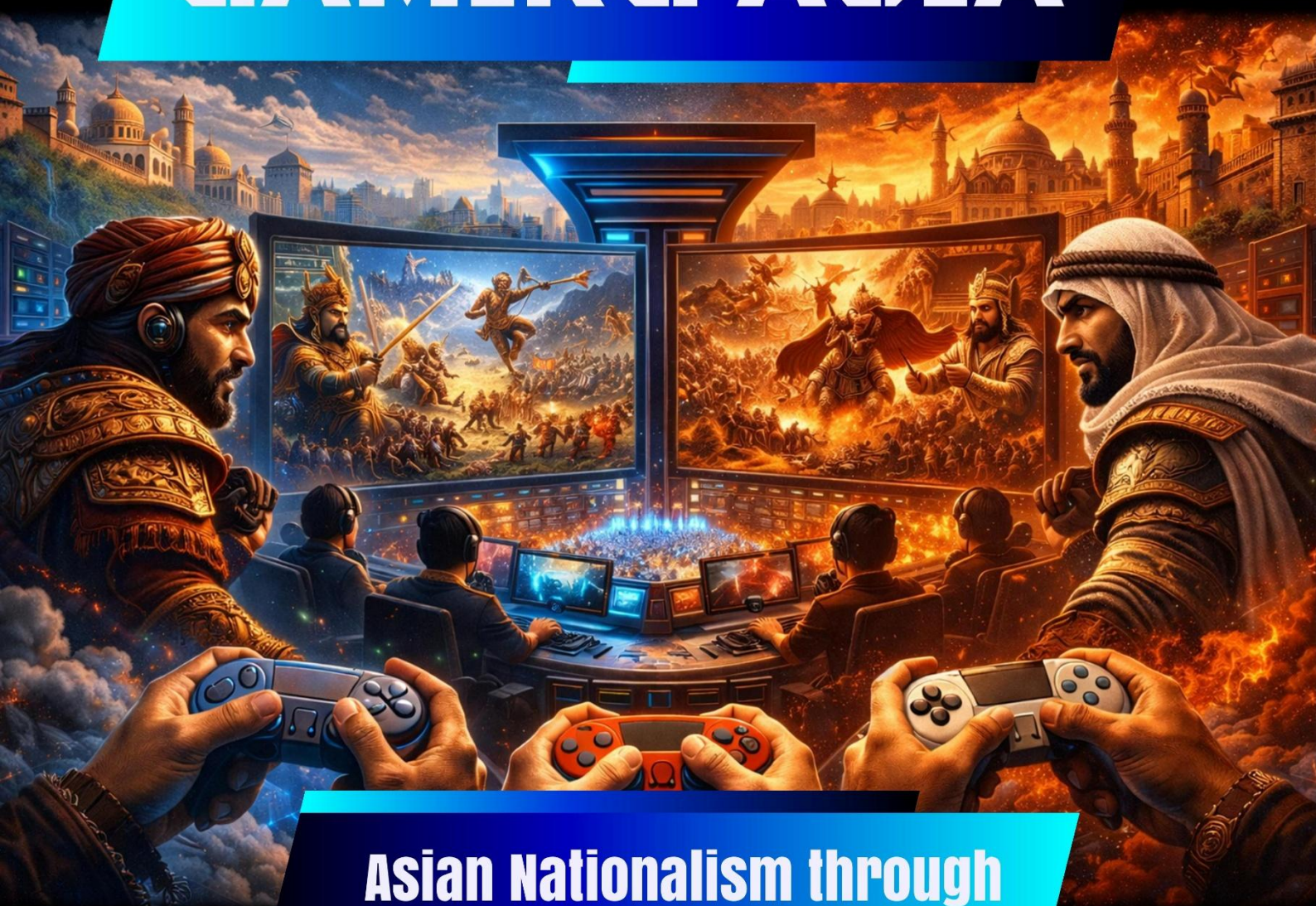


GAMING ASIA



**Asian Nationalism through
the Lens of Video Games**

29-30 APRIL 2026

AS8, SEMINAR ROOM 04-04

National University of Singapore

For more information, please visit <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/gaming-asia/>

Over the past several years, Gaming Asia has emerged as a captivating cultural phenomenon. While established global centres of video games—the United States, Europe, and Japan—remain vibrant, Asia has become the world’s largest market and a core locus of production, innovation, and contestation in digital culture: video games are produced, modded, played, streamed, circulated, archived, and competed over at scales unmatched elsewhere. Yet Gaming Asia is not only about entertainment or economic revenue; it has also become a focal arena where national forces are entangled in projects of remapping—especially against the backdrop of a fragmented imagination of Asia, splintered into reified national categories and resurgent, reactionary nationalisms.

The tightening relationship between video gaming and nationalism has become increasingly apparent. From production pipelines and platform governance to localisation, streaming, esports, and fan communities, nearly every aspect of gaming is now read—and regulated—through national lenses. In 2024, for example, the award-winning Chinese video game *Black Myth: Wukong* became a cultural landmark, framed simultaneously as proof of China’s technological capacity, a celebration of national cultural heritage, and a showcase of market potential. In India, echoing Hindutva currents, a triple-A title *The Age of Bhaarat* is under development. In addition to directly developing local video-game industries, Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund has taken major positions in global publishers and financed content such as *Assassin’s Creed Mirage*, including an AIUla expansion, leveraging games to revitalise UNESCO-listed heritage. More than serving as representations, these strategies of (re)imagining national pasts, presents, and futures within geo-cultural imaginaries, deeply entangled with real-world geopolitics, are embedded in socio-cultural practices such as streaming and in gaming infrastructures like player communities, where national forces and emotions are channelled.

Yet the relationship between video games and Asian states remains fundamentally ambivalent. Games mobilised for national purposes can be subverted, rerouted, or reinterpreted by players, creators, and platforms. Attempts to fence off “national” gaming cultures routinely collide with the trans-local, and often global, infrastructures, economies, affects, and histories that make gaming possible. Moreover, national projects of cultural remapping through games frequently diverge, conflict, or overlap, producing contested visions of geography, identity, and heritage. The increasingly tight yet intricate relationship between video games and Asian nationalism has not yet received sustained academic attention—particularly from bottom-up perspectives attuned to everyday politics and practices that navigate, appropriate, and contest the hegemonic framings of nationalism in macro-level discourses of video games.

Marking the tenth anniversary of the agenda-setting call for Regional Game Studies, this workshop invites papers that critically examine the evolving nexus of video games, nationalism, and geopolitics across and beyond Asia, past and present. It aims to investigate Asian nationalism through the lens of video games, offering a nuanced perspective on the proliferation of new gaming materialities, modalities, and mobilities, and their intricate entanglements with national politics in Asia. The workshop asks how gaming technologies and data infrastructures shape whose nations gain visibility, and how national trends across Asia, in turn, influence the supposedly apolitical landscapes of digital technology. On the one hand we focus on how games reflect and actively shape (geo)political, historical, and cultural dynamics. On the other hand, by approaching games as assemblages of economy, technology, history, infrastructure, and emotion that generate geocultural power for diverse Asian actors, we welcome papers that rethink the trans-Asian linkages and disjunctures produced through gaming practices, along with the competing concepts of “Asia” and “nation” they bring into being.

WORKSHOP CONVENORS

Dr Zezhou YANG

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

Dr Rani SINGH

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

Prof Tim WINTER

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

29 APRIL 2026 • WEDNESDAY

09:45 – 10:00	WELCOME REMARKS
	VINEETA SINHA , National University of Singapore ZEZHOU YANG , National University of Singapore RANI SINGH , National University of Singapore TIM WINTER , National University of Singapore
10:00 – 11:00	KEYNOTE ADDRESS
Chairperson	ZEZHOU YANG , National University of Singapore
10:00	Reading the Nation in Indian Videogames: Stereotypes and Multiplicities SOUVIK MUKHERJEE , Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
10:40	Questions & Answers
11:00 – 11:30	MORNING TEA
11:30 – 12:30	PANEL 1 • PLAY ONE, PLAY MANY: EVERYDAY NATIONALISM I
Chairperson	SABINA INSEBAYEVA , Nazarbayev University
11:30	Reinventing Tradition and Participatory Meaning-Making: <i>Black Myth: Wukong</i> (2024) and Playable Nationalism TINGTING LIU , University of Technology Sydney
11:50	Commodity Nationalism and the Digital Frontier: Piracy, Patriotism, and the Moral Economy of 7554 in Vietnam DUY LY CHU , University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City
12:10	Questions & Answers
12:30 – 13:30	PANEL 2 • PLAY ONE, PLAY MANY: EVERYDAY NATIONALISM II
Chairperson	TIM WINTER , National University of Singapore
12:30	Playing the Past: Historical Imagination and World Building in Roblox DANIELE CIOCCA , University of Milan-Bicocca
Online	
12:50	When Games Disappear: National Memory, Digital Prohibition, and the Everyday Politics of Gaming in India RAJESH PRASAD , University of Delhi
13:10	Questions & Answers
13:30 – 14:30	LUNCH
14:30 – 16:00	PANEL 3 • CODE, CULTURE, CAPITAL: ASIAN GAME INDUSTRIES IN MOTION
Chairperson	ZEZHOU YANG , National University of Singapore
14:30	Nationalism, Identity and Video Gaming in Digital Kazakhstan SABINA INSEBAYEVA , Nazarbayev University
14:50	Compensation Guaranteed? The State of/and Indie Game Development in Singapore NIEN YUAN CHENG , Singapore University of Technology and Design
15:10	Platforming the Nation across Asia: Yalla Group and the China–UAE–MENA Gaming Infrastructure JING LIN , National University of Singapore
15:30	Questions & Answers
16:00 – 16:30	AFTERNOON TEA

16:30 – 18:00	PANEL 4 • LUDIC INFRASTRUCTURES
<i>Chairperson</i>	KAH-WEE LEE , National University of Singapore
16:30	Submarine Cables and Nationalist Currents: Mapping the Affective Infrastructures of Lag in Southeast Asian Esports KHYATI SINGH , Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses
16:50	Game Accelerators in Cross-Border Play: Lag, Repair, Reconnect NINGXI GUO , The Chinese University of Hong Kong
17:10	Game Streaming: Indian Nationalism through the Lens of Video Games Streaming in Kerala, India JAWHAR CHOLAKKATHODI , SRM University – Andhra Pradesh
17:30	Questions & Answers
18:00	END OF DAY 1
18:15 – 20:15	WORKSHOP DINNER (<i>For Presenters, Chairpersons and Organisers Only</i>)

30 APRIL 2026 • THURSDAY

10:00 – 11:30	PANEL 5 • PLAY, MYTH AND NARRATIVE I
<i>Chairperson</i>	RANI SINGH , National University of Singapore
10:00	Simulating National Trauma: 1998: The Toll Keeper Story and the Burden of Historical Memory
<i>Online</i>	ISKANDAR ZULKARNAIN , Hobart and William Smith Colleges
10:20	Playing at the Margins of Empire: Taiwanese Video Games and the Politics of Colonial Memory
	SARA MORINI , Sapienza University of Rome
10:40	The Train Parable: How Varying Contexts Mediate the Interpretation of Kazakh Cultural Codes in an Experimental Video Game
	ALEXANDRA KNYSHEVA , Kazakh-British Technical University
11:00	Questions & Answers
11:30 – 12:00	MORNING TEA
12:00 – 13:30	PANEL 6 • PLAY, MYTH AND NARRATIVE II
<i>Chairperson</i>	NIEN YUAN CHENG , Singapore University of Technology and Design
12:00	Playable Victories: Negotiating National Humiliation and Historical Determinism in Chinese Video Games
	BIN CHEN , The Hong Kong Polytechnic University
12:20	Imagining India in Sinophone Video Games
	ZEZHOU YANG , National University of Singapore
12:40	Gaming as a Civilisational Geopolitics
	RANI SINGH , National University of Singapore TIM WINTER , National University of Singapore
13:00	Questions & Answers
13:30 – 14:30	LUNCH
14:30 – 16:00	PANEL 7 • GENDER AND GAMES IN CHINA
<i>Chairperson</i>	TINGTING LIU , University of Technology Sydney
14:30	Digital Intimate Geopolitics and Intimate Literacy: Negotiating Nationalist Sentiments and Gendered Scripts in <i>Otome</i> Games
<i>Online</i>	LIANG GE , University of Manchester
14:50	Strategic Emotives: Micro-Political Practices of Otome Game Participants under State and Platform Governance in China
	CHENGLIN SU , Xiamen University
15:10	Recognising Games, Regulating Players: Gaming Nationalism and Otome Games in China
	ZISHAN LAI , National University of Singapore
15:30	Questions & Answers
16:00 – 16:30	AFTERNOON TEA
16:30 – 17:30	DISCUSSION & CLOSING REMARKS
	ZEZHOU YANG , National University of Singapore RANI SINGH , National University of Singapore TIM WINTER , National University of Singapore
17:30	END OF WORKSHOP

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

**Reading the Nation in Indian Videogames:
Stereotypes and Multiplicities****Souvik MUKHERJEE**Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta
prosperoscell@gmail.com

Videogames are a fairly new entrant into the millennia-old ludic and narrative traditions of South Asia. Although computers were an integral part of India's post-independence, the 'License Raj' or bureaucratic restrictions in innovation and trade, which lasted until the nineties, hampered the development of the IT industry. Initially entering Indian society through a few rare imports by individuals and then as 'grey market' products, video games began to be made in India as late as the end of the nineties. Incidentally, both the games, *Yoddha* (Gondal and Chhaya 2000) and *Bhagat Singh* (Lumenphon 2001), which were released had deeply nationalistic plots. *Yoddha* is based on the Kargil War between India and Pakistan while *Bhagat Singh* is about the eponymous Indian freedom fighter who fought against colonial rule. However, as Adrienne Shaw (2013) comments that games have historically been external to Indian culture. Unlike film and radio, videogames did not even have a separate word for them in Indian languages. This dichotomy is, arguably, illustrative of the contrasting influences wherein the Western and nationalist cultures collide and yet coexist in the production and reception of videogames in India.

This talk will address the fraught concept of 'nation', as imagined communities (see Anderson 1983), in the context of these dual influences in the conceptualisation of Indian videogames. Addressing current discussions on Indian videogames such as *Raji*, the use of Western stereotypes in both the genre and the gameplay mechanics in constructing an 'Indian' videogame as a so-called 'forgotten epic' will be examined. How this compares with the stereotyping of 'Indianness' in triple-A videogames from the Global North, such as *Age of Empires III: The Asian Dynasties* (Big Huge Games 2007) is also a point of interest, here.

At the same time, however, there are a slew of indie videogames that address different aspects of the complexity of what nationhood means. As Zeiler and Mukherjee (2021) comment, 'the academic interest in Indian video game development, certainly in relation to creative industries and cultural heritage but even much more broadly, has just begun' and already the diversity of indie games, such as *Venba* (Visai Studios 2023), which reconstructs an expat Indian family's memories of their homeland through food and *Palace on the Hill* (Niku Games 2024), which is an exploration of art in rural India. The ways in which these games approach the thinking of 'nation' and 'nationalism' as, arguably, multiple rather than unitary and majoritarian are helpful in beginning to better understand videogames as a medium of reading and disseminating cultural heritage. In the process, this talk will also address other examples from South Asia and make larger connections with the Asian scenario at large.

Souvik Mukherjee is Associate Professor in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta, India. Souvik's research looks at the narrative and the literary through the emerging discourse of videogames as storytelling media and at how these games inform and challenge our conceptions of narratives, identity and culture. Related interests and expertise include a broad spectrum of topics in game studies ranging from postcolonialism, identity and temporality in videogames and boardgames to the videogame industry in South-East Asia. Souvik is the author of four monographs, *Videogames and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Palgrave Macmillan 2015), *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Springer UK 2017), *Videogames in the Indian Subcontinent: Development, Culture(s) and Representations* (Bloomsbury India 2022) and *Indian Boardgames, Colonial Avatars: Transculturation, Colonialism and Boardgames* (De Gruyter Brill 2025).

Reinventing Tradition and Participatory Meaning-Making: *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024) and Playable Nationalism

Tingting LIU

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This paper examines how the global reception of Chinese video games has grown increasingly polarised in the wake of the success of *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024), mirroring broader global perceptions of “Made in China” products. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of Reddit discussions and large-scale text-mining of gaming-related subreddits—both before and after *Wukong*’s release—this study investigates how English-language player communities construct and circulate meanings around “Chinese games.” Prior to *Wukong*, Reddit discussions of Chinese games were largely dominated by references to *Genshin Impact* (2020) and its perceived imitators, often framed through narratives of aesthetic homogenisation, commercial opportunism, and limited creative originality. In contrast, *Wukong* has been widely recognised for its technical sophistication, visual quality, and production scale. Yet this recognition has not led to a straightforward revaluation of Chinese game development, but rather has produced a polarised discourse in which aesthetic and technical acclaim is persistently entangled with geopolitical suspicion and nationalist interpretations—particularly through recurring framings of the game as a vehicle for “telling China’s story well”. These debates resonate with broader patterns of whataboutism and essentialist reasoning in discussions of China (Franceschini & Loubere, 2022). In addition, following Massanari’s (2015) analysis of Reddit as a platform whose design and governance structures implicitly support exclusionary and antagonistic technocultures, this study treats Reddit not as a neutral discussion space but as a socio-technical environment that actively shapes discursive polarisation. The paper demonstrates how Reddit users simultaneously acknowledge China’s technological capacity while reproducing anxieties about political influence and cultural propaganda. These polarised readings echo longer-standing global narratives surrounding “Made in China” products, oscillating between admiration for industrial capability and suspicion toward state power.

Tingting Liu is Chancellor’s Research Fellow in the Faculty of Design and Society at the University of Technology Sydney, Australia. She completed her PhD in Anthropology at the University of Queensland in 2018. Following this, she served as ARC Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, and later as Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Jinan University, China. Trained in both anthropology and media studies, her research investigates the cultural politics of digital platforms, with a regional focus on China and the Asia-Pacific. She has conducted extensive ethnographic and digital fieldwork on livestreaming commerce, mobile gaming, and digital labour, and has published widely in SSCI-indexed journals. Her current projects explore how platform governance, soft power, and algorithmic mediation shape user practices and transnational imaginaries.

Commodity Nationalism and the Digital Frontier: Piracy, Patriotism, and the Moral Economy of 7554 in Vietnam

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In the early 2010s, Vietnam's gaming landscape was characterized by a near-total normalization of software piracy. This paper examines the release of 7554 (2011) not merely as a commercial venture, but as a catalyst for a burgeoning moral economy of consumption. I argue that the game's release triggered a unique form of commodity nationalism, where the act of purchasing a legal copy was reframed by community leaders and tech media as a litmus test for one's patriotism. This study analyzes the discursive shift within Vietnamese online forums (such as GameVN and VozForums) where "buying genuine" (mua game bản quyền) was championed as a way to defend national honor against the stigma of intellectual theft. By situating 7554 within Vietnam's socialist-oriented market economy, this study explores how the game acted as a bridge between official state-sanctioned history and a modern, tech-savvy youth identity. Despite the game's eventual commercial failure, the rhetoric surrounding its launch reveals how national belonging and communal duty in Vietnam began to involve an ethical responsibility to support the homegrown game industry. This paper concludes that 7554 served to discipline the Vietnamese consumer, transforming the act of purchase into a performative gesture of national solidarity.

Duy Ly Chu is Lecturer in Oriental Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities – Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City. He earned his PhD in Comparative Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore (NUS), funded by the NUS and Harvard-Yenching Institute Joint Doctoral Scholarship. His research interests focus on the intersection of science and technology, history, and geopolitical power in East and Southeast Asia.

Playing the Past: Historical Imagination and World Building in Roblox

Daniele CIOCCA

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Kingdom of the Philippines (KPHL) is a community of young Filipino users of the Roblox gaming platform, one of the most played Massive Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) worldwide. What sets KPHL apart from the variety of gaming experiences available in Roblox is its explicit historical and national inspiration. Through the world-building and creation tools made available in Roblox Studio and other pieces of software, members of KPHL actively re-imagine the past and the present of the Philippines, shaping an alternative history in which the country became a monarchy and thrived as an independent nation.

The process of digital re-imagination of the history, politics and culture of the Philippines happens through various shared practices: a role-playing structure that simulates a monarchical hierarchy; the creation of virtual three-dimensional maps that reconfigure the urban geography of Manila, where digital re-enactments of battles and war scenarios take place; the writing of a rich lore, containing details about the society, culture and history of this alternative world.

As part of my doctoral ethnographic fieldwork in Filipino Roblox role-playing communities between December 2024 and July 2025, I participated in in-game activities organized by KPHL, as well as conducting interviews and focus groups with its members both online and in real life in Metro Manila.

In this contribution, I aim to discuss some key questions that emerged during my fieldwork. Can video-gaming, often labeled as a form of entertainment or escapism, be a legitimate site of historical imagination? How do practices of play – and role-playing in particular – become vehicles for alternative visions of the nation and its past? By addressing these questions, I argue that Roblox communities can represent laboratories of collective imagination and performance, where community, politics and cultural identities are not only represented, but embodied and negotiated.

Daniele Ciocca is a third-year PhD candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Milan-Bicocca. Since his master's degree in Anthropology, his research interest has revolved around digital social platforms and religious discourse. He has conducted ethnography both in Italy and in the Philippines with Catholic Filipinos active on different kinds of digital media, from social media to news agencies, addressing the transformations in the hierarchy and symbology of religious communication in both Filipino and global Catholicism. For his PhD, he conducted digital ethnography within various Roblox role-playing communities targeted to a Filipino audience. These include Roblox Filipino Catholics, a religious community that constitutes his main site of research, and Kingdom of the Philippines, which is the subject of his proposal. His research explores the interplay between digital gaming and religious and political identities and performance, arguing that video-gaming can be a laboratory for self-expression and identity construction, learning, and community building.

When Games Disappear: National Memory, Digital Prohibition, and the Everyday Politics of Gaming in India

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This paper argues that India's September 2020 ban on PUBG Mobile, along with 117 other Chinese applications, should be interpreted not as an isolated regulatory measure but as a historically significant act of memory governance performed through the ordinary mechanisms of app store management and digital prohibition. Drawing on oral history testimonies collected among young people across northern India in March 2026, and engaging the theoretical frameworks of Florian Schneider, Christian Karner, and Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods, this paper situates the ban within a longer genealogy of state attempts to regulate circulation, from colonial press censorship to Cold War media controls. It demonstrates that the ban simultaneously produced nationalist pedagogy and generated counter-memories that complicated the state's intended message, revealing how limited sovereign authority remains when it attempts to govern digital cultures.

Rajesh Prasad is Assistant Professor of History with a strong academic foundation from Jawaharlal Nehru University, where he completed his MA, MPhil, and PhD in History. With a passion for teaching and research, Dr Prasad has been instrumental in shaping the academic experience of students at Daulat Ram College, University of Delhi, since February 2023. His expertise lies in modern European history, cultural transformations, and the intersections of history and memory, particularly through oral narratives. Dr Prasad's scholarly contributions include numerous conference presentations across the globe and publications in reputed journals and edited volumes. He has also authored two books, including the recently published *Cultural Transformation: The Making of Modern Europe*. Dr Prasad is committed to interdisciplinary teaching and advancing scholarly research aligned with the National Education Policy 2020, making him a valuable asset to any academic institution. Beyond academia, Dr Prasad's creative pursuits, including filmmaking and the arts, further enrich his multifaceted approach to education and scholarship.

Nationalism, Identity and Video Gaming in Digital Kazakhstan

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This research aims to unpack the evolving role of video games as a site for (re)negotiating national identity and growing nationalism within the broader context of Kazakhstan's ongoing nation-building project, with particular reference to the period following the Qandy Qantar events of 2022. This study joins the string of works, which argue that video games are not just economic commodities, but interactive cultural spaces where state actors, developers and players collectively engage in the articulation and contestation of evolving notions of Kazakh nationhood. Through an analysis of locally developed games, state-led digital initiatives, and the practices of gaming communities, this research shows how video games act as instruments of digital nationalism, embedding political and cultural discourses in everyday digital experience.

Sabina Insebayeva is Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan. She is concurrently a research associate at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, where she also held a postdoctoral fellowship in the Identities Cluster. Prior positions include an assistant professorship at the University of Tsukuba, as well as research and visiting fellowships at the George Washington University, University of Zurich, Leibniz Institute for Educational Media, Georg Eckert Institute, The University of Tokyo, Waseda University, and Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. Dr Insebayeva studies issues related to identity politics, power relations and security in Central Asia and East Asia, and is particularly interested in approaches rooted in social theory and historical sociology. She has published peer-reviewed articles in prestigious (Q1) journals such as *International Affairs*, *The Pacific Review*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, *Nationalities Papers*, among others.

Compensation Guaranteed? The State of/and Indie Game Development in Singapore

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Since the 2010s, digital and new media technologies have markedly changed the way The Singapore Story—the nation’s primary narrative of itself—is performed and proliferated. This is a shared project between state and society, facilitated through governmental campaigns and funding incentives. The development of the city-state’s independent (or “indie”) digital gaming industry is one recent iteration of this phenomenon. In 2024, for example, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) released for the first time a call for grant proposals of new game prototypes that promote “a stronger sense of Singaporeanness” and a celebration of its cultural heritage for both a local and global audience.

This paper examines this new turn, from the Smart Nation-centric policy measures underpinning this development to the processes behind the scripting and production of these local games with the state’s encouragement. It focuses on the case study of one of the recipients of the aforementioned IMDA grant, “Compensation Not Guaranteed”, an upcoming game developed by Team Project Lunch that explores the hard choices of urban planning in an unnamed post-colonial new Southeast Asian nation. I argue that the political and sociocultural implications of games go beyond the reach of “Triple-A” blockbuster titles – much can be said about the ecological, affective and pragmatic complexities and realities of narrating the nation through the lens of indie game development and aesthetics.

Nien Yuan Cheng is a Singaporean performance scholar, dramaturg and avid gamer. She is presently Assistant Professor at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Her work explores the politics and poetics of storytelling and dramaturgy in the digital age, intercultural theatre, and oral histories in/as performance. Her book, *The Storytelling State: Performing Lives in Singapore*, was published by the University of Hawai’i Press in 2025. For more information, please visit <http://cheng-nienyuan.com>.

Platforming the Nation across Asia: Yalla Group and the China–UAE–MENA Gaming Infrastructure

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While the relationship between video games and nationalism is often examined through representational politics and state-led cultural narratives, less attention has been paid to how nationalism is produced through platform infrastructures, transnational labour, and everyday gaming practices. This paper examines the United Arab Emirates as a distinctive case of a platform-oriented approach to gaming and cultural power, focusing on Yalla Group, a UAE-based company whose social and casual gaming platforms primarily serve Arabic-speaking users across the Middle East and North Africa, while relying on game development and technical teams based in Hangzhou, China.

Unlike high-profile state-backed projects that explicitly mobilise history or heritage, Yalla's platforms appear largely apolitical, foregrounding casual play, voice-based sociality, and monetisation rather than national storytelling. However, this paper argues that nationalism is nonetheless produced through the material and infrastructural conditions that shape how play, language, and sociability are organised. Yalla's business model brings together regulatory and financial conditions in the UAE, Chinese game development labour and technical expertise, and Arabic-language localisation for a regional user base, forming an inter-Asian gaming assemblage that transcends national borders while remaining structured by them.

Drawing on platform studies and regional game studies, the paper conceptualises this mode of engagement as a form of banal nationalism embedded in infrastructure rather than discourse. The UAE does not project nationalism through symbolic representation, but through its role as a platform hub enabling translocal play and regional integration. At the same time, the incorporation of Chinese development teams highlights how Asian gaming infrastructures redistribute labour, technology, and value across national boundaries. By foregrounding these inter-Asian linkages, the paper contributes to broader debates on how video games participate in the remapping of nation, region, and identity through platform capitalism and everyday digital practices.

Jing Lin is Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore, specialising in Middle East studies, with research interests in cultural diplomacy, regional politics, and the inter-Asian relations. She earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Peking University and served as a senior lecturer at the School of Asian and African Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University. She has published on China–Middle East relations, interfaith dialogue, and the politics of cultural exchange, and has extensive experience analysing Gulf state approaches to soft power and regional connectivity.

Submarine Cables and Nationalist Currents: Mapping the Affective Infrastructures of Lag in Southeast Asian Esports

Khyati SINGH

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While academic discourse often treats the 'nation' as a representational construct within game narratives, this paper argues that nationalism in Asian gaming is equally produced through the material failures of digital infrastructure. Examining the 'geopolitics of lag' within competitive Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) and Valorant communities across the Malay Archipelago- Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines- this study draws on multi-sited digital ethnography and platform studies to analyse how the physical layout of subsea fibre-optic cables and regional server hubs in Singapore creates a 'hierarchical geography of play'. The paper demonstrates how technical friction is translated into nationalist resentment, how telecommunications providers mobilise patriotic play as digital sovereignty, and how the 'imagined community' of the nation is reinforced through shared infrastructural frustration. 'Gaming Asia' is not a seamless digital market but a fractured landscape of cables and currents.

Khyati Singh is Research Analyst at the Centre for North America and Strategic Technologies, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. She is also a PhD scholar in the Centre for the Study of the Americas, School of International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She has authored the book *Cyber Leviathan: Digital Strategies in International Relations*. Her research area includes AI, technology, geopolitics, techno-social interaction, cybersecurity and grand strategy. She contributes regularly to leading academic spaces including *ASPI*, *The Diplomat*, *Small Wars Journal*, *Wavell Room*, *Indian Express*, along with journal articles in reputed journals including *Journal of Strategic Security Studies*, *Connections Journal*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, etc.

Game Accelerators in Cross-Border Play: Lag, Repair, Reconnect

Ningxi GUO

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This paper examines how Asian nationalism is materially enacted, negotiated, and unsettled through the infrastructural conditions of cross-border online play. Focusing on Chinese players of Korean title PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), it investigates how gameplay is sustained, fixed by informal tools under conditions of infrastructural fragility produced by China's gaming governance, transnational routing bottlenecks, and state-level filtering systems (GFW). Rather than treating nationalism as a ideological content embedded in games, the paper approaches it as an part of infrastructural condition that shapes who can play, how play circulates across borders, and what forms of connectivity are permitted, repaired, or rendered precarious.

Situated within this uneven digital topology of disconnection and lag, Chinese players rely on commercial "gaming accelerators"(booster) to reconstitute the basic conditions of online play. Through ethnographic engagement, paratext and interface analysis, player interviews, the paper conceptualizes these accelerators as a form of grey infrastructure: publicly available and infrastructurally indispensable, yet institutionally ambiguous. While marketed as tools that "increase speed," they do not accelerate networks or gameplay progression. Rather, they reroute and recalibrate existing network relations through offshore relay nodes positioned within legally and geopolitically uncertain spaces. Each act of repair that temporarily mitigates lag simultaneously produces new instabilities, recursive breakdowns, and conflicts with domestic infrastructures.

Building on Jane Bennett's notion of distributed agency, the paper understanding playability as an emergent, relational effect produced by human actors (players, developers, regulators), and more-than-human actants such as routing protocols, ISPs, and accelerator clients. Cross-border play thus becomes a mundane yet persistent site where national borders are both enforced and pragmatically undone, an ongoing negotiation with nationalist projects of digital sovereignty. It contributes to regional game studies by illuminating how Asian nationalism operates through, and is destabilised by, the material infrastructures and informal tools that make transnational play possible.

Ningxi Guo is a PhD student in the Centre for China Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research examines the Chinese video games through the lenses of political economy and cultural studies. Drawing on both academic training and prior industry experience in major gaming company and smaller studios, she is particularly interested in how games are produced, regulated, and negotiated within and beyond China, with attention to informal practices, platform governance, and transnational infrastructures. Her current work explores topics such as gaming accelerators and grey infrastructures, AIGC technologies in game-making, and the platformisation of game production and circulation. She has presented her research at DiGRA and related international conferences.

Game Streaming: Indian Nationalism through the Lens of Video Games Streaming in Kerala, India

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In this paper I will examine Pan Indian nationalism as it articulated, negotiated, and contested through video game streaming practices regional context, particularly in the context of Kerala, a southern state of India. The recent studies on Indian gaming culture(s) focused on the relationship between game design and player behaviours in India (Garg, R., Deshbandhu, A., Rangaswamy, N. 2025), the multiple lives of the “gamer” in India (Deshbandhu, A. 2020) cultural representation in videogame culture(s) India (Mukherjee, Souvik 2022). And state-led or industry-driven nationalist projects such as mythological game development or “Made in India” gaming initiatives (Cantano, Antonio. 2024). In this study I will shift the attention to everyday, bottom-up practices of Malayalam-speaking game streamers on platforms like YouTube and Twitch.

Through digital ethnography and stream analysis, I will examine popular Kerala-based gaming channels streaming titles such as PUBG/BGMI, GTA V, Free Fire, and Call of Duty. In the streaming process, they spread nationalist sentiment often emerges through different practices such as the use of Malayalam mixed with English, jokes about Indian military strength during shooter gameplay, celebratory reactions to India-themed in-game events, and audience chat discussions responding to national political moments. At the same time, streamers localise games through region-specific humour, references to Kerala’s political culture, and everyday social concerns such as unemployment, migration to the Gulf, or internet shutdowns. Through these they produce, articulate, negotiate, and resist homogenized Hindutva-inflected narratives of Indian nationalism.

Finally, this paper analyses how streaming infrastructures such as algorithmic visibility, monetization systems, and diasporic Malayali audiences shape Indian gaming infrastructure. Since Kerala as an under-represented gaming region, and nationalist sentiments are different, the study argues that nationalism in Indian game streaming are co-produced by representational content, as well as the material, affective, and infrastructural conditions of platform capitalism. By this, the paper contributes to regional game studies.

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Simulating National Trauma: 1998: The Toll Keeper Story and the Burden of Historical Memory

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In this presentation, I am going to discuss a recently published Indonesian narrative simulation game, *1998: The Toll Keeper Story* (hereafter, *1998*). Specifically, I question the way it portrays one of the most pivotal moments in Indonesian history, the 1998 mass protests challenging the New Order regime and the riots that ensued. Developed by GameChanger Studio, an independent game studio focusing on simulation games, *1998* depicts a story of Dewi, a pregnant toll keeper who has to survive a volatile period in Janapa, the fictional counterpart of Indonesia. As Dewi, players interact with a variety of characters that reveal bits and pieces about the social and political environment of the country. The game takes heavy inspiration from Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*, a procedural rhetorical game about borders and immigration enforcement. *1998* is of particular interest as a game published during the current presidential administration of Prabowo Subianto, a former general implicated in the kidnapping and killing of activists during the 1998 protests. It also coincides with the Prabowo administration's effort to deny the traumatic impacts of the 1998 tragedy, especially in downplaying the occurrence of mass rape. Yet, examining its game mechanics, visual representation, and the context of its release, I argue that *1998* generates an ambivalent stance about national trauma. On one hand, the game aims to elicit empathy for Dewi, a representation of ordinary Indonesian people. On the other hand, this focus ends up diluting the historical moment into a nostalgic representation of past events. Outside of the game, this ambivalence is also apparent in the game studio's silence in response to the August 2025 mass protests, which happened during *1998*'s pre-release promotion. Ultimately, the case of *1998* demonstrates the challenge of Indonesian indie games in producing bottom-up perspectives on Indonesian history.

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Playing at the Margins of Empire: Taiwanese Video Games and the Politics of Colonial Memory

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This paper examines how two Taiwanese independent video games — *The Legend of Tianding* (2021) and *Raid on Taihoku* (2023) — mediate the historical memory of Japanese colonialism through what I call *embodied reenactment*: a memory strategy in which developers use ludic design to make players physically inhabit, rather than merely witness, historical experience. Drawing on Alison Landsberg's theory of *prosthetic memory* (2004, 2015) and Ian Bogost's *procedural rhetoric* (2007), I argue that these games construct sharply divergent modalities of embodied reenactment. *The Legend of Tianding* enacts colonial resistance as ludic empowerment, allowing players to embody a folkloric rebel through acrobatic combat and acts of cultural reclamation such as the integration of the Taiwanese Hokkien language in the game. In contrast, *Raid on Taihoku* centers civilian precarity during the 1945 Allied bombings of Taipei, employing scripted helplessness and ethical gameplay to subvert conventional war game tropes. Through close analysis of game mechanics, aesthetics, and narrative, I show that both games—despite their opposing approaches—function as affective sites where colonial memory is not passively consumed but actively performed. Situating these titles within the recent shift in Taiwan's indie game industry from globalized genre production to localized historical storytelling, I argue that they represent a significant intervention in East Asian postcolonial memory cultures.

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The Train Parable: How Varying Contexts Mediate the Interpretation of Kazakh Cultural Codes in an Experimental Video Game

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This paper examines how players interpret culturally specific meanings embedded in narrative video games when they lack the contextual knowledge required for decoding them. Drawing on Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, the study conceptualizes meaning-making as a process of translation across cultural boundaries rather than direct transmission. The research is based on a qualitative reception study conducted through a gamified workshop built around *The Train Parable*, an experimental narrative game exploring Kazakh cultural codes related to displacement, memory, and historical trauma.

The primary empirical focus is on international participants with no prior familiarity with the Kazakh cultural context, examining meaning-making under conditions of cultural distance, supplemented by comparative insights from Kazakh participants. The study design systematically varied the sequencing of contextual exposure—before, after, and at intermediate stages relative to gameplay—enabling comparison between different modes of interpretive entry at the boundary of the semiosphere. The findings reveal that interpretation unfolds as a staged process shaped by the availability and timing of contextual information. Players without prior cultural knowledge initially engage through affective and narrative cues, constructing provisional meanings that are later reconfigured through contextual exposure—a process described here as delayed semiosis. In contrast, participants provided with contextual framing demonstrate more immediate symbolic recognition but engage less in interpretive reconstruction.

The study contributes to game studies by foregrounding the plurality of interpretive logics in cross-cultural gameplay and by positioning ambiguity not as a barrier, but as a productive condition for meaning-making. It also offers methodological insights into combining qualitative reception analysis with experimental design to investigate how context mediates player interpretation in culturally specific games.

Alexandra Knysheva is the head of GameLab KBTU and a senior lecturer at the Kazakh-British Technical University (KBTU), where she leads projects and educational initiatives at the intersection of video games, gamification, and interactive learning, supporting both student teams and research-driven game development. She is also the founder and chair of DiGRA Central Asia, the regional chapter of the Digital Games Research Association. She has coordinated multiple educational gamified projects with UNICEF, for which she was nominated for the Women in TechCCA Best Ally award in 2023 and 2024. Her research interests include gamification beyond competition, video game semiotics, player agency, and broader questions of how interactive systems shape engagement and trust. In 2025, she published a peer-reviewed textbook on gamification and game studies based on her authored bachelor-level course.

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Playable Victories: Negotiating National Humiliation and Historical Determinism in Chinese Video Games

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Since the beginning of the Reform and Opening-up period, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has anchored its political legitimacy in a narrative of “National Humiliation” (bainian guochi). Through the Patriotic Education Campaign, the state emphasizes historical traumas—specifically the Opium Wars (1840–1842) and the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895)—as wars that “Old China” was destined to lose due to corruption and feudal backwardness. This teleological narrative asserts that only the CCP’s leadership could eventually “wash away” this shame and rejuvenate the nation.

However, this official historiography faces unexpected challenges from the domestic video game industry. To attract consumers, Chinese developers commercially weaponize nationalism, marketing games with the promise that players can command Qing forces, defeat imperialist aggressors, and xuechi (avenge humiliation). This creates a political paradox: if a game allows players to avert these “destined” defeats, it contradicts the CCP’s foundational claim that the Qing dynasty was incapable of salvation, potentially undermining the Party’s unique historical mandate. Conversely, forcing players to reenact historical defeats renders a game commercially unattractive.

Focusing on the game *Jiawu: The Storms of Beiyang* (2026), this paper examines how game companies navigate this ideological minefield. It argues that to justify “playable victories” without triggering censorship, developers are forced to excavate specific, overlooked historical details that provide a plausible basis for resistance within the official framework. In doing so, these companies inadvertently complicate the state’s monolithic victim narrative. By analyzing these digital negotiations, this study posits that Chinese video games function as sites of “counter-memory” where the ambivalence between commercial nationalism and state legitimacy transforms the static history of National Humiliation into a dynamic, contested space.

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Imagining India in Sinophone Video Games

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The recurring presence of South Asia, particularly India, in video games produced in the Global North has attracted substantial scholarly attention, often framed through critiques of Orientalism and the persistence of colonial epistemologies in postcolonial cultural production. By contrast, the question of colonality of Indian configurations in video games produced and circulated within the Global South remains underexamined. Addressing this gap, this paper offers a preliminary investigation into the construction of India-ness in Sinophone video games. Guided by two central questions: how India-ness is imagined in Sinophone games, and to what extent these imaginaries diverge from or reproduce Western representational paradigms, this study examines how such representations illuminate broader issues of decoloniality and inter-Asia engagements from a South–South perspective. Building on Sinophone studies of literature and film, the paper contributes to the emerging field of Sinophone Game Studies by interrogating the relationship between cultural production, national frameworks, and historically embedded power structures in inter-Asian contexts.

Methodologically, the paper proposes a tentative typology of Indian and South Asian elements in Sinophone video games with a close analysis of three case studies spanning the late twentieth century to the present. In doing so, the paper situates Sinophone game production within the intersecting fields of regional game studies, China–India studies, and decolonial theory. It further proposes a larger project of a systematic effort to document and preserve Sinophone video games that engage with South Asian themes.

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Gaming as a Civilisational Geopolitics

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Civilisation has long been a generative trope for the aesthetics and imaginaries of the gaming industry. As previous scholars have highlighted, contemporary games speak to post Enlightenment conceptualisations of civilisation, and their associations with progress, trade, empire and economic rationality. In this regard, civilisation for game developers has been normatively Western. This of course also carries ideas of civilisational centres and hierarchies, which stretch back to antiquity; a civilised Sparta embattled by the barbarian Persia.

How then are we to read the Age of Bharat or Black Myth Wukong, two of the many games that speak to a geocultural politics of Asia's civilisational states? This paper takes up such questions and considers whether this civilisation genre of Asian gaming constitutes a mode of cultural production that needs interpreting in relation to a larger theatre of multipolar geopolitics. In doing so, it brings gaming into conversations on civilisational politics and geocultural power, fields in which digital games have remained relatively underexamined despite their growing symbolic and commercial reach.

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Digital Intimate Geopolitics and Intimate Literacy: Negotiating Nationalist Sentiments and Gendered Scripts in *Otome* Games

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Against the backdrop of Gaming Asia as a contested locus of digital media and culture, the meteoric rise of Chinese *otome* games—the women-oriented romance simulation genre, including *Mr Love: Queen's Choice* and the immersive 3D title *Love and Deepspace*—signals a critical shift in the region's gaming ecology. Often dismissed as escapism, these games function, I argue, as institutions of intimacy where the boundaries of the nation and the self are actively renegotiated. Drawing on multi-round in-depth interviews with 33 women players in China and digital ethnography of *otome* fan communities on Weibo, RedNote and QQ, the paper advances two interrelated concepts: digital intimate geopolitics and intimate literacy, to analyse the structure of feeling emerging from the friction between the party-state's macro-level nationalist and pronatalist discourses and the micro-politics of digital romance. Players are caught in a tense matrix: the state's moral biopolitics mobilises women toward marriage and reproduction to avert demographic crisis while anchoring the games' Chineseness; the games' post-feminist and neoliberal narratives encourage self-enterprising subjectivities and confidence, framing virtual romance as cosmopolitan empowerment. I show that players do not merely consume these scripts but deploy critical-ideological literacy to navigate them: ambivalently channelling techno-nationalist pride in domestic developers like Paper Games against Japanese genre hegemony and Euro-American dominance, while simultaneously resisting the state's gendered mandates through more-than-human intimacies.

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Strategic Emotives: Micro-Political Practices of Otome Game Participants under State and Platform Governance in China

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Over the past decade, otome games have grown rapidly within China's highly platformized mobile gaming environment, transforming from a niche game genre into one of the most significant female-oriented subcultures on social media platforms. At the same time, state authorities and digital platforms have continuously intervened across the stages of production, circulation, and reception through phased censorship regimes, policy discourses, and algorithmic mechanisms, thereby constructing normative boundaries surrounding intimacy, desire, and their modes of expression within Chinese otome game culture.

Drawing on netnography and autoethnography, and building on William Reddy's theory of emotion, this study examines the everyday practices of Chinese otome game players and creators, and explores how norms of emotives are co-produced through the interaction between state- and platform-imposed regimes of taboo and everyday participants' practices, functioning as a mechanism for regulating the affective order of digital intimacy. The study argues that the institutional constraints jointly enacted by the state and platforms not only discipline industrial production standards, game content, and the generic characteristics of Chinese otome games, but also shape the conditions under which players' desire and sensory experience can be articulated, thereby aligning these affective articulations with a dominant regime of social emotional governance oriented toward heteronormative family structures and the goals of social reproduction. Long-standing dilemmas in subjectivity formation among otome game players have given rise to informal community rules, exemplified by the "Guo Yi Law," which delineates a controllable, safe, and sufficiently participatory boundary for the expression of heterosexual intimacy. However, unlike William Reddy's notion of "emotional navigation," which aims to alleviate individual suffering within an emotional regime, emotional navigation in Chinese otome game culture is characterized by a high degree of strategic calculation and technological mediation. Within a governance framework jointly constituted by state regulation, platform algorithms, and community norms, players and creators mobilize emotives as a micro-political tool. Drawing on a logic of "stealth," they develop a set of emotive strategies sustained by affective literacy, enabling transgressions against external prohibitions while further contesting the boundaries of legitimate intimacy.

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Recognising Games, Regulating Players: Gaming Nationalism and Otome Games in China

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In August 2025, *Love and Deepspace* by Papergames won Best Mobile Game at Gamescom, becoming the first otome title and second Chinese game to receive this international honor. With over 70 million global players and revenues exceeding \$650 million USD, the game represents Chinese technological achievement and global market success. As young Chinese women have increasingly engaged with otome games and related practices like cosplay commission dates, where players hire female cosplayers to embody male game characters for real-world romantic experiences, state-affiliated media have begun framing these practices as social risks requiring regulation. Players describe turning to these practices to access romance and care absent in their experiences with men, where women perform emotional labor without reciprocation.

Drawing on ethnography of Chinese otome game players and gaming culture alongside discourse analysis of state-affiliated media coverage from 2021 to 2025, I examine the paradox of otome games as simultaneously nationalist achievement and threat. State anxiety centers not only on the games themselves but also on women's use of them to bypass heterosexual relationships, which threatens state goals of maintaining marriage and birth rates. By framing these practices as risky dependencies rather than addressing women's accounts of emotional labour imbalances, the state reveals how gendered governance operates through moral panic, managing women's desires while celebrating industry success. This bottom-up analysis makes visible how state regulation and platform governance attempt to balance industry growth with controlling female autonomy, exposing the gendered tensions within gaming nationalism.

Zishan Lai (she/her) obtained her PhD in the Department of Communications and New Media from the National University of Singapore. Her research focuses on digital intimacy, East Asian popular culture, and fandom, with a particular emphasis on the intersection of feminism and media studies. Her dissertation examines how Chinese women engage with otome games (female-targeted dating simulations) to navigate love and intimacy under the overlapping pressures of heteropatriarchy and consumerism, situating these experiences within broader political and economic structures. Recent publications include peer-reviewed journal articles on *Information, Communication & Society*, *Games and Culture*, and *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*. For more information, please visit <https://zishanlai.owlstown.net/>.

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