tencent QQ or WeChat users can sign in to their accounts as a formal member of the gaming community. The access rule aims to lead users of multiple social media platforms onto its mobile gaming platform. Built on a social media network, *HoK* encourages users to invite their friends to join a competition for increasing connection and intimacy. Users, after logging in to the game, can view their friends' gaming data, such as rankings, historical records, and active status. The gaming data becomes part of their conversations. More importantly, the game competition enriches the social model as well. As a teamwork-based game, *HoK* requires team players to cooperate. For example, in the normal model of five-on-five competition, each teammate needs to choose a different role to compose a well-balanced team. Three players should defend their home constructions in three branches against the opposite team's attacks. Two other teammates have the duty of hunting to earn money for equipment or supporting their teammates if their territory is invaded. Teammates are allowed to text or talk with each other to design strategies. By engaging in in-game interaction, gamers have the opportunity to socialize with friends from Tencent QQ or WeChat.

The third feature is its localization design, which diversifies the mobile e-sport experience. The character designs are mainly based on Chinese history and mythology, which are well-known among Chinese players. When controlling a character on the battlefield, players can listen to short famous quotes from the character to experience its personality. For Lü Bu, the generous military general in the late Eastern Han dynasty, as an example, eight different quotes show his boldness, including “Kill the blocking god” (Shendang shashen) and “From this moment, the battlefield is dominated by me alone” (Congcike kaishi, zhanchang youwoyiren zhuzhai). Some characters’ lines are taken or adapted from classical poems or popular movies. Players can purchase virtual skins to change the original costumes and soundtracks into more individualized versions as well. The great popularity of *HoK* stimulated various business opportunities for other industries, such as game data analysis, live webcasts, and more.¹⁰ Meanwhile, *HoK* was triggering intense debates across the nation.

Debates on *HoK*: From Antihistory and E-opium to a New Digital Lifestyle

Despite its ongoing popularity, *HoK* suffered fierce criticism in 2017, aimed at its antihistorical design. In March, *Guangming Daily*, an official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for domestic intellectuals, criticized the mobile game for distorting Chinese history. The report argued that the game characters, inconsistent with the historical and mythological narrative, were keeping teenagers from forming an “authentic” historical view. For example, Jing Ke is a male assassin in history but is female in the game. The report emphasized that mobile games, as a branch of the culture industry, should take on educational responsibility instead of merely making profits.¹¹ *People’s Daily*, the largest official newspaper of the CCP, reproduced news of the report in both its WeChat account and Sina microblog.¹²

The criticism also aroused opposite opinions, even within the national press. *China Daily*, owned by the publicity department of the CCP, mentioned that some Chinese ancient poems that appear in *HoK* had become popular.¹³ An article from the *21st Century Business Reviewer* noted that Tencent rewrote traditional stories in a modern style, which would enrich national culture.¹⁴

The public reputation of *HoK* was hurt during these debates, though some supporters insisted that game industries should not be responsible for education.¹⁵ Tencent took action to avoid further criticism: in April they added introductions to characters adapted from Chinese history and mythology.¹⁶ For the purpose of showing the differences between fictional and historical narratives, *HoK* not only provided historical backgrounds for these characters, but also invented new stories to introduce their game roles. Tencent changed the name of the female assassin from Jing Ke to A Ke to make the character more fictional and independent as well.¹⁷

Tencent's game website also released a series of videos on how to learn Chinese history in an interesting way, thus branding *HoK* as an educational product. In its first video on Liu Bei, a king in the late Eastern Han dynasty, Tencent argued that the key to learning history is to understand historical figures instead of reciting facts. By explaining how its designers embodied the benevolence and justice of Liu Bei in *HoK*, Tencent reframed the antihistorical debates as educational value conflicts.¹⁸ Moreover, based on its attractive soundtrack, Tencent continued to operate the poetry reading program and to produce its background music albums. Lu Han, a Chinese pop star, was invited as the brand ambassador to strengthen the trust between young players and the game brand.¹⁹

The next criticism of *HoK* was that it could become addictive for its teen players. *China Youth Daily*, run by the Communist Youth League of China, criticized *HoK* as "digital opium," citing several game-addiction cases.²⁰ The criticism of game addiction was later enlarged by two developments in the city of Hangzhou. Jiang Xiaoxiao, a middle-school teacher, published an article attributing students' distorted values to their use of mobile games and called for a ban on the games for the sake of teenagers' mental health.²¹ Her article was quickly reproduced on the Internet. Next, a thirteen-year-old pupil jumped off a building because his father stopped him from playing *HoK*. As the pupil was being moved to the hospital, he woke up and begged to log in to the game one more time.²² The *Qianjiang Evening News* proposed a ban on *HoK* after reporting on these two events.²³ Furthermore, by investigating several primary and junior schools in Shenzhen and interviewing Tencent company representatives, the *Southern Metropolis Daily*, the most influential newspaper in Southern China, exposed that *HoK* had not implemented the national anti-addiction

system that aimed to protect adolescents from online game addiction.²⁴ More media criticized the game's evil nature in late June, though several reports argued that it was unreasonable to simply ban the mobile game.²⁵

Faced with this new wave of criticism, Tencent promised to upgrade its system and limit teenagers' gaming hours in the near future.²⁶ Hu Yong, a professor at Peking University and chairman of the China Information Economics Society, was invited by the company to defend the mobile game in a column at the same time.²⁷ However, before mounting the anti-addiction system, Tencent suffered the fiercest criticism to date from official media as *People's Daily Online* criticized *HoK* for causing serious addiction problems and called for a strengthening of the supervision of the company on July 3, 2017.²⁸ The next day, *People's Daily* published another article calling for supervision of online games.²⁹ This criticism was so serious that it directly caused the Tencent stock shares to plunge as much as 5 percent, losing over US\$17 billion in a single day.³⁰

Tencent's rebranding measures came in the following days. On July 3, Li Yu, the chief developer of *HoK*, published a letter of apology and an improvement plan.³¹ Tencent implemented anti-addiction measures on the following day to limit teenagers' gaming time. Ironically, that same day, it was reported that some teenagers bypassed the restrictions through black market applications.³² The ineffectiveness of the anti-addiction system drove the public to rethink the causes of game addiction. Both official and unofficial media outlets turned from attacking *HoK* to considering the larger problem of domestic game addiction, though some voices doubted Tencent's security system.³³ The responsibility for mobile addiction was shifted toward family, school education, or other factors. In its fourth article, *People's Daily* attributed game addiction to the dereliction of family duty instead of to the black market or the game industry.³⁴ This forgiveness from the official media also stimulated a quick increase in the value of Tencent stock.

This was not the end of the debate about *HoK*. If the mobile game is not a source of addiction, how do we reconsider the role of mobile gaming in daily life? Significantly, *People's Daily* argued that mobile games indicated the emergence of a new mobile life.³⁵ However, criticism of *HoK* kept growing in July. On July 7, Xinhua News Agency, an official agency of the Chinese government, advocated for sociopolitical powers to engage in

forming a healthy gaming lifestyle, and on July 11 emphasized that the game industry needs both governmental support and supervision.³⁶ It appeared that for the sake of its survival, *HoK* would be wise to invite sociopolitical powers to reshape its gaming experience.

For the official media, the problem of distorting history still existed, which would influence political support for globalizing the mobile game. On July 10, Xinhua criticized *HoK* for its representation of Chinese history, which could mislead both Chinese teenagers and foreign players.³⁷ Because of its antihistorical image, *HoK* had been considered an inferior cultural product by *Guangming Daily*, which argued that the Chinese game industry should focus on the “proper” narrative of Chinese culture.³⁸ This article was reproduced by the official website of the Ministry of Culture, which suggested the direction of national policy on the mobile game industry.

The gaming community showed little interest in Tencent’s attention to poetry reading, background music albums, and history lessons, as those programs aimed to promote *HoK* as a creative product but did nothing to improve their gaming experiences. According to the number of visits to the official website of *HoK*, the history lesson series attracted the highest number of viewers among the three programs. While the video of Li Bai, a Tang dynasty literary genius, had 741,000 views by November 2017, the number was insignificant compared with the continually increasing number of users, which had reached 178 million by the end of September.³⁹ What has sustained and enlarged the popularity of *HoK* is not the company’s development of these three programs or its defense against public criticism, but the game’s modification, which successfully transformed sociopolitical resistance into cultural consumption.

Reimagining Pop Culture: Resistance or Consumption?

The global mobile game industry has been booming since 2014. The average popular period of the top twenty mobile games in 2015 in the American market was about fourteen months.⁴⁰ The three-year-long top status of *HoK* in China is thus an exception in the global game market. However, during the debates of 2017, *HoK* was labeled as antihistorical and addictive in China. What makes *HoK* acceptable as a new kind of digital lifestyle, therefore, has been its mobile game modification. Through ongoing mod-

ifications, Tencent has developed a new form of digital nationalism and creative imagination to satisfy both the Chinese official media and the gaming community.

Instead of following an “authentic” historical narrative, Tencent chose to embed the value of nationalism into the game. A series of characters named the Great Wall Team (*changcheng xiaodui*), later renamed the Great Wall Guardians (*changcheng shouweijun*), were published from early June to mid-September 2017. The team leader is Hua Mulan, the legendary female warrior in ancient Chinese literature. Other team members include Kai, the first original character, released in July; and Baili Shouyue, Baili Xuance, and Su Lie, all modeled on famous military generals in the Tang empire but not well-known in present-day China.⁴¹ The four new characters were released one by one from July to September. The mission of the team is to protect their homeland from invasion by monsters. This fictional story rewrites China’s history by emphasizing defensive justice in the virtual war narrative.⁴² This national defense value is also highlighted in the gameplay itself. If there are more than two teammates from the Great Wall Guardians, they can enhance their abilities to fight on the battlefield. In addition, background orchestral music enriches the epic imagination aurally.⁴³ Tencent thus successfully recuperated its antihistorical image by producing a new form of digital nationalism.

Meanwhile, Tencent tried to improve the creative image of *HoK* to attract more players. Besides the cool-looking fiend prince, Kai, Tencent published its second original character on October 23, the cute pet Mengqi, to target young players and female players.⁴⁴ The continual emergence of new characters aimed to enhance the independent and creative features of the mobile game and diversify the gaming experience. Another breakthrough in Tencent’s rebranding strategies was the invitation of pop singers to produce theme songs for its game characters. The first such pop song was produced for the 7th Lu Ban, a robotic character modeled on a historical Chinese carpenter and inventor of the same name. The theme song, “1Q 250” (Zhishang Erwuling), was composed by Hua Chengyu, an influential contemporary Chinese singer and songwriter. The title is a shortened form of one of the character’s game lines: “Master Lu Ban, 1Q 250; Worship, remember to worship” (*Luban dashi, zhishang erwuling; mobai, jidemobai*). Ironically, according to game data from June 2017, the clever 7th Lu Ban was

the worst fighter, with 6443 million deaths, 1731 million more deaths than the second-ranking character, Hou Yi, a Chinese legendary hero who shot down nine suns to solve a severe drought.⁴⁵ Although the large numbers of deaths make the 7th Lu Ban less attractive, Hua's lyrics reinterpret the terrible fighter as a cute maverick. His musical interpretation changed the cultural image of the 7th Lu Ban as well as the meaning of "1Q 250" into a more positive form.⁴⁶ This new interpretation encouraged competitors to explore and enjoy a more diverse virtual experience. The history-based world of *HoK* was expanded by publishing original characters and pop songs, and the game's new cultural image thus became more acceptable to Chinese media — at least, there had been no more serious collective criticism about its cultural representation.

The flexibility of the digital online program makes it available to respond to the domestic criticism as well as to global markets in a short period. Since late 2017, Tencent has published several foreign-language versions of *HoK* to target overseas players. Instead of adding foreign cultural elements to expand the existing virtual worldview like *World of Warcraft* (as Douglas Eyman demonstrates in this volume), Tencent rewrote the whole story and redesigned its virtual characters for non-Chinese players to become immersed in the game more quickly. In the English version of *HoK*, *Arena of Valor*, most Chinese characters are replaced by American and Japanese heroes, such as Batman, The Flash, and Jinnar, while Sun Wukong and a few other recognizable Chinese figures are visually redesigned for Western players.⁴⁷ By deconstructing Chinese nationalism and aesthetics, the mobile game opened new digital space for overseas players to craft their gaming experiences. Indeed, while *Arena of Valor* is designed and promoted by the Chinese Internet giant, it is becoming much harder to categorize *Arena of Valor* as Chinese pop culture. The flexibility of digital modification allows a local mobile game to de-emphasize its nationalism and culture in the overseas markets. By developing cooperation with different countries, a hosting company can redesign and popularize its products within corresponding contexts. Future investigation on the evolution of *HoK* toward global markets should not ignore the relationship between its digital modification and regional gaming discourses.

Conclusion

Due to Tencent's localization designs, *HoK* as a mobile e-sport is accessible to different age groups in China. The popularity of this mobile game among Chinese gamers, meanwhile, provoked nationwide criticism for its ahistorical depiction and the addiction risks it posed to minors. The game company transformed sociopolitical resistance into cultural consumption by developing a new kind of digital nationalism and creative imagination. The modification capacity of *HoK* deconstructs the value of the host country and invites overseas gamers to craft their own localized mobile experiences. The relationship between digital modification and gaming discourses should be considered a key factor in the localization and globalization of *HoK*.

Notes

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