Article

Japanese Console Games Popularization in China: Governance, Copycats, and Gamers

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the popularization of Japanese console games in China in the past two decades, which reveals the tripartite relationship of the nation-state, transnational cultural power, and local agents.[1] This study focuses on the formation and development of the console game industry in a non-Western context, where the society has undergone dramatic transformations and has been largely influenced by the globalization process. Encountering social anti-gaming discourse and cultural protectionism, the importation and distribution of Japanese console games did not get support from the state. However, it found its way to the audience and gained popularity through piracy, the black market, and the local agents' appropriation, becoming an integrated part of many Chinese early gamers' lives. This article draws upon the intersection of cultural globalization with game studies, calling for an investigation into the complexity of the game industry through its socio-historical, political, and cultural environment.

Keywords

console games, globalization, Japanese games, nation-state, piracy, active gamers

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Introduction

Video games, which have developed for over 50 years in the West and Japan, are imported media products for China. Console games were rapidly distributed across China in the late 1980s, when Japan dominated the popular console game world in both hardware and software innovation. During the late 1980s-1990s, Japanese game companies eagerly knocked at the door of China, however, they were facing at least three barriers. First, the Chinese government charged a high tariff on transnational trades: The tax rate of imported gaming devices was 130% and the preferential rate was 35%.[2] Second, piracy was rampant and the black market was prosperous, which impeded the development of a healthy and legal game market that protected the benefits of foreign game companies. Lastly, gaming culture has long suffered from social pressure and government regulation, where the public considered gaming as a moral deterioration of the youth. Traditional Chinese moral standards of restricting entertainment have been adopted as part of the ideological state apparatus, which hindered the recognition of console games.

Aside from these problems, Japanese console games did bring in a new kind of entertainment form to Chinese consumers. The foreign cultural products stimulated the console game industry, bridging the gap in the development of the game market between China and the rest of the developed world. At the same time, these games have occupied a high status in the hearts of gamers, particularly the generation that grew up in that historical period. Against all odds such as the government censorship, problematic piracy, and social discourse of anti-gaming, *how did Japanese console games become popular in China?* This study seeks to provide an answer.

A very relevant issue to this study is the discussion of globalization. As a multilayered concept, studies of globalization embrace a wide range of different perspectives and evidence looking into the global change in relation to, principally, three dimensions: culture, economics, and politics. This study tries to unfold the relationship among the transnational cultural flow (Japanese console games), the nation-state ideology (Chinese government orientation), and the Chinese market (practices by companies, studios, and gamers), as well as how they are negotiated in a particular sociocultural context. Scholars have argued that the globalization process does not just accelerate the Americanization of global mass culture (Schiller, 1969).[3] Through investigating how Japanese console games generated huge influence in China, this study epitomizes the importance of the transnational and intraregional flows within cultural–linguistic markets (Straubhaar, 2007). Further, this research gives a significant account of the active participation of Chinese game companies, studios, and gamers in the process of vernacularizing Japanese console games into their everyday life. Many recent game studies reconsider the role of active participants in coworking with the games through creative interpretation, appropriation, and negotiation (Behrrenshausen, 2012; Consalvo, 2009b).

In this case, the active agents in appropriating Japanese games can be seen as part of the rising force of grassroots cultural creativity. By studying how Japanese console games penetrated into the Chinese market, this article investigates the complexity of console games in China as a particular transnational culture phenomenon in its sociohistorical environment.

In order to develop the topic, this study mainly relied on documentary analysis. Archived sources included, but were not limited to, government documents, company reports, industrial interviews, news reports, research institution statistics, blog narratives, and video sources. In addition, I conducted in-depth interviews to supplement the analysis of archived data. Nine gamers, born in the 1980s, were randomly selected from my gaming acquaintances, and they were my childhood friends, classmates, or coworkers.[4] Although the number of interviewees was limited, the relevance and importance of their participation were unfolded through their narratives. This group of informants belonged to the post-1980 generation, and they were born between 1980 and 1989, when the Chinese one-child policy was deployed. Their life began right after China's economic and social thawing, so they were, to a great extent, influenced by and deeply intertwined with digital media and popular culture. Through their personal narratives, they articulated the active role of the audience in the formation and development of the Chinese console game industry.

In what follows, I outline the history of Japanese console games in China by situating it in the context where the government controlled the import of games due to moral, ideological, and politico-economic concerns. Next, several factors that facilitated console games popularization are delineated. Government management had a loophole that cultivated a huge market for smuggled consoles and piracy. Japanese console games with distinctive globalization strategy and geo-cultural appeals to Chinese gamers intertwined gamers' everyday gaming experiences. Domestic companies and gamers creatively appropriated the imported console games to nurture the emerging market and the generation of gamers. A conclusion is put forward after the investigation of these aspects. It indicates that the specific sociopolitical, economic, and cultural circumstances of China contribute to the complexity and vitality of console games development.

Console Games in China: History, Social Anxiety, and Government Regulation

The year of 1977 witnessed the birth of the Atari 2600 game console, which was triumphant in the burgeoning video game industry (AtariAge, 2014; Barton & Loguidice, 2008). However, during the video game crash from 1983 to 1985, Atari attenuated, and Japanese console games began to dominate the market (Ernkvist, 2008; Katz, 1985). In 1985, the Japanese company Nintendo launched Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in North America. As it is released in many other countries in the following years, the console had become very popular around the

world since that time (Scullion, 2013). Selling over 60 million units, NES "almost single-handedly revitalized the video game industry" (Nintendo, 2014). Globalization of Japanese video games has reshaped the world's game industry since the mid-1980s, as "Japanese game developers, publishers, and console manufacturers have gone from dominating output to, at minimum, assuming a central role in the industry's continuing development" (Consalvo, 2009a, p. 139).

China had not entered the console games world during the 1970s; it just declared the reform and opening-up policy at the very end of the 1970s (The Gazette of The 3rd Plenum, 1978). It engendered a dramatic social transformation and kicked off the modernizing period in China, when the massification of television ownership took place (Lull, 1991). The country was gradually exposed to transnational trades, which increased the possibility to import video games. In the late 1980s, Japanese game companies rushed to China, and they were tariffed tremendously high—a 130% rate for general duties, and the rate still exists. Moreover, a 17% rate of value-added tax for each imported game console was charged later (China-Customs, 2014). Thus, transnational companies were scared off the market. But consumers desired the new entertainment form, which resulted in the growth of pirated consoles as well as content. More than a dozen of domestic imitations appeared on the market, which soon led to the popularization of console games in the country. Rampant piracy also accompanied a boom in the black market, where Chinese consumers enjoyed smuggled consoles with more sophisticated designs. For foreign game publishers, content usually generated more profits than hardware did. Under this situation in early 1990s' China, foreign game companies failed in the business of legal consoles and copyrighted games simultaneously, which further discouraged them from investing in the Chinese market.

The problem was not only in knockoffs and smuggling. Transnational game companies also confronted the long-lasting social and moral tradition of restriction on playing games in the Chinese market (Golub & Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010). Media-oriented social discourse of resisting game playing, emphasizing the negative effects of games on people. Around the early years of the 21st century, it was common to see or hear expressions such as "digital heroin" and "contamination of spiritual civilization" in nationwide news reports and municipal propaganda, warning people of dangerous game indulgence (Xiong, Yu, & Li, 2000). Consistent with traditional morals of resisting excessive attention to entertainment (such as the proverb of *Wanwusangzhi*, implying indulgence in playthings will sap one's spirits), parents and teachers watched out for children who played video games a lot. My informants shared similar experiences of being supervised both at home and in school, mentioning that parents and teachers were anxious about the youth's indulgence in games and distraction from schoolwork. For example, Sheng Zhu talked about how he saved his pocket money to get a secondhand Gameboy Color without his parents' permission, "They will be angry if they know . . . . They all considered that playing games distracted you from studying. And it was somehow true—those who played a lot really performed poorly in schoolwork, and they seldom entered college."

Parents and educators' vigilance had resonated with the government's defensive reaction to the gaming culture. In June 2000, the State Council had passed a bill (No. 44 Notice) proposed by seven ministries, regarding special regulation on video games.[5] This bill covered requirements on net-bars (Internet cafés) safety, restriction on video arcades and computer gaming, forbidding certain game content, and so on. In a nutshell, the notice was to keep the underage away from dangerous venues and game content that were violent, erotic, politically subversive, and the like. Specifically, several parts were assumed to relate to the prohibition on console games:

> As of the day this notice is released, the manufacturing and selling of any digital gaming devices, plus their parts and accessories, to domestic areas is to be stopped immediately. No companies or individuals can partake in the manufacturing and selling of digital gaming devices and their parts and accessories headed to domestic areas . . . . With the exception of processing trade, the import of digital gaming devices and their parts and accessories through other forms of trade is strictly limited. (State Council, 2000)

What should be noticed is the term "strictly limited," meaning that there was still space for negotiation; the industry intentionally used this ambiguity. Indeed, Sony and Nintendo tried alternative ways to go into the market. Sony had a low-key launch of its PlayStation2 (PS2) in China back in 2004 (Jou, 2013), and Nintendo cooperated with a Chinese company to release iQue game consoles (including Nintendo 64, Gameboy Advance, DS, and 3DS) since 2002.[6] Nevertheless, both of them struggled to survive, mostly due to the strict censorship of the games and the prevalence of pirates.

That the nation-state actively controlled the transnational cultural and technological flows was not a new phenomenon. Historically, South Korea, China, and Taiwan all have imposed prohibitions on the importation of Japanese cultural products (Befu, 2003; Ching, 1994). The state's restriction of console games facilitated the political, cultural, and economic protectionism against global capital, such as the Japanese transnational game companies exemplified in this case.[7] It would be necessary to look into the intricate elements behind the censorship of foreign cultural products, which largely contributed to piracy and the black market of console games in China.

State Oriented? Piracy and the Black Market

Historically, piracy of games was not just confined to China but was a worldwide phenomenon (Houghton, 2010). In various countries, such as Brazil, India, and South Africa, many companies cloned the technologies of flagship game publishers like Atari and Sega and distributed illegal video games to fulfill the desire of local markets, which probably could not afford the high price of legitimacy

(ManWhoRuns, 2011; The NES in Brazil, n.d.). In addition, the emergence of the Internet and file sharing technologies has allowed for illegal downloads, expanding the availability and accessibility of pirated games (Gaar, 2012; Kalning, 2007). What is distinctive here is that the popularity of Japanese console games in China is closely related to the state's politics, vastly differing from the Euro-American approach, which traditionally emphasized the free market and less institutional barriers, except for more vigilant protection of copyrights. It was because the state tended to claim its independence on technologies, economics, and cultures that the Chinese console game industry grew and prospered out of piracy and the black market.

Asian countries like China, Japan, and South Korea are keen to develop state-initiated strategies and cultural policies that aim at seeking technological independence as well as economic and cultural autonomy (Felker, 2009; Kim, 1994; Masuyama, Vandenbrink, & Chia, 2001). Ernkvist and Ström (2008) have pointed out that the Chinese government exerted an influence on the online games industry by issuing state policies with three main concerns: information control, techno-nationalism, and social fears/pragmatic nationalism. Jiang (2013) also elucidated that, in the game industry, the Chinese government not only took techno-nationalism as a rhetoric or an ideology but also integrated it into "a cultural policy to drive, guide and direct the national creative industries of its own and a guideline for foreign investors of technology to steer in China's cultural market" (p. 13).[8] In the console game market, this ethos of national development and industry formation materialized in the early restriction on console games importation and, later, the console ban, which eventually screened out all the legitimate venues for Japanese console games to enter China.

Under these circumstances, the business of pirating foreign console games emerged and was growing quickly during the 1990s. For instance, Xiaobawang, founded in 1987, was one of the most successful domestic companies that made many cloned versions of Nintendo's consoles. Those consoles stood out for the quality, price, and, especially, the marketing strategy during the 1990s (ChinaMemory-Channel, 2013). Up to now, there are still some imitations in circulation. For example, there was a "Vii" game console, very similar to Nintendo's Wii, and its second generation had the same appearance as that of Sony's PlayStation3 (PS3; Patel, 2007; TweeterMan287, 2008). As technologies advanced to protect game companies' copyrights, the cost of imitation increased. More and more Chinese gamers inclined to get the originals: the smuggled flagship consoles in the black market, such as the PS2, Wii, and Xbox 360. Those consoles were mostly modified, hacked, or jailbroken to accommodate a wide range of pirated games. My informants' experiences provided evidence that getting a console from the black market was a common practice for gamers. Xingzhi Li said, "Everybody got it in this way, and we appreciated it."

According to the data collected by the market research agency Niko Partners, at least 1.2 million units of consoles were sold illegally in China from

2002 to 2009. Upon the launch of Nintendo's Wii and Microsoft's Xbox 360, roughly 500,000 and 450,000 units were sold to China, respectively (Hanson, 2014). Back in the 1990s, the runaway success of piracy was widespread: Small tech companies and game studios produced various Chinese versions of Japanese games. For example, during 1993–1996, Waixing had released its pirated titles like *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, *Dragon Ball*, and many others quite openly.

The government had a low profile in combating the piracy of console games during the 1990s. There was a provision of the Electronic Publications Regulation (hereafter Regulation), issued in 1997, that was applicable to the console game market. The Regulation specified that domestic companies were allowed to do business in electronic publishing, copying, importing, and distributing. However, they would be punished if they provided forbidden content as described in Clause No. 6 and 7: violating the basic principles of the constitution; jeopardizing the nation-state's unity, safety, and sovereignty by promoting violence, eroticism, and superstition; or deteriorating adolescents' morality as well as physical and psychological health. The censorship of electronic publications, including console games, predominately emphasized the state's interests in social unity as a political and ideological agenda. Only in Clause No. 74 and 76 did the Regulation make reference to punish companies that infringed upon the copyright laws by smuggling and piracy. However, there was barely documented legal enforcement of the policy on combating the illegal market in console games.

As China actively engaged in global issues with other countries after joining the World Trade Organization in 2002, the country felt a growing pressure to tackle piracy, since many transnational corporations urged the Chinese government to improve the investment environment. The government did make efforts, which were reflected in some statistics. According to Business Software Alliance's (2014) data, the Personal Computer (PC) software piracy rate in China has declined every year, from 92% in 2003 to 74% in 2013, which, though, was still higher than the global average rate of 43% in the same year. Domestically, the hi-tech consulting company ChinaLabs began to document the rate of game piracy in China since 2005. Its annual report showed that the rate also dropped each year, from 68% in 2005 to 28% in 2012 (ChinaLabs, 2013).

Nevertheless, the absence of legitimate venues for console games, while leading to PC games' domination and a growing market share of mobile and browser games, means that the black market continues to prosper. With the fast development of China's information and communications technology (ICT) and e-commerce, illegal console game business, originally conducted underground, eventually found its way to officially recognized distribution venues through online shopping websites like Taobao.com. Interestingly, despite the ban, it seems that nobody actually cares about the illegal appearance of Japanese console games in China; even the mass media talked about the public desire for Japanese consumer technologies and audiovisual products (Li, 2014).

The nation-state has had a complicated relationship with the console game market. On one hand, it sought political and economic independence in transnational trades by utilizing strict import quotas and even prohibition of certain foreign cultural products. On the other hand, it took a laissez-faire attitude toward the illegal console market. Transnational console games penetrated the domestic area to cultivate the unfledged game market and satisfy the desire of its potential consumers. This hypocritical, yet pragmatic, approach skillfully restrained the social order, allowing individuals to play games as they wished, as long as they did no harm to the centralized authority (Doctoroff, 2012). Therefore, the popularization of Japanese console games in China underwent a subtle political agenda that led to a lucrative market.

Japaneseness in Games: Proximity and Nonnationality

The Chinese government had created a predicament for Japanese game companies, when the ban was not actually a ban. The underground market made numerous console games available to Chinese gamers; this availability, in turn, prompted the gamers into an appreciation of the transnational cultural products, foremost being the Japanese console games.

Japanese popular culture has skyrocketed in the global marketplace in the past decades: manga, anime, sushi, karaoke, and TV dramas have created and fostered a craze from East to West (Allen & Sakamoto, 2006; Iwabuchi, 1998, 2004; Ng, 2001). The Japanese cultural presence has been significant and unprecedented, with a global contribution in both soft and hard technologies. As is the case here, Japanese companies strategically aimed to appeal to people in other countries or regions who find support for local demands from transnational cultural exchanges. This process was especially at work when Japan provided games with themes culturally relevant to a Chinese audience. The popularity of *Sangokushi* (also called *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) was an example of Japanese console games with salient cultural appeal catering to the Chinese audience.

Sangokushi was a game series published by a Japanese game company Koei Co., Ltd. It was based on the transformation and adaptation of Chinese histories, novels, and folktales about three historical kingdoms—Wei, Shu, and Wu—in the turbulent years toward the end of the Han dynasty. Chinese and Japanese people were quite familiar with this storyline as it was widespread and reproduced in novels, TV series, comics, and many other types of media. Koei did not target the Chinese market at the very beginning—*Sangokushi* games were only released in Japan and North America, and sometimes Europe, until Taiwanese companies agented the series in the mid- to late 2000s. But the game series was very popular among Chinese gamers, which was evident in its wide distribution through piracy, smuggling, and, later, online file sharing, with avid fans doing the translations. One of the informants, Ah-K, expressed his and his friends' enthusiasm and admiration of the games, saying,

"When I first heard about that [*sic*] it was designed by Japanese, hardly could I be at ease. You see, it is our story, our Sanguo in the history. But you have to admit—they made it better than most of the domestically produced Sanguo games."

As a game series, *Sangokushi*, which also enjoyed great popularity in China, incorporated historical settings and characters, while creatively changing the context, images, and judgments to vitalize the games in Japan (Ng, 2013). The appeal of the games in the Chinese market can partly be explained by the theory of cultural proximity, which elaborates that the audience prefers media and cultural products that reflect their lives nationally and regionally. The sense of cultural relevance or proximity is affected by geographical closeness and cultural similarities such as history, language, ethnicity, religion, and social codes (Straubhaar, 1991). It can also partly explain why Japanese idol dramas, Korean Wave, Indian soap operas, and Latin American telenovelas attract a large audience in their cultural–linguistic and/or geo-cultural markets (Kaur, 2002; Kim & Wang, 2012; Lee & Ho, 2002; Sinclair, 1996).

In addition, the reason why China received Japanese games well was not simply due to the shortened physical distance and presupposed salient cultural similarities, but because of Japan's cultural globalization strategy, especially in the realm of audiovisual products and consumer technologies. It has been argued that Japan was disproportionately lacking in cultural influence upon the world, where Japanese companies tended to efface Japaneseness and camouflage themselves as being local when they exported consumer technologies since the 1950s. Iwabuchi (2002) analyzed the strategy of producing consumer technologies, animation, and video games without an imprint of any nationality as *mukokuseki*, articulating how Japanese companies did not seek to sell products based on a Japanese way of life and usually erased or softened the bodily, racial, and ethnic images associated with the country of origin. An oft-quoted example was the Sony Walkman, which utilized a "global localization" strategy to emphasize that global companies should pay attention to local preferences when distributing standard commodities; thus, for the consumers, the use of a Walkman did not immediately conjure images of a Japanese way of life even when the consumers knew that it was made in Japan (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Morley & Robins, 1995).

Later in the 1990s, Japanese companies increased their share in the audiovisual world market as well as their cultural presence on the global scene through exporting cultural products, such as animated software, with mukokuseki. Meanwhile, Japanese animation and video games attained greater and greater popularity and were gradually recognized as something very "Japanese" and "cool" in Western and non-Western countries alike, as the global enthusiasm for Pokémon demonstrated (Allison, 2003). These seemingly contradictory discourses of nonnationality as a glocalization strategy and cool Japanese as an impression of Japanese cultural products actually reflected how the mukokuseki worked to circulate Japaneseness. As Befu (2003) argued, Japan creolized or

glocalized the West to package a set of middle-class lifestyles and ideologies and export them through popular culture. In a similar manner, Lu (2008) identified three cultural politics with anime's globalization: depoliticization, occidentalization, and self-orientalization, which explicated how anime was an integrated component of Japan's multicultural interactions with others. Japaneseness, in a sense, was multicultural and intercultural without privileging Japan. With acculturation and glocalization, Japanese games' exportation did not seem to threaten other cultures or attempt to conquer them through imposing attractive cultural ideologies, as some scholars feared Americanization would.[9] Therefore, the strategy of mukokuseki was exactly what made the invisible Japaneseness in video games distinctive as well as socially and culturally acceptable in other countries.

This was the situation in the Chinese console game market. Japanese console games were widely available in the Chinese market at a high degree of diversity. There were the cute-looking characters in *Super Mario Bros.*, the grand narration of *Final Fantasy*, the splendid historic events in *Sangokushi*, and the adventure of *The Legend of Zelda*. Most of the Japanese console games did not convey something distinguishably Japanese. My informants' experiences of playing Japanese games confirmed this assertion. For example, Sid Zhang said he seldom related Japanese console games with their nationality or cultural features such as ninjas, kimonos, or samurais. The growing popularity of Japanese console games in China was not "determined simply by the consumer's perception that something is 'made in Japan'" (Iwabuchi, 2002, p. 27). Even though the consumer knew that an animation or a video game was made in Japan, it was not especially relevant for them to enjoy those cultural products.

One of my informants, Suri Liu, said she loved Japanese games because they provided cute characters and delicate designs, while stating, "I do not want to play *World of Warcraft* because the characters are too ugly." It is one thing to observe that Chinese gamers appreciated Japanese console games for their cuteness, delicacy, large inventory, and inventiveness. However, it is quite another to say these games largely influenced these gamers' ideas of Japanese lifestyles or values in a tangible and realistic way. This had a resonance during the time from the opening-up policy in the late 1970s to the 1990s, when the government's censorship of foreign products in general constrained the ability of the Chinese audience to largely contact with transnational cultural flows.[10] The yearning for Japanese console games as cultural commodities and a gaming experience became an integrated part of early Chinese gamers' everyday lives. As many of my informants' experiences demonstrated, playing console games was an everyday activity with classmates, peers, and friends. They saved money for new consoles and game titles, shared carts among a group of friends, exchanged gaming information and experiences, and covered up for each other to play games outside the sights of parents and teachers, among other shared

activities. The gamers expressed a strong sense of togetherness with their friends. For instance, Xingzhi Li vividly described how he and his friends went to each other's homes in turn to spend days and nights playing games together during summer vacations. For the gamers, playing games meant being with friends, ordinary, but enjoyable, sharing, and happy—those were the emotional attachments to Japanese console games, as an embodiment of memories, friendship, and happiness in everyday life.

Chinese early gamers have incorporated Japanese console games into their everyday lives, articulating the significance and meaning of playing games through belongingness. Here, a particular value, idea, and way of life were attached to the gaming experience, later conflated with China's expanding exposure to various transcultural experiences as the country furthered its progress in globalization. Japanese console games evoked a sense of proximity that was not only due to the close geographical distance but was also embedded in Chinese early gamers' experiences that vernacularized gaming into everyday life. The nationality of Japanese console games was not the monolithic factor that triggered pleasure of playing games, rather, it was mukokuseki in those console games that facilitated the games' social and cultural acceptance as well as their popularity, allowing the audience to integrate, appropriate, and reinvest them with their own experiences within the social context.

Local Practice: Early Game Companies and the Generation of Gamers

Recent video game studies revisit the active audience thesis in media and cultural studies, producing fruitful player-centric investigations that highlight the importance of audience agency (Consalvo, 2009b; Taylor, 2006). Here in the case, local agents—both gamers and domestic game companies—all participated in, and engaged with, the console game market. Globalization of Japanese console games is understood in the local context as vernacularization, a discursive domestication of console games that points to both the linguistic aspect and the lived experience of cultural appropriation in everyday life (Appadurai, 1996). The active local agents not only played games but also created and produced new practices, economic capitals, experiences, meanings, and identities, as they appropriated the Japanese console games.

One of the prominent figures was Xiaobawang. It started its business based on imitations of Nintendo's consoles. Xiaobawang Learning Machine, launched in 1993, was an extremely popular console produced by this company. Instead of emphasizing the aspect of home entertainment, the company promoted the learning machine by highlighting the additional functions of learning the English alphabet and Wubi input.[11] It was indeed a very sophisticated and strategic move, contributing to Xiaobawang's triumph in game consoles. In order to mitigate the issue of anti-gaming, Xiaobawang strategically emphasized the function that facilitated work and study in its consoles, in accordance with the social morale. It gave both the parents

Figure 1. Xiaobawang learning machine. By courtesy of Sid X. Zhang.

and the children a reason to obtain a device. On one hand, vigilant parents and educators might consider playing games as a bonus for the students' hard work. On the other hand, the youth could play Jekyll and Hyde in getting the console. The informants stated that they and their peers would persuade their parents to get them devices for studying, yet most of them played games a lot more than they did schoolwork. Ken Song puts it, "Well, we study in front of our parents but play games behind them." The learning machine as an appropriated version of Japanese game consoles was situated in the social and cultural context, rather than merely copying game technologies. Its huge success could be seen in a total sales volume of 20 million units, from its production line debut to the shutdown just a few years later.[12] (Figure 1).

Despite efforts to camouflage game consoles as learning machines by Xiaobawang, other domestic merchants were innovative in selling game titles, roughly starting at the end of the 1980s. Many small software companies and game studios, like Yanshan Software Co. and Waixing Computer Science & Technology Ltd. in Fuzhou as well as Huoxing Electronic Ltd. in Xi'an, started to hack copyrighted games and release Chinese versions (the process is also called Chinesization).[13] They had released *Battle City*, the *Sangokushi* series, the *Contra* series, *Pokémon*, and the *Street Fighter* series, among others (Dagou, 2009; Shuijingshuai, 2013). They also made a famous attempt by packaging several Chinesized games into one cartridge as "N-in-One" multi-ROM carts (Dagou, 2009). Combining various game titles in one tape was not only technologically and economically adaptable for the company but also pragmatically favored by the early gamers. The N-in-One accommodated the gamers' desire for games and economic condition, when they would

like to try a chic thing or were already crazy about console games, yet needed financial support to get them. Young gamers might try to persuade the bill payers, like parents, grandparents, or family acquaintances, to buy them a cart. In this case, getting an N-in-One, rather than many single-game carts, was in line with everybody's interests: parents could only pay for one cartridge, and the gamers could enjoy many games. Moreover, the very act of language translation cleared the obstacle to understanding game content, providing more pleasure for gaming. Soon, N-in-One multicarts were so widespread that they almost ruled the market. During the 1990s, this experience was unprecedented.

As of Chinesization, hardware piracy and software hacking would have been the king of the console game market in the 1990s. However, with the pressure of copyright enforcement, and the transition from cartridge to CD as the game storage, plus the coming of the Internet age as well as the advent of file sharing online, many of those early companies and studios went bankrupt or changed their business. There was a shift on the core players in appropriating Japanese console games; one notable moment occurred when a young boy, Shi Keyu, had individually Chinesized the then-PS game *Parasite Eve* in 2001 (Dagou, 2009). This move had opened a new chapter for the individual gamer or fan groups (as Chinesization groups) to vernacularize Japanese console games. Now, the illegal translation and adaptation of Japanese game titles are no longer as popular as an entrepreneurial activity; on the contrary, the individual takes the lead. For example, the well-known Japanese game publisher Koei's *Sangokushi 12* was officially released on April 20, 2012, in Japan. The next day, one of the Chinese game portals, Youxia.com, had posted a free downloadable game with a Chinese language patch uploaded by a fan group for other fans to enjoy the long-anticipated game timely. There are hundreds of thousands of game Chinesization groups, and many game portals have forums for information exchange. The range and availability of video games have largely expanded due to the volunteering work. Fans engaged in new media take a participatory role in forming the game culture, which is a global phenomenon (Jenkins, 2006). A growing body of the active audience is the representative of the Chinese net generation who are keen to use digital media and skillful in navigating various information, technologies, and platforms in the hybridized cultural landscape.

The audience's deep involvement in cultural (re)production and distribution threw light on a generation of gamers who were prominent in the formation and development of the console game industry: the generation born in the 1980s (post-80s or post-1980 generation, or "80hou" in Chinese). The post-80s generation in China has drawn nationwide, if not worldwide, attention in recent years (Lee, 2013; Palmer, 2013). They were the first generation born with the one-child policy. They witnessed dramatic social changes happening around them. They enjoyed far better material conditions while being accused of having "spiritual confusion and a loss of identity" (Bai, 2013).[14] They were the first generation that experienced the expanding consumer culture in China. At the conjuncture of the immature console game market and the nation's modernization, this generation of young people

became the pioneers and ambassadors of Japanese console games. Of course, they confronted many accusations from family, school, and society. They also suffered from technical problems in both hardware and software when they played games, and their fun with games was constrained by economic capability. One of the informants, Ah-K, explained his frustration on those N-in-One carts when he played *Pokémon*. He stated that the game could not be saved during the battle, and the device sometimes automatically shut down while getting to the end. Chi also mentioned that game carts in big department stores were pricey, and he could not afford to have many. Therefore, he and his friends usually exchanged their carts to play games in order to reduce the cost.

The harsh situation did not prevent the spread of Japanese console games. On the contrary, the gamers' specific gaming experiences, intertwined with time and place, have become valuable memories and even the stimuli of career paths. One of the interviewees, Sheng Zhu, was my schoolmate in college. He majored in philosophy as it was the wish of his family. Upon his graduation, he boldly recommended himself to the Director of Human Resources of Shanda Games, one of the biggest and most profitable entertainment companies in China. The director appreciated him and recruited him to join a creative team. Sheng Zhu and I had many conversations about games in private. He mentioned how he was motivated by playing games all these years, and he had the ambition to establish his own game studio to create great games. The gaming experience of post-80s gamers may not impel everyone to devote their lives to the game industry. Nonetheless, it has been an imprint of a generation (FckMe, 2013; Saiken, 2014; Zhao, 2010).

Today, gamers no longer need to suffer from low-tech copied console games, and their practices are absorbed and commercialized by the evolving game industry. For example, the famous website TGbus.com provides almost everything a gamer wants and needs for a console. The company is stretching its business from a game portal and online shop to physical stores that offer consoles, games, tech information, and friendly services. Off-line stores usually facilitate the process of console game vernacularization. In many urban places, digital retailers are proliferating. They sell smuggled consoles as well as some officially published games and offer value-added services to help green hands install piles of downloaded games, teaching them to play games and jailbreak.

I once bought a Wii with Balance Board in 2011 through an online shopping site, Taobao.com. The retailer and gamer provided me a bundle package: A cracked version of a smuggled Wii, a value bundle of 500 gigabyte hard drive full of pirated games, and advice about maintenance of the console. The scene is peculiar. Despite the illegal status of console games, the market itself is saturated with numerous devices and game titles. Even after the console ban lifted regionally in 2013, many unlicensed retailers and know-how gamers still smuggle high-end consoles and keep hacking into newly released games, making them available and free for their fellow gamers. The development of the Chinese console game market was not a result of an imposed top-down policy at the very beginning.

With the facilitation of local companies and gamers, the market leaped at the opportunity of economic reform and social transformation as well as globalization to prosper.

In this sense, the console game market can be seen as a grassroots-made industry, which has a resonance in the ''shanzhai'' culture that is popular in recent years. The term shanzhai is a Chinese neologism designating counterfeits. It usually refers to some Chinese business largely based on knockoffs. About 2005, some clusters of small companies in South China produced counterfeit and inexpensive smart phones—they broke down the top-end phones from well-recognized foreign companies and imitated, as well as modified, their technologies, appearances, and functions (Cui, 2012). Today, shanzhai also refers to a grassroots way of innovation that challenges the authority and the originality. Studies have revealed that the knockoffs are sometimes more user-friendly, appealing to local consumers as well as serving the creative economy (Keane & Zhao, 2013). From this point of view, the early practice of local game companies and the Chinesizing efforts made by Chinese console gamers didn't simply copy, plagiarize, and pirate. They also creatively interpreted and appropriated their own understandings of the social and cultural context into the ostensibly negative vernacularization process, propelling the development of the console game industry toward user-centricity.

Concluding Remarks

On December 21, 2013, the Chinese State Council issued a bill (No. 51 Decision) lifting the ban on the manufacturing and selling of console games.[15] It was a provisional end to the console ban that has been issued, but not completely executed, for over 13 years. In 2013, the wholesale value of the Chinese game market was about 13.48 billion U.S. dollars (83.17 billion RMB), and the number of Chinese gamers reached 490 million (GPC, IDC, & CNG, 2014). Yet, this data did not cover the statistics of the console game market. Media reporters and industry analysts have doubted the actual meaning of the lifting of the console ban (Carsten, 2014; Kain, 2013; Mitchell, 2014). Chinese gamers may not be passionate for the legitimate console games, since the devices can be easily purchased illegally, while the price for pirated content is much cheaper and the quality remains almost the same (e.g., a pirated title costs 50 cents instead of 15 dollars or even is free through online file sharing). Transnational companies such as Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft are still experiencing difficulties in China.

The console game market in China emerged in the period of economic liberation and social transformation, burgeoned in the years of local piracy, went underground with the paradoxical ban on console games, and kept prospering with the running torrents of PC, browser, and mobile games until today. The imported Japanese console games have not only cultivated a generation of gamers to appreciate, appropriate, and integrate gaming into their everyday lives, but they have also written down the preface of China's game industry.

This article mainly seeks to investigate the success of Japanese console games in China, elucidating the formation and development of the console game industry under the specific sociocultural and political environment. In an authoritarian country, concerning the moral depravation and corruption of playing games, as well as maintaining the principles of techno-nationalism in the reform and opening-up process, the Chinese central government has restricted and censored Japanese console games. This ostensibly ideological campaign did not veil the prosperity of console games; the market was booming through the underground economy and illegal exchange, where the government was sluggish in regulating piracy and smuggling in late 1980s to early 1990s. On one hand, piracy confirmed the tendency of recentralizing the production and distribution in the console game market, wherein local distributors and retailers benefited at the expense of transnational companies (O'Regan, 1991). On the other hand, through smuggling, the presence of Japanese games in China became conspicuous, codeveloped with other Japanese popular cultural flows symbolized by anime, manga, consumer technologies, and the like as China further opened its market to the world.

In an increasingly commercialized context, Japanese console games in China were not under the direct control of the nation-state. Consumerism is broadly spread and practiced in the society, along with the modernization and urbanization process of China (Lull, 1991). From an early gamer's perspective, Japanese console games were appealing, not only in their well combination of particularities and universities with cultural-friendly aroma but also in their presence in, and contribution to, a generation's gaming experience, memory, and affect in everyday life. As time went by, many early software companies and game studios have melted into the air. Xiaobawang has kept up with the trend of the times, turning to brand its home-designed handheld consoles, cellphones, and tablets (McFerran, 2014). The post-80s' gaming experience has become a nostalgia as this generation gradually enters into their late youth and midlife. New generations of gamers spring out, growing up with different imprints of gaming preferences, habits, experiences, and memories. Nonetheless, console games as a home entertainment, from a Western perspective, are more than a "home" culture in China. Large numbers of leisure bars and public playrooms have proliferated throughout the whole country. These public spaces provide a wide range of games, from consoles like Wii, PS, and Xbox 360 to popular tabletop games, such as *Sanguosha* (*Legends of the Three Kingdoms*), *Monopoly*, and *Uno*. Playing games is mostly a public activity and fun for everybody. This point remains quite stable as reading into the complexity of console games development in China upon its sociohistorical, cultural, political, and economic environment.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The current study explicates the word ''console games'' in terms of physical devices, game titles, and gaming cultures. Japanese game devices specifically refer to (1) home entertainment devices like Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), Wii, and PlayStation and (2) handheld consoles like Gameboy, PlayStation Portable (PSP), and Nintendo DS (NDS).
2. Information about tariff is retrieved from a review on the development of Sega games in a Chinese portal (see http://biz.163.com/06/0315/11/2C8JR5LK00021GLI.html, retrieved August 13, 2014).
3. There is a pessimistic perspective of globalization, seeing it as little more than Westernization or Americanization in politics, economy, and culture. In terms of cultural globalization, this perspective usually concerns about the widespread and domination of U.S. cultures such as Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Disney, and Hollywood films through transnational and multinational corporations, which export not only content but also formats, practice, cultural values, and lifestyles. Thus, some scholars argue that Americanization will lead to the U.S. cultural imperialism and homogenization of the rest of the world.
4. The author is a senior player who has indulged in the game world for over 15 years. The experience grants me the social networks of gamers, through which I can contact the informants and carry out the interviews. Nine interviewees came from different cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, Shenzhen, Changzhou, Changchun, Liuzhou, Baoding, and Dongguan. They were all college educated, benefiting from the reform of the education system after the reform and opening-up policy. The occupations of their parents varied; there were primary school teachers, civil servants, and presidents or directors of companies. Thus, their family income varied a lot, too, from roughly US$1,500 to US$20,000 per month. The interviews were conducted in face-to-face conversation, telephone, and through online instant communication facilities like QICQ. I asked questions mainly focused on their gaming history and invited them to talk about their experiences.
5. The seven ministries included the Ministry of Culture, the State Economic and Trade Commission, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Industry and IT, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, the General Administration of Customs, and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce.
6. Nintendo and iQue cooperated as a shareholding company, selling Nintendo console games through iQue in China. Later, iQue sold all its stocks to Nintendo and became a subsidiary to Nintendo (see http://www.ique.com/index.html, retrieved November 10, 2014).
7. Over the last decade, the public was stirred by the unsteady Sino-Japanese relationship, which led to the outbreak of anti-Japan discourse and boycotts of Japanese goods

periodically. A famous demonstration broke out in 2005 (see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/
hi/asia-pacific/4429809.stm, retrieved July 11, 2014). In 2012, China and Japan had
a more tense relation than ever before due to the dispute over the ownership of Diaoyu
Island.

8. Globalization scholarship has discussed techno-nationalism as a possible impact of glo-
balization on nation-states, especially in Asia. This sense of nationalism, while addres-
sing economic concerns, drives the research, development, and application of
technologies as well as relevant industries such as broadcasting and telecommunication.

9. Associated with theories of cultural imperialism, scholars have argued that the U.S.
strategically disseminated an American model of modern and democratic society to
win the ideological combat over the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This men-
tality confers the United States, a global hegemony after the Cold War, through
major vehicles of mass media and consumer cultures to Americanize the rest of the
world.

10. Many people in China would consider that joining the World Trade Organization in 2001
was a turning point for China to further the reform and opening-up policy, when the
nation-state can actively participate in transnational trades and improve people's material
life.

11. Wubi input, also known as Wubizixing input method, is a Chinese character input method
to input traditional/simplified Chinese text into a computer.

12. These data were not released by the company itself. It is difficult to obtain officially
recorded data for that period due to the unsound auditing system back at that time. The
sales data were investigated and published by a game portal. It is worth mentioning that
this article was written after the lifting of the ban on console games. In doing a compar-
ison, the author(s) suggested that current foreign console makers should learn from the
success of Xiaobawang Learning Machine for its strategies to grab the Chinese market.
Many readers in the response section harshly criticized this suggestion (see http://www.
gamelook.com.cn/2014/01/142759, retrieved October 7, 2014).

13. Chinesization can refer to a wide range of Chinesizing processes in language, reli-
gion, ethnicity, and other similar practices in history, when China has expanded its
political, economic, and cultural power to different regions, especially in premodern
period (Imtiyaz, 2012). Here in the article, it roughly refers to the process of trans-
lating and appropriating popular culture in non-Chinese languages, such as English
video games, Japanese animation, Korean TV dramas, and Thai soap operas, into the
Chinese language, particular the Mandarin Chinese. The process would involve tech-
nological skills, language proficiency, and more or less understanding of different
cultures in terms of how to make the transcultural work acceptable in the domestic
sphere. Nowadays, it is frequently used among online fan groups who get non-
Chinese media products in various ways, then translate, appropriate, and share them
through the Internet (e.g., see http://www.minecraftforum.net/members/qianzha/
posts? page=3, retrieved February 7, 2015). It is a forum of the game *Minecraft*.
People in this post were discussing and exchanging ideas about Chinesizing
Minecraft.

14. On May 14, 2013, the state-run newspaper *People's Daily* published a report entitled "The post-80s generation is dispirited: Early decline cause for alarm" (originally titled "Don't be dispirited when young"). It argued that the post-80s generation were dispirited, even though they enjoyed better material conditions and experienced less misery. The article induced a backlash in the society, especially after it was re-tweeted through the popular microblog platform Sina Weibo. Many people argued against the standpoint of the previous article, calling for addressing deeper social conflicts along with the reform and opening-up policy and its aftermath. A widely cited opponent's response would be here: http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/05/viral-response-to-peoples-daily-sermon-you-caused-my-problems/ (retrieved November 2, 2014).

15. The practice in the decision is restricted to Shanghai. Whether other places in China will embrace the Shanghai experiment is unknown. And it is not clear what manufacturers will be allowed to make gaming devices (see http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2014/content_2567151.htm, retrieved November 23, 2014).

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