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Playing with Indexical Chineseness:
The Transnational Cultural Politics of *Wuxia*
in Digital Games

Wuxia narratives delineate an imagined cultural China. Although officially banned in Mainland China for most of the twentieth century, contemporary Chinese reclamations of these pseudo-historical and fantastical tales of martial chivalry now circulate locally, regionally, and internationally. New treatments of *wuxia*—especially in film and literature—have drawn increasing international scholarly interest.[1] Nevertheless, the proliferation of *wuxia* digital games has, to date, received scant academic attention. Over the past decade, the use of *wuxia* fictions has steadily gained momentum in East Asian games networks, particularly within Chinese language territories. This essay traces a cultural history of the evolution of *wuxia* digital games from PC role-playing games (RPGs) to massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and offers a contextual analysis of their attendant significations. The games industry uptake of *wuxia* may be linked, in part, to newly emergent forms of Chinese economic nationalism. Such an interpretation not only accounts for why *wuxia* has become an important aspect of Chinese digital content production, but also how it modulates Chinese cultural identity within transnational games networks today.[2]

Wuxia fictions collectively support and substantiate particular fabulations about Chinese cultural identity. I am especially interested in how they act as signs of Chineseness-as-difference. Hence, my examination focuses on how *wuxia* digital games are complicit in constructing and circulating specific versions of contemporary Chineseness for transnational consumption. *Wuxia* possesses unquestioned auratic value. It acts in contemporary popular culture as a visual motif and narrative trope for a version of Chineseness that is framed—and, indeed, legitimised—by the "aura" of antiquity. Dai Jinhua's analysis of cultural nostalgia in China provides a useful premise for contextualising the use of *wuxia* in digital games. She posits:

> As one of the most important cultural realities of contemporary China, rather than as a trend of thought or as an undercurrent that resists the systematic progress of modernization and commercialization, nostalgia functions more prevalently as a fashion. Rather than originating from the writings of intellectual elites, it is more a pulse of the not inelegant urban noise; the trappings of nostalgia become perfectly suited as alluring commercial packaging, as a fashionable culture.[3]

Dai's reading of the contemporary Chinese context is an attempt to come to terms with identity-formation within newly accelerating socio-economic conditions: such is the now ubiquitous pulse of urban noise, commercial packaging, and fashionable culture, at least in some major metropolitan centres. Nostalgic imaginaries have a significant role to play in this particular moment of China's social and economic transformation. Dai is explicit about their specific symbolic currency and representational value. As she explains: "Nostalgic atmosphere, in embellishing the vacuum of memory and in creating personal identities within the span of historical imagination, simultaneously accomplishes a representation of consumerism as well as a consumerism of representation."[4]

While Dai is focused on local paradigmatic shifts, it should also be noted that processes of contemporary identity-formation are becoming increasingly connected to the

dynamics and cultural politics of globalised transnational capitalism. *Wuxia*—as a symptom of currently fashionable nostalgic imaginaries—offers a sense of spatial and temporal continuity, as well as cultural specificity. Or, to put it another way, *wuxia* provides an indexically Chinese sense of place, space and history within national and transnational networks. At the same time, however, as Aihwa Ong acknowledges, Asian modernist imaginations that insist upon their cultural and spiritual distinctiveness may be potentially regarded as self-Orientalising.[5] In this respect, Ong proposes that such a form of Asian modernity is only "alternative" insofar as the term refers to "a dynamic that is oppositional to existing hegemonies, a counterforce arising from other sites that are not without their own particular mix of expansive and repressive technologies."[6]

It is crucial to retain a reflexive understanding of these seemingly paradoxical tensions, especially in any discussions of the putatively self-Orientalising role played by *wuxia* digital games in propagating and promulgating Chineseness. At issue here is the process of defining and asserting cultural identity; but for whom, and from whose perspective? As truth claims are invariably articulated in webs of power relations, questions of the so-called "ownership of culture," and the agendas of articulating its particular truths, are necessarily open-ended and contestable.[7] I therefore echo Ong's qualified use of the term "self-Orientalising" in order to acknowledge the primacy of these predicaments—and, equally important, to underpin the relative agency to manoeuvre and manipulate meanings within different power domains.[8] This twinned impulse is retained in my analysis of the function of nostalgic imaginaries in *wuxia* digital games.

On a final note, it is perhaps worth mentioning that a transnational conceptual framework is both appropriate and essential for understanding the modulations of cultural identity discussed in this essay. As Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini put it:

Clearly the old East-West binary for understanding and crafting identity is obsolete. The varieties of Chinese identity thus emerge out of the continuous invention and reinvention of Chineseness as a product of the multiple and contradictory effects of ultramodernist attitudes, transnational subjectivities, and the nostalgic imaginaries marketed by late capitalism and its culture industries.[9]

Accordingly, my discussion endeavours to map the plurality of position-takings and underscore the affective investments involved in playing with indexical Chineseness in contemporary transnational contexts.

The Birth and Evolution of *Wuxia* Games in Taiwan

Wuxia fictions were considered "superfluous at best, regressive at worst" by the Chinese government for most of the twentieth century.[10] They had previously circulated in the form of serialised novels and were incorporated into Peking Opera in the nineteenth century. However, in 1931, censorship laws were passed in China prohibiting the production of films that promoted a belief in superstition, while Mainland Chinese filmmaking was directed towards the project of nation building.[11] Thus, from the 1930s onwards, popular culture forms based on *wuxia* were primarily produced in Taiwan and Hong Kong. PC games that were produced in these territories in the early 1990s set the precedent for Martial Arts Role-Playing Games based on *wuxia* narratives.[12]

Taiwan became the key site for the development of Martial Arts RPGs. The Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission in Taiwan describes the early production stage as one principally characterised by "the embarrassing way of imitation."[13] Game design was largely derivative of imported Japanese and North American RPG models. Local software companies had begun to produce games by covering "transplanted famous foreign games with a Chinese coating."[14] Softstar's *The Royal Sword* (1991) is generally regarded as the first *wuxia* PC-based game, spawning sequels and spin-offs including *The Enchanted Sword* (1993). However, games published between 1991 and 1993 basically only changed in form but not

content. Many of these games were not particularly well designed and they had poorly implemented in-game narratives. The Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission describes 1993 as a milestone year in which the Taiwanese company Soft-World International bought the copyright to produce *wuxia* games based on the popular martial arts novels of Louis Cha (a.k.a. Jin Yong). A new period was inaugurated whereby "the trend of departing from foreign games' structure became the mainstream of the games producing industry in Taiwan."[15] Game narratives became the main focus of these new developments.

Core RPG dynamics involve the incremental development of a central character who is usually given the responsibility of completing some lengthy quest, often accompanied by a team of support characters. This generic format prompts considerable gamer identification as the customisable player-controlled characters grow in experience and power over the course of the game. Storyline and characterisation are crucial in enhancing this sense of identification, as well as sustaining player interest in these lengthy games that may take well over forty hours to complete. These design elements are significant in accounting for how and why wuxia fictions were perfectly suited to, and indeed even thrived in, the narrative-driven RPG format. As Avis Tang, marketing director at InterServ International, reasons: "[The RPG format] affords players a chance to appreciate the worlds of Louis Cha and Ku Lung from a different angle, and injects a new element of [interactive] fantasy into Chinese martial arts stories."[16] Tsai Yi-lin, a manager in the marketing division at Softstar comments that in order "[t]o produce a martial arts role playing game, the first thing you have to do is write a good script. Then you'll be able to create a long-selling product series."[17] Tsai further explains that the most time-consuming part of the game design process at Softstar is the planning and writing of the script, which usually takes eight to twelve months to complete. This attentiveness to the script is integral in contributing to the creation of an engaging and immersive experience.

Consequently, it is unsurprising that the earliest innovations in Taiwanese game design were in terms of narrative refinement and development, effectively giving rise to the creation of a new RPG sub-genre entirely based on *wuxia*. Martial Arts RPGs, also sometimes referred to as Kung Fu RPGs, were predominantly derived from well-known *wuxia* stories, especially those popularised by Jin Yong. *Wuxia* games are largely dependent on their literary and filmic counterparts for their main plotlines, and certain narrative leitmotifs prove to be particularly suited for cross-media translation. Broadly speaking, *wuxia* games can be divided into two main types, namely those that centre on the adventuring aspects of vagabond life, and those that are more focused on the supernatural elements of Gods and Devils.[18] This veritable template for *wuxia* RPG design has been subject only to minor variation and remains largely unchanged today. Needless to say, the calculated choice of *wuxia* was also a culturally appropriate marketing gambit. Taiwanese PC games were developed mainly for domestic and regional Chinese language audiences. Hence, the choice was strategic in targeting local and regional pop-cultural palates already conversant with this particular idiom.

As *wuxia* narratives were being refined into the defining stylistic feature of Taiwanese games design, local technological prowess also gradually improved. In fact, within a relatively short space of time, by 1999, another local turning point had been reached in the design and development of *wuxia* games. Softstar's *The Royal Sword III* marked a high point in the visual design of PC-based *wuxia* games. As the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission notes, in that same year, WAEI launched *Jiang Hu*, an open-ended RPG, where the

> player becomes a vagabond swordsman, and adventures in the fictitious world occur as one so desires…. Without a master script, it means that the player has to create his own wish. Furthermore, it seems that WAEI is going to expand its games to the Internet, so one can play this kind of game with others through the web. Players can play the role of themselves, talk to other swordsmen, and create their own adventure. It's a new domain worthy of our expectation.[19]

The concluding sentence has, in hindsight, proven to be an under-statement that correctly anticipates the following: the phenomenal rise of online gaming in the East Asian region, the prospect of more open-ended games that allow for online interaction with other players, and the evolving role of *wuxia* within current intra-Asian online games networks.

Martial Arts MMORPGs in Intra-Asian Game Networks

1999 marked the year in which online games were systematically introduced in Taiwan. According to Lin Chieh-yu, online gaming first made an impact on the local market with *King of Kings* released by Chinasoft in 1999 and with the introduction of the North American MMORPG *Ultima Online*.[20] "Initially, given the considerable complexity of the games, they were the exclusive preserve of hard-core gamers, many of whom had been following developments overseas through BBS [Bulletin Board System] sites."[21] Foreign-designed online games did not automatically flourish in Taiwan. A case in point is that "[w]hen Interplay released its *EverQuest* series [the most popular North American MMORPG at that time] in 1999, the game received much media attention, but the complexity of the games and the lack of a Chinese-language interface continued to restrict the online games to a dedicated group of role-playing game addicts."[22] The subsequent launch of *EverQuest* in Mainland China in 2003 likewise proved to be a spectacular failure, ostensibly due to inadequate localisation and poor client support infrastructure.[23] "It was not until 2000 when WAEI introduced the Japanese game *Stone Age* that online gaming broke out from its geekish enclave and spread to a wider public," notes Lin, who suggests that the game's popularity may have been principally due to its relative ease of play.[24] In addition, *Stone Age* was more familiarly cast "in the tradition of the [*Pokémon*] animation series that emphasises daily life

over superhero adventure."[25] More to the point, it was comprehensively localised for regional Chinese language audiences.

Within a few short years, the online games market in Taiwan and China had grown exponentially, propelled by the rise of strong intra-Asian online games development and distribution networks. Duncan Clark's account of the Chinese online gaming scene in 2002 is illustrative of the transnational dynamics and the centrality of intra-Asian joint ventures that were already in place and at work then:

> While US developed games such as Blizzard Entertainment's *Starcraft* remain very popular for LAN based players, the most popular online games in the China market today include cartoon, fantasy and Kung Fu games produced in South Korea and distributed/localized in Taiwan. Leading games include *Stone Age* marketed in the mainland by Taiwan based WAEI and Kung Fu games such as *The Legend of Mir II* developed by Actoz Soft and distributed in China by Shanghai Shanda. In *The Legend of Mir* players can take on the role of warriors, wizards or Taoist monks, taking on thousands of other players and climbing new levels one by one.[26]

Significantly, all of these named East Asian online game titles are massively multiplayer online role-playing games. MMORPGs constitute an evolution of the RPG to the point where players can take their digital avatars into evolving virtual worlds populated by as many as tens of thousands of other player-avatars. They are also referred to as persistent world games in the sense that such virtual worlds continue to evolve even when an individual player logs off. These games nevertheless retain some core RPG elements that have been popularised within the region. Richard Aihoshi discerns that "a strong narrative is very important" in East Asian MMORPGs; and they are "far more story-driven…with considerably more text to read" compared with their Western counterparts.[27] "Famous incidents or periods from Chinese or oriental history comprise the prevalent thematic trend, often with elements of legend or Eastern-flavoured fantasy mixed in," continues Aihoshi.[28]

The provision of culturally specific content has become a key aspect of the East Asian digital content industry. As previously mentioned, Soft-World International had capitalised on this in the 1990s with their licence to produce PC games based on Jin Yong's novels. With the present turn to online games in the region, the company has managed to maintain its successful commercial track record by shifting attention to the development and distribution of persistent world games such as *Jin Yong Online* for domestic and regional Chinese-language players. There is a clear rationale for this focused initiative. As Wang Chin-po, President of Soft-World International, explains: "Our products are not only derived from Jin Yong. But I admit that we prefer Chinese cultural materials, because this is an area in which South Korea, Japan and the U.S. cannot compete. So we will stick to this as our main theme for developing new games."[29] The culturalism implicit in Wang's statement is echoed in the company's marketing of these specifically themed games to overseas and diasporic Chinese audiences for whom such games might be culturally resonant. Current agendas include the targeting of overseas Chinese gamers in South East Asia, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore. As Wang puts it:

> In this huge market, we plan to target overseas Chinese or migrants that have experiences with and are fond of online PC games. As for non-Chinese gamers, we are still considering what games are appropriate to give to them. After all, most of our product lines contain cultural elements that may not be accepted by Western gamers.[30]

Therein lie the cross-cultural parameters in this transnational marketing scenario. The commercial success of Martial Arts MMORPGs has been mainly limited to intra-Asian games networks. "The market for kungfu games, which is the main style of Taiwanese games, is mainly limited to Asian consumers," concedes Lee Wen-pin, director of the Information Technology Industries Division at the Industrial Development Bureau.[31] In this sense, "Taiwan's concentration on martial-arts games has some drawbacks, but at least it

positions local companies to work with Western companies that want to develop martial-arts games for the Asian market."[32] At base is the irrefutable significance of this genre in the regional market, especially in Chinese-language territories.

Martial Arts MMORPG design has likewise become a central feature in the fledgling online games development industry in Mainland China. At the same time, however, the specific contextual factors that have occasioned this focus need to be acknowledged and appraised. The inclusion of online gaming initiatives in 2003 in the 863 High-Tech Programme, the national science and technology development project, recognises their importance for Mainland China's IT and telecommunications sectors. Furthermore, the Chinese government is reportedly investing US$242 million in the domestic industry with a view to developing over a hundred original online game titles.[33] Industry analysts note that "the move [to fast-track the local online games development sector] is also equally motivated by economic nationalism and seeks to redress the striking imbalance in the sector between domestic and imported gaming products, and in particular the dominance of Korean games and software."[34]

South Korean designed and distributed online games presently enjoy a virtual hegemony in East Asia. In 2002-3, for instance, over 70 per cent of the games in China's online games market were originally developed in South Korea.[35] In much the same fashion, South Korean games enjoyed a 65 per cent market share in Taiwan in 2002.[36] This market dominance, in turn, creates its own set of problems that impact on licensing issues, intellectual property, and profit margins for Chinese developers and games operators. As one report points out, "The predominance of Korean games means that Chinese online games operators are constantly faced with high intellectual property payments which can take away as much as 50 percent of online gaming revenue."[37]

Intra-Asian game networks do not currently operate on a level playing field. The present hegemony of South Korean MMORPGs raises the question of whether it constitutes a new type of media imperialism within the region. The situation in Mainland China provides a case in point: "The problem for Chinese developers with the Korean stranglehold on the sector is overcoming the inertia of the Chinese industry on the one-hand and trying to temper the momentum of the Korean industry on the other."[38] Ian MacInnes and Lily Hu underscore the weak bargaining position of Mainland Chinese online game operators who often have to bear considerable operating risks:

> since the Chinese game operators were so eager to obtain the licensing right of popular online games from abroad and operate them in the local market for quick profits, bargaining power rested almost entirely with Korean developers as they controlled the scarce resources—popular game titles—in the Chinese market. As a result, Chinese online game operators usually have to pay a large upfront licensing fee, which can be as high as $1-2 million U.S., plus a large portion, as high as 50%, of later operating profits…. The weak bargaining position of Chinese online game operators also has meant that bugs have marred the licensed games. The Chinese game operators are not given access to the source code. Troubleshooting problems with licensors abroad has been time-consuming and ineffective.[39]

Comparable scenarios have arisen in Taiwan. Lin Chieh-yu observes that "Taiwanese online game companies are still heavily dependent on the South Korean game development companies and this has become the main reason why the industry has not been growing well on its own."[40] For example, "Gamania Digital Entertainment Co Ltd… survived purely on its agent rights and has made the most revenue (nearly NT$3 billion) among all the local companies out of *Lineage* [an iconic South Korean Fantasy MMORPG], the most popular online game in Taiwan. However, the real profit Gamania makes is only around NT$10 million, due to high royalty fees."[41]

At issue here is the broader question of the degree to which "increasing intra-Asian cultural flows newly highlight structural asymmetry and uneven power relations in the

region."[42] China's introduction of preferential policies to foster the local online games

development industry in 2004 constitutes an overt expression of economic nationalism. It has

since become harder for foreign companies to obtain a licence for distributing foreign-made

online games in China.[43] As one government official unambiguously states, "At present, the

most popular online games are mainly from Korea and Japan…. We want our youth to

experience traditional Chinese culture and education when they're playing online games."[44]

This is also, in part, a calculated response to buffer the long-term socio-economic impact of

the current Korean Wave or Hallyu (namely, the present fad for South Korean mass media

and popular culture in China) that includes the local proliferation of South Korean online

games. Indeed, the Korea Culture and Content Agency reports that, in 2005, online games

accounted for 43.3 per cent of total entertainment and culture-related exports including

music, films, TV dramas, books and animation. [45]

In a related development, the issue of cultural trademarks in digital content production

has arisen within China's online games industry. The registering of Chinese classics such as

Journey to the West, *The Water Margin*, and *Annals of the Three Kingdoms* by foreign

electronic gaming companies has become a growing concern. Zhang Rui reports that

> Japanese companies along with others from South Korea, Europe and the US are all
> eyeing Chinese classics which they see as ideal for the development of computer games.
> It seems Chinese martial arts novels, sweeping fairytales, swordsman legends and
> historic lover stories are of particular interest.[46]

The current trademark registration process for digital games offers considerable latitude. For

instance, Japanese company KOEI listed a number of trademarks relating to the *Annals of the*

Three Kingdoms in 2002, including the proprietorial use of associated game titles such as

Romance of the Three Kingdoms and *Shin Sangoku Musou* and even the name of a fictional

character "Koumei."[47] The Honghui International Intellectual Property Firm is advocating a

review of current policies, and its Chief Executive Officer Liao Junming proffers an explicit agenda: "The protection of the intellectual properties of these Chinese classics relates to our traditional culture and the education of our children."[48] Thus, if anything, an imbricated sense of economic and cultural nationalism (not to mention paternalism as well) sustains topical developments associated with the Chinese games industry.

The commercial stakes are very high in this rapidly growing market. In fact, online game sales revenue in Mainland China grossed 3.77 billion yuan (US$468 million) in 2005, 52.6 per cent higher than the previous year.[49] Local economies have much to lose in the current context. In this respect, the privileging of *wuxia* in local games production arises from, and serves as a calculated response to, distinct material conditions. Its current circulation is premised on highly specific terms. As Wang Chin-po succinctly puts it, "Chinese online game makers have their own advantage against foreigners…. Our products have cultural proximity with customers."[50] Such a proclamation might, in turn, prompt one to ask: what, indeed, are the performative politics of cultural proximity in the East Asian context; and how is this linked to the use of *wuxia* fictions in Martial Arts MMORPGs?

Performing Chineseness in Wuxia Digital Games

Marketable signs of culturally proximate traditions (imagined or otherwise) are becoming commonplace in East Asian MMORPG design. "The fact that most Korean role-playing games are based on historical adventures, fantasy and martial arts could also explain the Chinese consumers' quick acceptance of Korean games," comments Lee Soo-jin from the Korea Game Development and Promotion Institute.[51] *1000 Years* (2001), for instance, is expressly marketed as an "Asian Martial Arts MMORPG" by its South Korean developer Actoz Soft. The promotional blurb for this game, which is simultaneously distributed in South Korea, Taiwan and China, reads as follows:

> Set your clock back to 100 decades ago, when the most notable historic changes occurred in the Far East. Masters of Martial Arts spread out rapidly among the three newly born dynasties of Korea, Japan and China. In this era when Kingdoms fell and new dynasties were born, players start their own journey to become a Master and rewrite the history of eastern Martial Arts.[52]

Such visions of a shared East Asian martial arts history (however questionable) are suggestive of the manifest desire to commodify and market a sense of shared cultural lineage and regional identification. As Chua Beng Huat notes, "the construction of a pan East Asian identity is a conscious ideological project for the producers of East Asian cultural products, based on the commercial desire of capturing a larger audience and market."[53] *1000 Years* consistently ranked among the Top Five most popular online games in China between 2001 and 2003.[54] The game is indexical of the current cultivation of Asian-specific transnational cultural networks in East Asian MMORPGs.

At any rate, this is a limited success story. I have already established a critique of the imbalanced power relations, market forces, and capital flows in regional game networks. Specific forms of Chinese economic nationalism have emerged in response to the hegemony of South Korean online games in the region. The explicit cultivation of culturally specific digital content, compounded with the conscientious invocation of cultural proximity, may altogether be regarded as essentialist and self-Orientalising. How might this problematic be negotiated? The role played by *wuxia* in modulating performative representations of contemporary Chineseness provides some crucial insights.

The dominant form of Martial Arts MMORPGs is the *wuxia*-styled persistent world online game. According to one report, *wuxia*-themed games constitute one third of the online games market in China today.[55] As Jung Ryul Kim notes: "The emerging strength of Chinese *Wuxia*-style (martial adventure or chivalry) online games demonstrates that Chinese gamers are hoping to see their own traditional values and specific historical artifacts in the new

cyber-realities."[56] A keen sense of cultural pre-determination is reflected in much official industry and bureaucratic rhetoric on current games production agendas. Kingsoft, the premier local games company, launched Mainland China's first online game *JX Online* in 2003. The game—also variously translated from Chinese as either *Legend of Knights Online* or *Swordsman's Destiny*—was explicitly derived from *wuxia* thematic sources. According to the Xinhua News Agency, "the real success of *Legend of Knights Online* was due to its story line based on popular Chinese martial arts and Chinese-style love affairs. Nurtured in a 5,000-year history, Chinese players are more fascinated by the 'Xia' or Chinese 'knights' than 'monsters and soldiers' often seen in overseas games."[57] Furthermore, Kingsoft plans to promote the game overseas when the time is right. Its Chief Executive Officer Lei Jun declares, "The Oscar winner *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a worldwide hit, and we believe our game with a similar story will also capture players worldwide."[58] Hence, in addition to catering to local palates, *wuxia* games are simultaneously intended to act as a marketable commodity for transnational consumption, and to capitalise on new audiences whose tastes for—and "product awareness" of—the generic *wuxia* "brand" have been cultivated by internationally successful films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). *Wuxia* therefore has strategic utility in performing Chineseness within international markets.

Given that there is a manifest sense of cultural pre-determination at work in these production and promotion scenarios, exactly what kind of "tradition" is being engaged here? John R. Eperjesi contends that "[a]s economic reforms in China continue to repress the revolutionary dreams of Mao and nurture the growth of middle-class Chinese public spheres, we can expect to see an increased circulation of politically vacant signifiers of 'traditional culture' that aim to foster smooth cultural and economic relations."[59] The apparent ideological premises in Eperjesi's proposition notwithstanding, his point about the

commoditised circulation and function of "traditional culture" warrants further explication. Indeed, as Liu Shifa, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Culture asserts, "[*Legend of Knights Online*] proves the charm of homemade online games, which have begun to serve as a catalyst for the rebirth of the whole information industry."[60] So, on one level, *Legend of Knights Online* may be regarded as "a hybrid that engages with the tradition of the wuxia genre and with the process of cultural production at a specific historical moment in shaping a cultural identity."[61] Yet, on another level, the game attests to the process whereby *wuxia* narratives are now proactively recuperated in China as a sign of indigeneity and fashioned into a marketable aesthetic.

These layered considerations are germane to any analysis of the significations of "traditional culture" in Asian-designed games, if only to contextualise potentially reductive essentialist and ontological truth-claims. Asian antiquity (imagined or otherwise) acts as a common reference point for in-game narratives, characters, and imagery in many East Asian MMORPGs. My discussion of *wuxia* digital games has endeavoured to map the constituencies and contingencies of this particular mode of cultural production.[62] These games stage a performative articulation of legible difference, especially in their capacity to act as visibly different and localised cultural products that may be distinguished from other global cultural products. Antiquity acts as a trope of authentication and relative cultural difference. In this regard, Martial Arts MMORPGs offer an alternative modern counterpoint to Euro-American swords-and-sorcery fantasy paradigms for persistent world games. In invoking this reading of an "alternative" Asian modernity, I echo Aihwa Ong's use of the term "to denote not so much the difference in content from Western ones as the new self-confident political re-envisioning of futures that challenge the fundamental assumption of inevitable Western domination."[63] At the same time, the Chinese reclamation of *wuxia* as a veritable indigenous bulwark against the Korean Wave is suggestive of the complex intra-

Asian dynamics that are also at play, effectively complicating any simplistic understanding of these issues purely in terms of East-West cultural binarisms.

Xudong Zhang defines the present turn, where historical cultural elements are being reflexively recuperated and strategically reclaimed in Mainland China, as symptomatic of a form of Chinese postmodernism. In his words:

> postmodernism in China, in its seemingly ahistorical affirmation of the new, maintains, not eliminates, a unique sense of time and history or, rather, a unique temporal and historical tension, so long as all these different layers of collective experiences and memories still persist in the 'status quo' of Chinese socialism. In other words, Chinese postmodernism… becomes a buffer against the more radical and universal claim of the absolute market as a negation of the historical experience of Chinese modernity. The fundamental irony of Chinese postmodernism lies in that, by bestowing the status quo with a cultural space, it becomes a way of living history and its contradictions, rather than consuming it out of existence.[64]

Zhang's argument is instructive in accounting for what may be regarded as the productive ambivalence generated by such a cultural positioning. In this respect, digital *wuxia* games stand for an ambivalent contemporaneous mode of living history and its contradictions. An attendant critical appreciation of the affective investments inherent in this positioning equally needs to be retained. Accordingly, as Rey Chow notes elsewhere, "[t]he identification with an ethnic or 'national' history, and the pain and pleasure that this involves, cannot be understood simply in terms of 'nativism.'"[65] I therefore borrow her words, by way of a conclusion, to stress that the forms of indexical Chineseness currently circulating within *wuxia* games networks are very much "part of the process of cross-cultural interpellation that is at work in the larger realm of modern history."[66]

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1. The essays in this issue collectively offer a case in point. Other examples of recent

international scholarship, particularly those that were generated in response to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, are referenced elsewhere in this essay.

2. As a sign of its topical currency in transnational popular culture, *wuxia* has also impacted on game design practices elsewhere. For example, *wuxia* is featured overtly in North American games such as *Jade Empire*, and rather more subtly in the popular online game *World of Warcraft*. Comparable Japanese cultural paradigms have exerted similar transnational influence. The recent proliferation of Japanese horror films and survival horror games, for instance, has informed the design of games such as *F.E.A.R.* Nevertheless, the specific modalities of cross-cultural borrowings, interculturalism, and cultural hybridism in these game-texts warrant further analysis in a separate discussion.

3. Dai Jinhua, "Imagined Nostalgia" in Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, eds., *Postmodernism and China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 206.

4. Ibid., 211.

5. Aihwa Ong, "Chinese Modernities: Narratives of Nation and of Capitalism" in Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 194.

6. Ibid., 194-195.

7. Ibid., 195.

8. Ibid.

9. Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, "Towards a Cultural Politics of Diaspora and Transnationalism" in Aihwa Ong and Donald M. Nonini, eds., *Ungrounded Empires*, 327.

10. John R. Eperjesi, "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Kung Fu Diplomacy and the Dream of Cultural China" (*Asian Studies Review* 28.1, March 2004), 30.

11. Ibid.

12. Alexandra Liu, "Flat Screens and Flying Fists: Martial Arts Gaming in Taiwan" (*Sinorama Magazine,* http://www.sinorama.com.tw/en/print_issue.php3?id=2001109010032e.txt& mag=past), 2001.

13. See Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission (Taiwan), "Computer Games" (http://edu.ocac.gov.tw/culture/chinese/cul_kungfu/e/4-3.htm), c. 1999.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Cited in Liu.

17. Ibid.

18. Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission.

19. Ibid.

20. Lin Chieh-yu, "Gamers Find Their Thrills Online" (*Taipei Times,* http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2002/01/27/121697), January 27 2002.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. For further discussion of the failed launch of *EverQuest* in China, see, for example, DFC Intelligence, "The Game Business Comes to China" (http://www.dfcint.com/game_article/aug05article.html), August 16 2005.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

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