

# Techno-nationalism and reconstruction of the past in China through video games

*Tecnonacionalismo y reconstrucción del pasado en China a través de videojuegos*

*Tecnonacionalismo e reconstrução do passado na China através de videogames*

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ARTICLE



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### Abstract

This article analyzed how the different educational and cultural organizations in China, especially since Jiang Zeming's Patriotic Education campaign, have used the video game format to favor nationalism and rewrite the country's past through cultural digital techno-nationalism. A holistic methodological analysis was carried out that combines cultural journalism, sociology, international relations, and audiovisual communication. As a preliminary result, we can note that the importance of the Chinese video game medium to promote state ideology and unite society around a series of myths and historical themes.

### KEYWORDS

Digital nationalism, History, Video games, Ideology, State control, China, Jian Zeming.

### Resumen

En el presente texto vamos a analizar cómo los diferentes organismos educativos y culturales del país asiático, especialmente desde la campaña de Educación Patriótica de Jiang Zeming, han utilizado el formato de los videojuegos para favorecer el nacionalismo y reescribir el pasado de China a través del *teconacionalismo digital cultural*. Todo ello bajo un prisma metodológico holístico que combina el periodismo cultural, la sociología, las relaciones internacionales y la comunicación audiovisual.

Como resultado preliminar podemos avanzar la importancia del medio videolúdico chino para favorecer la ideología estatal y cohesionar a la sociedad alrededor de una serie de mitos y temas históricos.

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

Nacionalismo digital, Historia, Videojuegos, Ideología, Control estatal, China, Jiang Zeming.

### **Resumo**

Neste texto vamos analisar como as diferentes organizações educacionais e culturais do país asiático, especialmente desde a campanha de Educação Patriótica de Jian Zeming, utilizaram

o formato dos videogames para promover o nacionalismo e reescrever o passado da China através do tecnacionalismo digital cultural. Tudo isso sob um prisma metodológico holístico que combina o Jornalismo Cultural, a Sociologia, as Relações Internacionais e a Comunicação Audiovisual. Como resultado preliminar, podemos adiantar a importância do meio de videogame chinês para favorecer a ideologia estatal e unir a sociedade em torno de uma série de mitos e temas históricos.

### **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

Nacionalismo digital, História, Videoagmes, Ideologia, Controle estatal, China, Jian Zeming.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In each nation, people tell stories of how they have reached their current situation, from the most basic forms of social organization (family nucleus, tribe, group, collectivity) to the most complex. A central element in the creation of these narratives is knowing those episodes that are selected to be remembered and those that are preferred to be forgotten. It is the way in which states build their national identity (Wang, 2014, p. 20). For decades, different countries and international agents have been using the video game format to spread their reinterpretation of the past within their borders and defend their current position in international geopolitical strategies. As different studies have analyzed with interest, such as *Observant States: Geopolitics and Visual Culture* (Macdonald et al., 2010), a large part of the population understands international politics and the main war conflicts that derive from it through images. If they are accompanied by sound, video and text, the effect is even greater. This combination highlights the power of empathy to homogenize all these elements and impact

the viewer (Schrier & Farber, 2021). There are numerous examples that confirm the relevant role played by video games as a mechanism for transmitting and expanding the internal and external ideals of a nation in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, South Korea, Turkey, etc. (Venegas & Moreno, 2021; Moreno & Venegas, 2020).

Focusing our attention on China, as the journalist Minxin Pei (2001) pointed out, “national experiences and collective memory constitute a powerful force in decision-making in matters not only internal but also foreign policy.” Education and culture, in all their manifestations and formats, have played a preponderant role in forging this past identity. It has had the intention of unifying the mind of the population in a series of capital principles, with the capacity to project the future of the country in a hegemonic context and international reaffirmation. Based on the works of Zheng Wang (2008 and 2014), the patriotic education campaigns orchestrated by the Chinese Communist Party from the time of Jiang Zeming to the configuration of a new cultural identity will be studied (Liu, 2012). The use that has been given to digital media (Schneider, 2018) and propaganda (Brady & Juntao, 2009)

will be analyzed with the ultimate purpose of focusing on video games, an element of great value recognized by the Chinese Communist Party itself for updating history and the foreign spread of Chinese culture.

Parks M. Coble (2010) of the University of Nebraska questioned, when referring to China, “can the past serve the present?”. The answer is emphatically affirmative. The great past ephemerides have been updated through the new formats and technological channels of the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, such as the world of video games, and have given rise to what Schneider (2018) has defined as digital nationalism, which:

“... describes a process in which algorithms reproduce and enforce the kind of biases that lead people to see the nation as an important element of their personal identity and as the main locus of political action. The biases themselves are much older than digital technology. We can find them in all kinds of social networks, which frequently transmit the symbols of nationalism to their audiences. Digital nationalism is special because these existing biases are further strengthened and made to seem natural by virtue of the pervasive personalization processes, preference filters, and group bubbles that have come to define communication in the internet age. (p. 18)”

Some models of this expression of symbols and traditional cultural heritage can be found in the enormous success of several Chinese video games that have recently appeared, which follow this dynamic, as well as in the recovery of ancient analogical games and customs from several centuries ago. At the confluence between the two is where one of the paradigms

of this new nationalism lies, not without a strong ideological and propagandistic character. In February 2011, China’s National People’s Congress passed the country’s first law on the protection of the country’s cultural heritage (Chinese Policy Observatory, 2011), which was intended to enhance the preservation of its historical, literary, artistic, and scientific legacy. Within this heritage, there are almost 900,000 different elements. The large Chinese technology conglomerates, led by Tencent, have put the enormous potential of their creations at the service of this measure. One of the most striking cases is that of the video game *King of Glory*, also known as *Honor of Kings* (2015), which in just two years reached more than 80 million downloads and, in May 2017, became the most profitable mobile title of the world (BBC WORLD, 2017). It is an online multiplayer video game in which the user will find some of the great heroes and heroines of the country, many of them from the Three Kingdoms period (from 220 to 280 AD), such as: the Lord of the Lü Bu war; Cao, last prime minister of the old Han dynasty and leader of the Wei kingdom; Liu Bei, Emperor of Shu; Diao Chan, one of the four great beauties of ancient China; or the great general Han Xin. In addition to bringing these narratives closer to millions of people inside and outside the country, it has participated in the promotion of intangible cultural heritage by promoting events of this nature or participating in them through its most representative avatars. In April 2020, and in collaboration with the Shandong Art Research Institute, *King of Glory* joined the city of Weifang, the world capital of kites (an object very present in the skills of some of the characters from this video game), to “awaken” the memory of traditional festivals, despite the criticism it had received years ago from the official newspaper of the Communist Party, the People’s Daily (Chow, 2017). One more example of the difficult and complex rela-

tionship between ideology and economy within the country, the oscillation between “techno-socialism and state capitalism” (González, 2021, p. 21). Local artist Guo Hongli produced numerous paper kite models inspired by the theme of this title. As Guo Xuendong, head of the Shandong Institute, pointed out, “intangible cultural heritage must first be known by the public so that it is perpetuated among new generations.” For this reason, Tencent also collaborated in promoting the project to protect the knowledge of the Eight Immortals (Shangdong Business Daily, 2020). This is a group of national deities of special veneration, who according to traditional beliefs, existed on earth during the Tang or Song dynasties and practiced alchemy and some methods to achieve immortality.

**Figure 1**

*Screenshot of Cao in King of Glory.*



There is an official current of reinterpretation of the past in accordance with the current approaches of Chinese politics, which is relying on interactive digital creations for its dissemination and disclosure. A multitude of references are counted within this dynamic. One of them is *The Han Dynasty Imperial Mausoleums Museum* (Pai Jia Digital Creative Technology Co, 2017), which uses virtual reality to view in all kinds of details the resting place of the great emperors of the Han dynasty, including the famous Terracotta Warriors, through different clues and puzzles related to Chinese history. This is another example of the contribution that culture can achieve within the new nationalism of the Asian giant, in an analog or digital playful format.

## **2. THE HISTORICAL VIDEO GAME AT THE SERVICE OF NATIONALISM**

Chinese society is currently experiencing a double cultural identity confrontation between two paradigms that are linked at the same time in the antithesis between the other and the self (Wu, 2014): modernity and tradition. This clash is especially visible in the generation born in the eighties of the last century. They are the great beneficiaries in terms of material and economic prosperity of the country's spectacular pro-

gress in recent decades. Most of these young people are characterized by a culture of global mass consumption, in which the Internet and electronics are some of its most characteristic features. They express a desire for cultural belonging different from that of their parents, born into the revolutionary idealism of the Mao era. Their identity and historical vision are deeply linked with the contemporary media.

The story is “freed” from traditional textbooks and is integrated into everyday life through popular media culture: movies, TV dramas, video games, etc. The story is associated with nostalgia, entertainment and is understood as a cultural product of consumption. For this generation, as Liu Kang (2012, pp. 17-19) points out, present Chinese history has little relevance or practical implication for their current life. This does not mean that they do not feel a great patriotism towards past episodes or any “aggression” against the political, cultural, and social identity of the nation.

Following the April 2008 riots in Tibet and the international protests over the Beijing Olympic Games, thousands of overseas Chinese students mobilized on social media against the “distortion and demonization” of China in the Western media. Likewise, during the Sichuan earthquake of that year, there was a huge participation of the younger sectors of the population in actions of help and assistance. Although they are complacent participants in the global consumer society, at the same time, they are increasingly aware that resorting to the common history of the country is the best way to identify themselves with others. Progress can only develop through the memory and maintenance of historical tradition. These “millennials”, described as *xiao fenhong* (‘little roses’), are increasingly nationalistic and actively combat those who do not submit to the official regime in any digital medium (Li, 2017). The prolifera-

tion of historical video games or the presence of elements referring to the cultural and political heritage of the country in these digital creations does nothing more than respond to this demand and the desire to spread Chinese culture throughout the world.

This context determines the nature of most of the video games with a historical theme and set in China from the year 2001 (date of release of *Three Kingdoms: Fate of the Dragon*, Object Software) to the most recent. Chinese-style video games based on stories from imperial China, myths, legends, folklore, and literature, adopt Confucianism, Buddhism or Taoism, as well as other philosophical and religious components to build their narratives and game rules.

With a strong nostalgic tone, this genre of productions is designed to “provoke cultural sympathy, longing for one’s roots, and the search for identity” (Li, 2020). Most of the titles move in two genres of fiction: the *wuxia* and the *xinxia*, set in the world of the *jianghu*. *Wuxia* means ‘heroes of the martial arts’ and within its components are mysticism and legends, normally exaggerated in the narratives, in an environment that promotes the exploration of the world and the freedom of the characters that transit it. In its essence, there is a great contrast between the simplicity of life in ancient China, with great adventures that transcend the lives of simple humans. The *xinxia* genre is situated with a “high fantasy” component in which heroes with natural powers face all kinds of demons or evil creatures in universes divided into different kingdoms. All this develops in an architectural and material setting with elements of past Chinese dynasties.

In short, these are societies governed by martial codes of honor and courage, in idyllic landscapes, rivers and lakes, in a never-ending struggle between Good and Evil, the *jianghu* (Yuen,

2012). In the video game field, one of the first obligatory references is *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (Softstar Entertainment, 1995), whose excellent reception has caused this series to extend its creations to the present. The video game paradigm combines all the named aspects of wuxia, xinxia and jianghu, in a real historical context. Gods, demons, fairies, humans, and ghosts appear in a period that extends from the origins of the universe, with the appearance of the mother goddess Nüwa and Pangu, creator of the Earth, until the time of the Northern Song dynasty (centuries X-XIII AD). Over the years, and according to technological improvements, this type of video game has advanced in aspects of details, visuals, and sound. There has also been a greater interest in incorporating different contents that are increasingly associated with the country's cultural signs in the narratives and in the objects, practices and decoration that appear in them.

The developers of *Jade Dynasty* (Perfect World Games, 2009), a free-to-play online game, worked with several scholars and curators to show their characters' weapons in the most accurate and detailed way, including traditional Longquan swords with an antiquity of more than two thousand years. In addition, the mural paintings of Dunhuang (dated to the Tang dynasty, 7th-10th centuries AD) and the Confucius temple in Nanking have been incorporated into the scenes. Today, this cultural constellation serves not only as a background for the game, but also for a deeper experience through its richness of detail and artistic nuance. Lu Xiaoyin, executive director of this company, argues that these games also can promote national culture abroad through rules and mechanics that are common to any interactive creation (Ru, 2019).

**Figure 2**

*Jade Dynasty* screenshot highlighting a bucolic past.



Within Chinese historical video games, the dominant theme is related to the Three Kingdoms period (2nd-3rd centuries AD), a turbulent time of confrontations between different territories but which ultimately led to the unification of China. The relevance of this event, one of the constitutive milestones of the country's nationalism, has been widely reflected in the digital field. The huge number of titles that deal with it attest to this and do nothing more than respond to the growing demand of the population to relive these events. In addition to projecting the past context into the present, this format serves to publicize scenes of daily life, from dice games to the demanding exams that citizens who wanted to join the imperial civil service had to pass; as seen in *Wu Confucian Painting Volume - Apocalypse* (Wuru Xiaosheng, 2020) or *Call Me Emperor* (Clicktouch Co., 2020). On STEAM, one of the main digital platforms for downloading video games, around thirty titles can be found by entering the word "Three Kingdoms". On Google Play, almost a hundred games can be found on the same theme, figures that are undoubtedly surprising even considering their gigantic size. population.

### 3. POLITICAL PROPAGANDA AND IDEOLOGY IN VIDEO GAMES

Historical memory is one of the fundamental features in the formation of group identity. Authors such as Anthony D. Smith (1999) emphasize that ethnicity, nation, or religion are the basis of historical myths that define who belongs to a group, what it means to be a member of it and who are its enemies. These myths usually have a factual basis, but that is selected or exaggerated in its historical representation. Group identity is based largely on the memory of certain confrontations throughout their existence. And the recourse to these past episodes can be diversified in two ways: “chosen glories” or “chosen traumas” (Wang, 2014, p. 20). Whether one or the other option is transmitted from generation to generation, through the family, education, political spheres, or through participation in ceremonial rituals of exaltation (joy) or pain (trauma, such as the Nanking massacre or the Sino-Japanese War of 1937). Both elements serve as a timeless union between the collectivity of a certain nation. Memory is used, for better or for worse, as a connecting link.

This link between memory and history is particularly powerful with the participation of the educational system. Schools are the basic social institutions for transmitting national narratives about the past. After the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (an authentic exercise of opposition and challenge to the almighty Chinese Communist Party by the citizens), the politician Deng Xiaoping concluded that this serious incident demonstrated the “carelessness” on the part of the authorities for the “ideological education” of the population. In 1991, Jiang Zeming, the leader of the Party, promoted the patriotic education campaign:

The objectives of the patriotic education campaign are to boost the spirit of the nation, increase cohesion, foster national self-esteem and pride, consolidate, and develop the widest possible patriotic united front, and direct and unite the patriotic passions of the masses toward the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics. (Wang, 2008, p. 788)

The idea was to link national pride and patriotism to the ideological vindication of the Communist Party but determined by the history of the country. Communism was to be combined with traditional culture, using the past to serve the present. However, on this occasion the class struggle was not useful to conform to their patriotic interests. A decade later, and in view of the technological changes experienced worldwide, the deputy director of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party presented a report in which he appealed to the media and new interactive formats to promote state ideology (Nie, 2013). In 2005 at the United Nations 60th Anniversary Summit, Party General Secretary Hu Jintao appealed to traditional Chinese culture to achieve a harmonious world. From the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the academic field, research was promoted between ancient diplomatic theories (from the imperial era) and contemporary diplomatic strategies (Yu, 2014).

This redefinition of the past in accordance with state interests and applied to the world of video games reached its peak in 2005. Hand in hand with Shanda Interactive, the largest online gaming operator in the country, the General Administration of Press and Publications (in hereinafter AGPP), the Propaganda Department

of the Party Central Committee, the Central Civilization Bureau and the Communist Youth League promoted the Chinese Heroes (Zhong Hua Ying Xiong Pu) project. The objective was to develop games based on historical events that “stir” the consciences of the population (Li, 2020, p. 2). This initiative intended, in addition to promoting the national digital industry, to maintain government control of a medium with a great ideological influence on young people.

For this reason, in September of that same year, an “anti-addiction system” was launched in China in online games “to protect the physical and mental health of players”, one more example of the ambivalence between political, ideological, and economic interests. Among these measures was the appearance of messages on the screen reminding them “that they exceeded the recommended time and that their permanence in front of the computer is harmful” (Dickie, 2005). And, most importantly, to replace the time spent on fantasy video games of foreign origin (especially Japanese and South Korean) with others aimed at reinforcing ethics, morals, and knowledge of national glories in the form of certain “exemplary” historical figures (Jiang & Fung, 2019). Within the first phase of this project (which had the pretentious goal of “reviving” 100 historical figures) five names were included. First, Lei Feng, an iconic soldier of the People’s Liberation Army. A model of the Maoist era known for his self-sacrifice and unblemished ethics. In *Learn from Lei Feng, Xue Lei Feng*, (Shanda, 2006), distributed mainly among students, the game mechanics encouraged them to perform “collaborative acts” such as sewing and darning socks to gain experience and progress. The ultimate goal was, imitating the life of this character, to be able to meet the supreme leader, Mao Tse Tung. A sixth grader in Yuexiu District, Jin Jao, perfectly summed up the purpose of this “memory” creation:

As long as my experience, reputation, skills, and loyalty meet the criteria of the game, I will win and meet Chairman Mao. I still have several tasks to perform. I will work hard and strive to get the president’s autograph as soon as I can. (China.org, 2006)

Another of the “heroes” chosen for its digital release was Zheng He, a 15th-century Chinese Muslim sailor and explorer (although his religious affiliation was not highlighted), famous for his seven expeditions throughout the Indian Ocean. He was designed to remind children of the importance of cultural exchange between China and other countries. Accompanying Lei Feng and Zheng He would also be Zheng Chenggong, a Ming dynasty warlord who claimed victory over the Dutch garrison in Taiwan. Bao Zheng, a symbol of justice who stood out for his intransigence against corruption, was also included. Finally, Yue Fei appeared, a great warrior of the Song dynasty (12th century), who according to legend defeated one hundred thousand soldiers of the Jin (Jurchen) dynasty with just five hundred men (Davies, 2005).

It is difficult to distinguish in these creations what is indoctrination or educational purposes, even more so when these “heroes” are transferred to the present and must relate to the country’s armed forces. Army recruiters complain that the new generations are dominated by “spoiled brats interested only in their technological gadgets, such as the PlayStation Portable (PSP)”. This comment reveals the exasperation of military personnel with the value system of young people (Naftali, 2014, p. 4). For this reason, the Propaganda Department of the Popular Liberation Army has promoted digital cultural creations in recent times to improve its image and increase its attractiveness among said population niche. Within the education campaign mentioned in previous pages,



a guide for the implementation of Patriotic Education was included in 1994 to strengthen the civic-military unity within Chinese society as well as to make youth aware of the importance of “protect the territorial integrity, national sovereignty and independence of the homeland”. To better convey these ideas, the campaign advocates the use of entertainment as a medium of education and presents “the use of entertainment as a medium of education and employs a broad range of media channels for this purpose, including art exhibitions, books, newspapers, television shows, video and audio products, films, computer games, and the Internet.” (Naftali, 2014, p. 6). A recurring theme has been the “traumatic and humiliating experience of Western and Japanese incursions” (Nie, 2013). This has led to the direct participation of the national military in the creation of these recreational digital products. Like other industries, such as cinema or music, the state ideology has made an appearance increasingly accentuated in this medium. Unlike American productions, Chinese movies and video games focus their argument on sacrifice for the nation as the supreme reason. A clear example of this is the title *Glorious Mission* (Giant Interactive Group, 2013), in which the player must assume as his own the objectives of Chinese international politics, such as the control of the islands of the China Sea in dispute with Japan.

The true intention of this video game genre, and in response to the demand made by some military authorities, was to increase recruitment and glorify war. As some studies analyzed by Alberto Venegas in his work *Interactive Past* (2020) have highlighted, there is a relationship between war video games and the improvement of the military reputation among its players. This implies that any representation in dissonance with state approaches, in this video game industry or any other, will quickly come

up against the heavy curtain of censorship (Holmes, 2021). One of the most current examples of this problem is found in the blocking of the trailer (no longer directly the final product) of *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Activision, 2020) due to the inclusion of an image (which occupied only one second of the total) of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests against the communist government. Faced with Chinese complaints, Activision decided to eliminate this scene due to the possibility of losing the billions generated by this Asian market. There is something that is also decisive: the Chinese technology conglomerate Tencent owns 5% of Activision (Batchelor, 2020). This title is very significant in terms of the propaganda capacity that the video game world can have, capable of bringing historical events to the fore and generating debate about them. Not only has it annoyed China, but it has also earned Russian animosity by starting its presentation video with photographs of Yuri Bezmenov, a KGB deserter who achieved great fame in the 1980s by explaining to the media the psychological warfare that Moscow was conducting against the US (Egorov, 2020).

**Figure 3**

*Censored scene in Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War (Source: AFP)*



## 4. DISCUSSION

Video games have become one of the main state cultural industries for promoting nationalism and exporting a positive image of China abroad. They not only promote this identity trend through their content and discourse, but also through the laws and policies that surround them and reveal their economic importance. One of the features of the so-called neo-technological nationalism is to protect and promote national industries and keep the country's official discourse "unpolluted" regarding its own past. Of the 989 titles approved in 2018, only 30 were foreign, a clear confirmation of these restrictive policies (Niko Partners, 2019). This implies that the State has become a powerful subsidiary for the development of national digital companies (such as Shanda or Tencent), which benefit from these measures but at the same time are conditioned by the ideological nature of their creations.

These limitations represent an important burden in the process of taking advantage of video games as part of the cultural soft power of the country. According to the Anholt-GfK Roper Nations Brand Index, which annually measures the image of 50 countries, China ranked in a prominent third place due to its "culture and heritage" but fell to the worst positions when referring to governance and political sphere. As various international analysts point out, "people already know that China has an ancient and rich culture, emphasizing that point more does little to foster new visions of the country." As the researcher Nicholas Dynon (2014) points out, the motto of Chinese public diplomacy "all culture, no politics" will have little success

regardless of the medium chosen for its promotion (as in this case, interactive video-game digital products) if it does not there is a change in the political structure. We consider, in line with works such as those by Halter (2006) and in agreement with these arguments, that this genre of outlined videogames will mainly have a nationalist component with a propagandistic and educational purpose.

From a cultural point of view, and with clear nationalist references, Chinese interactive digital creations are part of the strategy to reinforce the country's identity through the projection of a past that is extolled among the new generations. This desire to recover ancient heroes, traditions, and values, such as the Three Kingdoms period (there are more than a hundred video games centered on this era), to highlight the value of national culture and history, not only among its citizens but beyond the Great Wall. This is part of the broad debate in which the country is going through and oscillates, that is, choosing the path of tradition or modernity. This technological nationalism, following Schneider's definitions, fosters an identity current through content and narratives in all kinds of formats, among which the digital gaming industry is especially relevant. In addition, the policies and regulations that surround it also show the economic importance that this industry represents for the Chinese State: using the past to serve the present and link the past glories and the contributions of the Chinese people to universal culture as an example of the present position that the country wants to achieve hand in hand with the Chinese Communist Party and its current leaders, such as Xi Jinping.

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