

Debating the “Chineseness” of a mobile game in online communities

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Abstract

After its global popularity and commercial success, Genshin Impact, a Chinese-developed, Japanese anime-style mobile game, provokes online discussions on whether such a game of cultural hybridity exemplifies “authentic Chineseness.” Based on online ethnography in the fan communities, this article investigates a two-year debate on whether GI should be considered a symbol of China’s “cultural export” to other countries. It reveals that players construct multiple meanings of authentic Chineseness, including GI’s integration of Chinese cultural elements, telling “the China story,” and its patriotism and “political correctness” in China. This article contributes to the project of de-westernizing cultural studies by revealing how the meanings of cultural authenticity are constructed in a Global South context. Moreover, players situate “Chineseness” in the power relations among China, Japan, and the West, and associate cultural appropriation in the increasing hybridization process with global soft power competition. It reveals that the construction of cultural authenticity as a relational concept is shaped by others defined in a contingent, contextual, and multilateral way, and that the construction process is conditioned by domestic and international power relations, thus contributing to the project of going beyond dichotomous thinking in cultural studies.

Keywords

authenticity, Chineseness, cultural export, cultural hybridity, Genshin Impact, globalization, mobile game, North-South dichotomy

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Introduction

“A smash hit from China,” claimed *The New York Times* (Dooley and Mozur, 2022), referring to Genshin Impact (GI), one of the most popular Chinese mobile games that “beat Japan at its own (video) game.” Over the past years, Chinese-developed mobile games have gained an increasing presence in the global market. Sensor Tower, an app analytic platform, estimated that, in 2021, the top 30 Chinese mobile games earned a total of 11.5 billion USD in the overseas market (Lu, 2022). GI alone has generated a revenue of over 3 billion USD within two years after its global launch in September 2020, 69.3% of it from the overseas market (Chapple, 2022). In Asia, Chinese game companies have exported their products as their Korean and Japanese counterparts since 2006, making China an increasingly important game provider in the global market (Chen, 2022; Jiang and Fung, 2019). Given its global popularity, *The New York Times* article claimed that GI’s success signified the rise of China’s “soft” power, challenging the dominance of the gaming industry by Japan and the United States.

However, despite recognizing GI’s global success, the article received unexpected backlash from Chinese fans because it portrayed GI as an imitation of Japanese video games. This backlash was among the ongoing debate in online fan communities of whether GI was an “authentic” Chinese game, or it was only a copycat of Japanese anime games. In July 2021, GI was selected as one of the “Chinese cultural export” projects by the Ministry of Commerce of China (2021). However, since the release of its trailer in 2019, GI has been accused of being a copycat of a Japanese game, *The Legend of Zelda - Breath of the Wild (BotW)*. Even its name, Genshin Impact, is a Romanized translation of Japanese, instead of Chinese pinyin. As a Chinese-made, Japanese anime-style, open-world role-play game catering to a global market, GI is a representative case of cultural hybridity, a cultural product that is simultaneously “global and Chinese” (She, 2022). Whether a game of cultural hybridity can export “authentic” Chinese culture has been continuously contested in its fan communities since 2020.

Based on two years’ online ethnography in GI’s fan communities, this article investigates the online discussions on the “authenticity” of GI’s “Chineseness.” Previous discussions of authenticity as an identity affixed by consumers have been shaped by dichotomies between the West and rest, the Global North and South, and the core and periphery (Abarca, 2004; Gaytán, 2008; Lu and Fine, 1995; Mao, 2021; Wang, 2015), and researchers are paying increasing attention to how local consumers in the South construct contextualized, alternative meanings of authenticity which transcend the in/authenticity and West/rest dichotomies (Vann, 2006; Wherry, 2006; Young, 2016). The intensified transnational cultural flows and the increasing cultural hybridization inbuilt into contemporary cultural products (Kraidy, 2002; Wang and Yeh, 2005) have made this task imperative. The debate on “authentic Chineseness” in contemporary China has also shown the socially constructed nature of cultural authenticity, and this construction process is embedded in certain power relations, particularly between the West and China (Chow, 1998; Guo, 2004). Following this line of research, this article asks how Chinese players perceive and debate the tension between GI’s cultural hybridity and its “Chineseness.” We reveal the multiple meanings of “authentic Chineseness” constructed by Chinese players and what kinds of power relations have shaped these discussions.

The article is structured as follows. It first reviews previous research on authenticity in and beyond the West/rest, North/South, and core/periphery dichotomies. It acknowledges that, as Chow and de Kloet (2014) argue, the epistemological approach of “China-as-Method” (or “Asia-as-Method,” Chen, 2010) enables cultural scholars to “de-westernize” knowledge production and go beyond the West/rest dichotomy. It then reviews how the notion of “Chineseness” is debated in

contemporary China and the domestic and international power relations that shape the debate. After explaining the research method and details about the research case, it shows that Chinese players construct multiple meanings of “authentic Chineseness” that GI represents, including its integration of Chinese cultural elements and natural landscapes, telling “the China story,” and its patriotism and “political correctness” in China. Moreover, they situate its “Chineseness” in the perception of Western consumers, and discuss how “Chineseness” and cultural appropriation could synchronize with China’s rising soft power in the relationships among China, Japan, and the West. The conclusion summarizes the findings and highlights the contributions of this article.

Authenticity in/beyond a dichotomous theorization

Scholars have established that authenticity, which literally means “genuine,” “real,” or “true to itself,” is not an inherent and objective quality of certain objects, cultures, or people but a social construction (Grayson and Martinec, 2004; Linnekin, 1991; Peterson, 2005; Taylor, 1992; Theodossopoulos, 2013). The socially constructed nature of authenticity is rooted in the anthropological notion of culture invention (Linnekin, 1991): if culture is socially and symbolically constructed/invented, it “effectively demonstrates the constructed nature of authenticity in national(ist) narratives” (Theodossopoulos, 2013, p. 338). The contingency of authenticity is because the culture of any social group is in continual flux (Lu and Fine, 1995). Therefore, in empirical research on authenticity, “authenticity can be seen as a process, used instrumentally, rather than a static quality, focusing on how authenticity is asserted, negotiated, performed, or rejected through social and political interaction” (Banks, 2013, p. 481).

In the globalized economy, “capitalist producers use regional identities and aspects of heritage to construct and market cultural productions they hope will be construed as ‘authentic’ in regional and global markets,” but given the constructed nature of authenticity, producing and marketing authenticity for capitalist circulation and consumption is a precarious process (Cavanaugh and Shankar, 2014, p. 52). Previous research has revealed that a dichotomous distinction between the West and the rest has characterized the social process of constructing ethnic/national authenticity for consumers (Abarca, 2004; Gaytán, 2008; Lu and Fine, 1995; Vann, 2006; Young, 2016). In the West, authentic goods are often conflated with exotic goods, catering to consumers looking for non-Western, “traditional” ethnic authenticity. The search for ethnic authenticity is tinted with colonist attitudes, particularly manifested by the appropriation of ethnic others’ cultural and personal knowledge (Abarca, 2004). For non-Western producers and service providers, the presentation of ethnic authenticity becomes the key to success in the competitive marketplace.

Yet, they often have to navigate the dilemma between “real authenticity” and “Westernization,” as Gaytán (2008, p. 332) notes, to be “ethnic, but not *too* ethnic, authentic, but not *too* authentic” (emphasis in original text). For example, Chinese restaurants in America strategically balance between “Chinese authenticity” and “Americanization” in their food preparation (Lu and Fine, 1995). Mexican restaurants in America provide a hybrid preparation and production of Mexican cuisine on the one hand and emphasize a right Spanish-speaking atmosphere with Mexican cultural elements to present their authenticity on the other (Gaytán, 2008).

When brands and products from Western countries are consumed in the Global South, the concept of authenticity carries socio-political weight as the Western, former-colonizing countries usually represent the standard of authenticity in the intellectual property rights system (Vann, 2006). Beyond the West/rest dichotomy, other researchers reveal that a similar power imbalance has shaped the social construction of authenticity in a core/peripheral dichotomy (e.g., Mao, 2021; Wang, 2015).

Meanwhile, researchers have increasingly paid attention to how local consumers in the South construct contextualized, alternative meanings of authenticity in their consumption practices, which transcend the in/authenticity and West/rest dichotomies while (re)negotiating with the effects of globalization on local culture(s) (Vann, 2006; Wherry, 2006; Young, 2016). For example, instead of “counterfeit” and “authentic” goods, Vietnamese shoppers distinguish between the “mimic” and “model.” The mimic goods are not necessarily unauthentic copies of model goods of international brands, but can be “real” if they are of good function and quality (Vann, 2006). How Ghanaian women redefine the meaning of imported Dutch wax prints in their social world demonstrates that local interpretations could decouple from the meanings assigned by Western producers and designers (Young, 2016). As Wherry (2006, p. 5) argues, in local societies of the South, the notion of authenticity “evolves and gains strength through a process of differentiation that largely relies on the social situations that the artisans, the sellers, and the buyers inhabit.”

In contrast with previous studies, GI is a cultural product produced in the South and consumed by global consumers (of particular importance, Western consumers), rendering the debate on GI’s Chineseness a unique case to study how the (reversed) West/China power relation shapes the construction of cultural authenticity in the local society. GI is also a game of cultural hybridity, further complicating the debates on its Chineseness. In the article, we will reveal the multiple meanings of “authentic Chineseness” in discursive online discussions and how these meanings are constructed beyond a dichotomous distinction between the West and China.

The search for locally constructed, multiple meanings of authenticity beyond the North-South dichotomy requires scholars to reflect on the hidden Eurocentrism in knowledge production in media and cultural studies, and the calling for “China-as-Method” serves as a suitable epistemological approach. The next part explains this epistemological approach.

“China-as-Method” and “de-westernizing” cultural studies

Calls for a “de-Westernization” project in media and cultural studies are derived from the concern that “universalistic claims inferred from geographically circumscribed empirical evidence promote Western ideals as general (hegemonic) sources and mechanism of knowledge” (Alacovska and Gill, 2019, p. 196). As part of this project, the approach of China-as-Method—or “Asia-as-Method” (Chen, 2010)—aims to “unsettle Eurocentrism in the domain of knowledge production, particularly in cultural studies” (Chow and de Kloet, 2014, p. 4). It encourages cultural scholars to “provincialize Europe,” recognizing that there exists multiple Asia as well as multiple West. However, recognizing the multiplicity of either Europe or Asia “runs the risk of ignoring the power structures that render some Asian (or European, or Western) voices more vocal than others” (Chow and de Kloet, 2014, p. 9).

This is particularly pertinent in this study in China, when the rise of China complicates the power relations where knowledge production is situated. On the one hand, China has been a victim of colonialism and imperialism in its modern history (Chen, 2010). After the reform and opening up, China suffered from a “cultural invasion” of foreign cultural products, colonial culture, and orientalized misrepresentation. Under the global intellectual property rights system, China has also been stigmatized for its “copycat products.”

On the other, China’s increasing political-economic and cultural power has made its voice more “vocal,” maybe more so among Asian and African countries. With the intensified transcultural exchanges between China and other Asian and African countries, it is imperative to be vigilant about China’s potential economic, political, and cultural dominance. The cultural industry in Hong Kong illustrates this complicated power relations in flux. With its history as a British colony and the

current political context, the juxtaposition of neoliberal market-driven platformization and state-driven techno-nationalism has rendered unique work experiences for television workers (Tse and Shum, 2023). By taking the approach of “China-as-Method,” we contextualize the authenticity debate on Chineseness in the complicated power relations among the West, China, and other Asian and African countries (in this case, Japan in particular). The research thus contributes to the project of de-westernizing the concept of authenticity by showing that multiple relations within China and among the West and Asian countries, rather than the West/rest division, have shaped the construction of Chineseness.

Contesting “Chineseness” in changing context

In contemporary China, defining what is culturally Chinese is a “dynamic, power-ridden and therefore unstable project” (Chow and De Kloet, 2011, p. 64). After the reform and opening up, one major task of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was building a modernized image of China’s national revival. The legitimacy crisis of the CCP in the late 1980s gave rise to cultural conservatism and anti-Western discourses, which shaped the official construction of “authentic Chineseness” in the 1990s (Yang and Lim, 2010; Zhong, 1996). After that, the authority promotes traditional Chinese culture, including Confucianism, folk arts, and customs, in patriotic education, as representations of “authentic” national culture with distinctive Chinese characteristics (Cheung, 2012). Cultural nationalists imagine these cultural elements as “national essence” to construct an essentialized notion of Chineseness irrelevant to Marxism or Westernism (Guo, 2004). In this context, the revival of traditional China becomes the pivot of popular nationalism for ethno-nationalists to express and practice their imagination of “authentic” Chinese, as manifested in the “Han clothing” movement (Carrico, 2017).

Another group of post-colonialists locate “Chineseness” with anti-Western and anti-imperialism discourses to resist “against an Orientalist Western Other” (Guo, 2004, p. 8). Complicit with the official campaign against “colonial culture,” they emphasize authenticity as a bulwark for national identity and cultural sovereignty against Western hegemony and cultural imperialism (Liu, 1996; Wang, 1993, 1994). They call for reclaiming an “authentic China” to reject the “orientalized” and distorted depictions created by the West (Guo, 2004).

Cultural products are increasingly hybridized under globalization, complicating the debate on “authentic Chineseness.” The hybridization process, that is, ubiquitous “imitation, borrowing, appropriation, extraction, mutual learning, and representation,” undermines an essentialist idea of authenticity (Wang and Yeh, 2005, p. 177). Against this background, authentic Chineseness is redefined by consumers as a contingent category rather than being pure, native, and essentialist. One prominent example is the *shanzhai* (low-cost knockoff) culture in China. *Shanzhai* means an imitation of the original, and its production is saturated with cultural hybridity. Wallis & Qiu (2012) find that the popular images of *shanzhai* revolve around “free-market fundamentalism,” “nationalism,” and “Chinese characteristics.” Chubb (2015) argues that people consume *shanzhai* as “ingenious Chineseness” despite the hybridity of the products.

The above discussion also implies that certain power relations have underwritten the construction of and debate on “Chineseness,” that is, the question of not only “what” but also “who” defines it (Chow and De Kloet, 2011). Domestically, the state plays a vital role in linking national identity to cultural goods (Fung, 2014; Gerth, 2012). In the domestic market, along with strict censorship of politically “incorrect” content, the government “softly promotes business initiatives of the online game companies that are in line with state interests” to strengthen the state hegemony by cultural capitalism (Ho and Fung, 2016, p. 118). Externally, a China-West dichotomy preoccupies the

imagination of Chineseness due to past victimization and present conflicts (Chow, 1998). With rapid economic growth, the CCP aims to increase China's global presence, including its soft power, by revitalizing the cultural industry and exporting cultural products (Li, 2016). The Chinese government has thus launched a series of policies to encourage Chinese culture to “go out” (走出去), aiming to promote a new, progressive, and diversified China image that has long been misrepresented by West-dominated media (Hu and Ji, 2012). Driven by the state, Chinese online games have become a means to market Chinese culture (Fung, 2016).

However, it remains challenging for censored cultural goods produced in China to cater to overseas consumers and generate decent profits (Fung, 2014). The global trend of cultural hybridization may have a complicated and unpredictable influence on the West-China power dynamics. On the one hand, the pervasiveness of hybridization risks lending legitimacy to the dominant hegemonic culture, especially that claimed by international capitals, when it appropriates and commercializes cultural elements from peripheral countries (Ahmad, 1995; Chow, 1998). On the other, producers and consumers previously in subaltern positions could strike back at Western domination by subversion and reappropriation of hegemonic discourses (Bhabha, 1994; Kraidy, 2002).

GI, a game simultaneously “global and Chinese,” exemplifies cultural hybridity, China's aspiration for a rising global presence, and the ambiguity of authenticity, rendering it a unique case to engage the authenticity debate embedded in complex power relations. In this case study, we ask the following questions: What are the multiple meanings of “authentic Chineseness” constructed in the online debate on GI's Chineseness? How do Chinese players make sense of the tension between GI's Chineseness and its culturally hybridized nature? What kinds of power relations have shaped these discussions?

Data and method

Data collection and analysis

This article is based on a two-year online ethnography of GI's online fan communities from September 2020 to July 2022. In online ethnography, the fluid and transient nature of online communities challenges the classical paradigm that ethnographers emerge themselves in a fixed location. Caliandro (2018, p. 570) thus suggests a new methodological approach that “follow the thing, the medium and natives.” This research selected the authenticity debate of GI's Chineseness as the topic (the “thing”) to follow. By tracing it across different platforms used by the “natives” (participants in the online debates), we observe how this topic was framed and contextualized in these online interactions.

The first author is a player of GI, and she has conducted participant observation in GI's online fan communities from 2020 to 2022. The data (Table 1) were collected on five major platforms where

Table 1. Data categories.

Bilibili	95 videos
Zhihu	16 questions with hundreds of answers in total; 11 articles
NGA	34 threads of discussions
Weibo	2 long posts; 229 short posts
Tieba	18 threads of discussions

gathered GI's online communities: Weibo, NGA, Zhihu, Tieba, and Bilibili. According to the first author's observation, public discussions on these platforms occurred mainly at several sites, including the homepages of GI's official accounts, thematic forums, and homepages of some most popular "producers" (active fans who are simultaneously producers and users of media content, Bruns, 2006). We also used keyword searches such as "cultural export" (文化输出), "cultural ceding" (文化让路), and "cultural baiting" (文化杀熟) on these sites for supplementary data. We selected these keywords from some iconic events that triggered heated discussions. All the data were from fully public content on the Internet.

The data analysis took an inductive approach. Our coding process was guided by the constant comparative method in the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1968). We first identified meaningful points from the corpus while constantly comparing the coding points. Then we merged and categorized them into different themes, which informed the structure of this article. Table 2 presents the outcome of our coding process.

The case

GI is developed by a Shanghai-based Chinese game company miHoYo. As a Japanese anime-style, open-world role-play game catering to a global market, GI is culturally hybridized by design. While cultural hybridity has made GI a success in the global market, it also fuels a debate on whether GI is an "authentic" Chinese game. This article examines a two-year-long online debate on whether GI should be considered a symbol of China's "cultural export" to the rest of the world.

Several incidents marked upsurges in online discussions on the subject. *Liyue*, the second country in GI released in early 2020, was modeled after China regarding the landscapes, architecture, and other cultural representations. Chinese players thus suggested that the game introduced Chinese culture to international players. In July 2020, a video on Bilibili listed the Chinese cultural elements in GI and appraised it as a successful "cultural export." It suggested that GI presented an "authentic China" unavailable in foreign-made games. The video received about 55,000 likes on the platform. In the following two years, three episodes in GI's development, namely, the releases of *Zhongli*, *Inazuma*, and *Yun-Jin*, triggered more celebrations of "cultural export" among its fans while inviting waves of doubts and criticism. A keyword search with "GI and Cultural export" (in Chinese) on Bilibili demonstrates these three waves (Figure 1).

In December 2020, the release of *Zhongli*, a male character representing the God of *Liyue*, triggered the first wave of debate. Fans took pride in the global popularity of a Chinese character, while critics emphasized his Western-style suit. Because of his weak fighting capacity in the game, critics mocked that, instead of cultural export, GI was "cultural baiting," indicating that GI only used Chinese cultural elements for marketing while misrepresenting China negatively (Figure 2).

The second wave was after the release of *Inazuma*, a Japan-inspired country, in July 2021. On Weibo, a user named "cultural ceding" discovered that many design elements in *Inazuma* were originally from China (Figure 3). S/he thus accused GI of "stealing" Chinese cultural elements to glamorize Japan's image. Some also suggested that *Inazuma* implied miHoYo's obsession with Japanese culture. The presence of Chinese cultural elements paradoxically became evidence of cultural inauthenticity.

The third, most heated online debate was after miHoYo released the trailer for a new character, *Yun-Jin* (Figure 4), in December 2021. *Yun-Jin* was designed as a traditional opera singer, and a famous Beijing opera actress dubbed her aria. GI also made a documentary

Table 2. The outcome of coding process

Topics	Themes	Main coding points	Examples in online discussions
Debating the authenticity of Chineseness	Mis/representation of Chineseness	Using Chinese elements in/ appropriately	The presence of Chinese knot, Chinese ancient poetry, Chinese clothes, and Chinese landscapes in the game; Reference of modern or ancient China elements
		Using foreign cultural elements	The anime-style using Japanese pronunciation rather than pinyin
	Telling Chinese stories/values	Reflecting reality about contemporary China	A story in GI shows Chinese family conflicts. A design shows socialist values
		Inherit traditional Chinese culture	An opera story in GI represents a Chinese story and Chinese spirit
		Using foreign elements to tell Chinese stories	How stories in Liyue show Chinese mindsets even though some characters look western
Official recognition	Authority recognition	Recognition of GI by government and professional game reviewers	
Situating cultural export in international relations	Perception of western consumers or players	Foreign audience perception	Translating English posts in YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter
		Introducing Chinese culture to foreign players	Some elements in GI reinforce/ break foreigners' stereotypes; presentation of Chinese image to foreigners; and GI makes foreigners interested in China
		China's image under western gaze	Discussion about presenting ancient or modern Chinese cultures to global consumers
	(Anti-)Cultural appropriation in hybridity	Anti-appropriation of Chinese culture	How Japanese games have appropriated Chinese cultural elements
		Anti-western cultural invasion	A Chinese game should not have too many Japanese elements
		Counter-appropriate cultural elements	Using other countries' cultural elements to tell Chinese stories
	Soft power in the global order	Political and economic reasons	Export the game for economic gains and positive political image
		Develop China's cultural/game industry	Develop a strong cultural industry in the anime culture
Cultural appropriation depends on national power		Cultural export is just international competition; Technology mastery is the foundation of cultural production	

explaining how Beijing opera inspired Yun-Jin's design. The high-quality integration of Chinese traditional culture into the character design put GI's fans ablaze. The state media, Xinhua Agency, praised the game in an article titled "Chinese-made game regale global gamers with cultural feast" (Zhao, 2022). In December 2021, GI won the "Best Mobile Game" at The

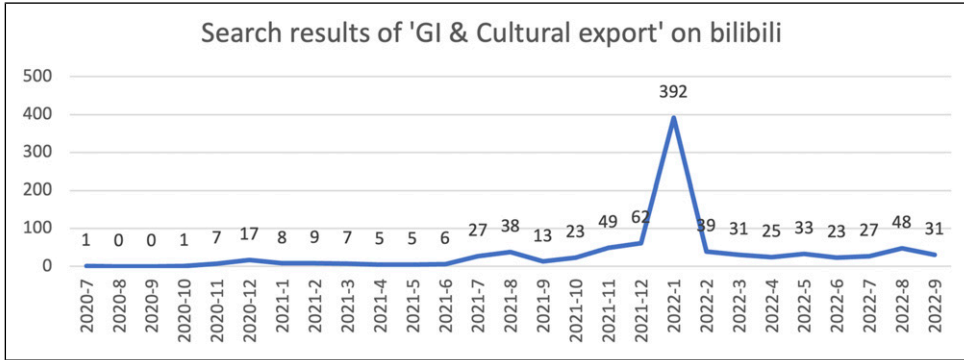


Figure 1. The search result of “cultural export and GI” on Bilibili.

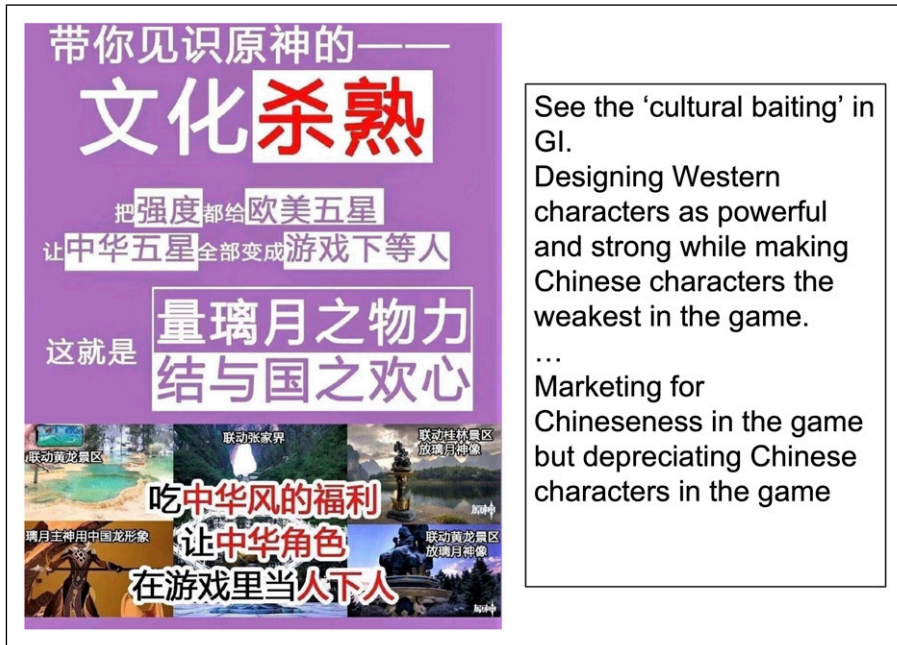


Figure 2. A screenshot of the original post about “cultural baiting.”

Game Awards, one of the most influential awards in the global game industry (IGN, 2021), and miHoYo was awarded “Top 10 ‘Going-out’ Outstanding Game Enterprises” in the 2021 China Game Industry Annual Conference (CGIGC, 2023). These official recognitions produced positive comments on GI’s role of “cultural export,” although criticism still lingered on platforms like Tieba. In the findings, we will demonstrate how Chinese players assert, negotiate, and reject the authenticity of GI’s representation of Chineseness in these debates.



Figure 3. A screenshot of the original post about “cultural ceding”.

Findings

The debate on the authenticity of Chineseness

Mis/representation of Chinese elements. The various cultural representations in GI were the primary focus of the authenticity discussion. To design the China-inspired country, Liyue, developers intentionally shied away from those cliché symbols like panda and kungfu. Instead, they drew on other iconic objects and landscapes in China (Cai, 2021). This design idea was widely acclaimed in online fan communities. In a video on Bilibili (also one of the earliest videos that labeled GI as cultural export) in July 2020, Knight mentioned that the Kongming Lanterns in Liyue reminded him of similar rituals in his hometown. Many fans have participated in similar activities of discovering “China” in GI from Liyue and Liyue-related content.

To prove that GI demonstrated an “authentic” China, some fans interpreted the design elements as representations of traditional Chinese culture. In these works, they first selected some “Chinese representations” in the game and then explained the associated “Chinese culture.” For example, Voidwing, a video uploader on Bilibili with 721,000 followers, produced a series of Liyue-related videos. He was famous for applying his history and literature knowledge to demonstrating the Chinese culture in GI. In his debut video about GI, he summarized all the Chinese elements in



Figure 4. The official poster of Yun-jin.

Zhongli's character design in great detail, including the traditional design of his suits, the historical references in his skills, and the "Chinese virtue" in the character's personality. This video received nearly 310,000 likes on Bilibili and remained one of the most-viewed videos about GI.

Using a similar strategy, critics questioned GI's Chineseness by listing the misrepresentations of Chinese cultures, such as overly sexualized female characters, orientalized costumes and hairstyles, and inaccurate depictions of Chinese history. They also showed particular hostility against Japanese elements in Liyue's design. The concern about a "cultural invasion" from Japan led to extensive scrutinization. Listing Japanese cultural features in the game was one common strategy to invalidate GI's Chineseness. Critics were so sensitive to representations that bore "Japanese" marks that it sometimes escalated into a "witch hunt." For example, Xiao, a Liyue character issued during the 2021 Chinese Spring Festival, caused controversy because of the similarity between his exorcism Nuo mask and the Japanese Hannya mask. Although developers had clarified that Xiao's design was

from traditional Chinese symbols, critics ignored the explanation and still considered it evidence of GI's Japaneseness. Another case was the architecture in Liyue. Some critics found the appearance of Karahafu, a curved gable in ancient Japanese architecture, in Liyue. For the critics, the representations of foreign cultures contaminated the purity and authenticity of Chinese culture.

Telling "the China story". While the representations implied ambiguous messages of GI's cultural authenticity, fans turned to "the China story" conveyed in the narratives to authenticate GI's Chineseness. "The China story" was a slogan borrowed from President Xi Jinping's talk in 2013 in which he urged to "create new concepts, new categories and new narratives which integrate Chinese and non-Chinese elements" to "tell the China story well and spread of the Chinese voice" (Xu and Hua, 2013), and the term had been widely used in the state propaganda (Lee, 2016). Borrowing this term, fans suggested that GI was an authentic Chinese game as long as it told "the China story" and disseminated "the Chinese spirit," regardless of its integration of Chinese or non-Chinese elements.

The Chinese spirit could include traditional Chinese virtues, collectivist values, and modern socialist ethics. For example, Zhongli, the God of Liyue, was described as an embodiment of the ideal emperor in Confucianism for his benevolence and righteousness shown in the story arc. On Zhihu, an answer with 1,272 likes interpreted Zhongli as an exemplar of an ideal type of father-like emperor (君父) in Confucianism with noble characteristics such as benevolence and righteousness (仁义) because of his lines, "I wish not for dominion, yet I cannot watch common folk suffer." In other words, although Zhongli's outfit design was a mix of Western and Chinese styles, his inner spirits rendered the authentic "Chineseness" with distinctive cultural specificity.

Another widely discussed "Chinese spirit" referred to officially promoted "core socialist values" (社会主义核心价值观). In a video with 268,000 likes, Coolplay suggested that the key theme of GI's story was fighting against the unjust world without reliance on Gods but on people themselves. He cited the lyrics in *the Internationale*, "no savior from on high delivers, no faith have we in prince or peer," to indicate the implicit communalist values. Fans also praised collectivist values such as altruistic sacrifice for national interest and unity of people manifested in the game stories. For example, on National Day in 2021, GI issued a story-arc video about the origin of an in-game festival. Many comments under the video interpreted it as a portrayal of Chinese history and a story to commemorate ancestors, revolutionary martyrs, and great men who contributed to our current prosperity, echoing the narrative in China's patriotic education.

Being a patriotic and "politically correct" company. Beyond the game content itself, the legitimacy of GI's producer, miHoYo, was also under scrutiny. The terms "cultural baiting" and "cultural ceding" were coined to question the political stance of miHoYo. Cultural baiting referred to the fact that "Chinese" characters in the game were generally "weaker" than their Western counterparts regarding fighting performance. For example, Zhongli, the Liyue (Chinese) archon, ranked at the bottom. It implied that miHoYo marketed the Chinese characters to its Chinese customers while secretly devaluing them. Cultural ceding referred to that miHoYo intentionally used Chinese cultural elements, including Han clothing, fireworks, and calligraphy, in the design of Inazuma (Japan), instead of Liyue (China), in the game. This implied that miHoYo was "ceding" Chinese cultural representations to Japan.

The two terms accused miHoYo of being unpatriotic, exploiting Chinese culture only for profit, and misrepresenting China while glorifying Japan. Linking the authenticity debate to political stance, critics suggested that GI was not an authentic Chinese game because of miHoYo's unpatriotic stance. This narrative was closely associated with the CCP's heavy online censorship of politically

incorrect cultural content. Some players even used common state rhetorics such as “lacking cultural confidence” and “hurting the feelings of Chinese players” to delegitimize miHoYo’s stance.

In response, fans emphasized GI’s role in the state policy of (Chinese cultural products) “going out.” The fact that GI was backed by the state further consolidated its political correctness. As noted, in July 2021, GI was listed as one of the key projects of National cultural export by the Ministry of Commerce. This news was circulated in fan communities as the official recognition of the authenticity of GI’s “Chineseness.”

Situating Chineseness in relation to other countries

For some fans, the Chineseness of GI was self-evident. As miHoYo was a Chinese company, and GI was made in China, it was clearly an “authentic” Chinese game. However, authenticity as a relational concept means that the cultural authenticity of one product is evaluated, questioned, and recognized by cultural others. Therefore, the authenticity debate of GI was also linked to whether it successfully “exported” Chinese culture to its global consumers.

Cultural export was first applied to describe the “cultural invasion” of foreign cultural products to China (Gong, 2003; Ren and Pan, 2018). In recent years, this term has been used more positively in academic and public domains, while China has transformed from a victim to a potential cultural power with China’s growing global impact and changing cultural diplomacy (Wang, 2004; Yang, 2017). In GI’s case, this increasing use of the term revealed how players situated “Chineseness” in relation to other countries and their aspiration for China’s increasing cultural power.

Chinese culture consumed by the West. On the face of it, GI’s global success has manifested a triumphant export of Chinese cultural products to overseas markets. In online communities, fans were keen to talk about how this game rivaled its foreign counterparts regarding revenue and popularity. In a comment on Zhihu that reviewed 1,585 likes, an anonymous user listed several numbers to show GI’s popularity, including the number of followers of the official account on YouTube (more than three million), the ranking in trending topics on Twitter (hottest game in the first half of 2021) and the number of participants in GI’s channel on Discord (730,000 at peak). The user compared them with the weaker numbers of *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*, two popular American-developed video games, to indicate the victory of a Chinese game in the Western market competition.

Fans emphasized that foreign players enjoyed the “Chinese [cultural] elements” in GI. Chinese players described GI’s popularity in Western countries, especially the English-speaking world, to prove that GI had introduced Chinese culture to its Western players. Some fans actively translated foreign players’ comments from overseas social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, and transported them back to domestic fan communities, such as Bilibili. Videos titled “foreigner’s reactions” edited the clips from foreign hosts’ live streams about GI to show their fascination with this game. In a Zhihu comment, Tang wrote that the Chinese elements were “trendy”: “For example, a YouTuber, Lyratic, had many videos about the *pinyin* pronunciation of Chinese words in GI and their cultural backgrounds. Some have been watched for hundreds of thousands, even millions of times.” According to most of these comments, GI had intrigued foreign players’ interest in Chinese culture and motivated them to learn about China.

However, whether these achievements signified the export of Chinese culture had been continually contested since 2020. In anti-fan communities like Tieba, we observed sarcastic comments suggesting that foreign players’ fascination with GI’s character designs was irrelevant to Chinese culture. For example, in a post that received hundreds of favorable reviews, Wang posted a

screenshot of a foreign player's comment on Yun-Jin. The comment appraised that the character design combined "basic theater fundamentals and phrases as well as Lolita fashion." In Wang's interpretation, the comment implied that the foreign player was only intrigued by Lolita fashion. Wang also posted other screenshots of hostile comments in English to demonstrate that many foreigners did not accept the "Chinese elements" in GI in good faith. Critics also circulated such remarks in English to show that foreigners were ignorant of the so-called "Chinese elements" and even hostile to China.

Regardless of their stances, both sides drew on foreigners' comments on Western social media platforms to support their arguments. It revealed Chinese players' anxiety over acceptance by foreigners, particularly Western consumers in developed countries. This attitude was rooted in the Western ascendancy in modern history, especially Western hegemony in popular culture.

On China's social media platforms, GI players were resentful that Western countries portrayed China as backward, undemocratic, and corrupt. It was a deeply ingrained idea that these stigmas caused China's non-recognition in the (Western) world (Guo, 2004). In a post with 8,361 likes, Bolin noted that Western media had denigrated China for decades. "For example, during the Covid pandemic, western media tries to deny China's success in defeating Covid, misleading their people to believe Chinese people are living in extreme misery." Against this background, the popularity of GI provided a positive representation of China, and many foreign players learned more about China after playing the Chinese game. Bolin summarized, "GI makes foreigners like China."

Cultural appropriation in globalized cultural hybridization. A skepticism toward GI's cultural export focused on its cultural hybridization, especially its Japanese anime style. It would be an oxymoron to say that a Japanized game exported Chinese culture to the rest of the world. However, many fans believed that a Chinese company should also be able to appropriate cultural elements from other countries to make it "Chinese," in this case, to represent Chinese culture with an anime game. A plethora of Chinese players pointed out the imbalanced power dynamics behind cultural appropriation in the globalization process. They were particularly aware that the West had benefited from appropriating Chinese culture in cultural productions. For example, in Hollywood movies such as *Kung Fu Panda* and *Mulan*, American companies appropriated Chinese cultural elements to export American culture and values.

In the online discussions, China's Asian neighbor Japan was depicted as a role model in reversing cultural appropriation. Because of the prosperity of its ACGN (animation, comic, game, and novel) industries, ACGN culture had become a representation of Japanese cultural export to the (Western) world. In this process, Japan was able to appropriate cultural elements from Western societies. For example, in a post with 15,930 likes, Baigui used the example of *Super Mario* to show how Japan had successfully appropriated the Italian name "Mario" and used it to brand Japanese culture:

Before the 1980s, when I said Mario, you would probably think of an ordinary Italian guy because it was a typical Italian male name... However, after the 1980s, when I say Mario, you would think of [the Japanese game] "Super Mario," even though there is not a single Japanese character in the word.

Yet, Chinese players expressed ambivalent feelings toward the success of Japan. In pre-modern history, China's hegemony dominated East Asia. In the history of the China-Japan relationship, Japan was a student of Chinese culture in the feudal era. However, the rise of Japan in modern history, especially its after-war development, reversed the power relationship. Consequently, Japan had changed from a destination of cultural export to a dominant player. The ACGN culture had

appropriated many Chinese cultural elements and made them “Japanese.” For example, many players mentioned that the well-renowned Japanese comic *Dragon Ball* was derived from the Chinese novel, *Journey to the West*. Even the protagonist’s name, *Wukong*, was copied from that in this novel.

Given its global success, many fans expected that GI would reverse China’s inferior position in cultural production and dissemination. The hybridity shows that GI had changed the cultural appropriation process, using “foreign elements” to tell “Chinese stories.” Regarding the anime culture, GI fans expected the relationship between China and Japan to be reversed. The anime style could also become “Chinese” if China’s domestic cultural industries appropriated it properly and successfully. In a post with 4,600 likes, Frederica concluded, “[in 100 years,] if the Japanese have abandoned the anime style and Chinese companies have developed it, it would become “Chinese style” because no one cares where it originated. Ordinary people only see where it becomes popular.”

Soft power in China/West confrontation. The discussion about cultural appropriation was deeply related to the power dynamics between China, Japan, and Western countries. A competitive paradigm of globalization shaped Chinese players’ understanding of cultural export, and they connected “cultural export” to the rise of China in globalization. In a Weibo post with 5,543 likes, Wang distinguished three aspects of “cultural export”: “the first is export of cultural products, the second is national branding, and the third is construction and export of [national] ideologies.” In his explanation, GI was only the export of a cultural product, while the real success in the globalized competition in the cultural realm relied on the latter two. S/he mentioned China’s negative national image in Western countries, especially given that its ideology was competing with Western values. Echoing this view, despite the worldwide reach of GI, fans cautioned that one single game was unable to carry the political heaviness of cultural export.

However, other fans enthusiastically believed that the success of GI indicated the rise of China’s soft power. First, as a “created-in-China” product, it represented the development of the Chinese game industry. In reply to Wang’s post, Beiwang commented, “The biggest contribution of GI is that it makes foreigners know China can produce good games.” Although other companies like Tencent had exported several popular games before GI, many fans found those games not original enough. They emphasized that, instead of co-production with foreign game companies, a Chinese company independently developed GI, and it received international recognition for its quality and originality, for example, winning influential global awards. As such, GI, as a model of Chinese creative cultural products, signified the rise of the Chinese game industry.

Second, fans underlined industrial and technological prowess as the foundation of soft power. Yashiren, an uploader with over one million followers on Bilibili, produced various analysis videos about GI’s technologies. In one video with 81,000 likes, s/he said,

The first stage of cultural export is to make others believe that we are advanced and civilized... How can we break prejudice [from Western societies]? Cultural export. But there are cultural barriers between different countries. How do we make others accept our culture then? Rely on our strong industrial and technological prowess to invade their entertainment and daily life.

In the video, Yashiren praised miHoYo for attracting numerous foreign players with its technological mastery and quality production. S/he implied that national hard power, namely, industrial and technological power, was the foundation for winning the cultural race (soft power). Another video with 271,000 likes even compared the cultural industry to the air force, claiming that GI made

a breach in enemies' defensive lines. In summary, fans authenticated GI's Chineseness by emphasizing its contribution to China's rising hegemonic cultural power in the global race.

Conclusion

Based on a two-year online ethnography, this article examines online discussions about whether GI is an "authentic Chinese" game and whether it could exemplify China's cultural export to overseas markets. It reveals that fan communities have locally constructed multiple meanings of authentic Chineseness. In particular, Chineseness manifests in Chinese cultural elements, China's traditional and socialist values, and official endorsement from the Chinese government. Chineseness is also defined as a relational concept, constructed in the perception of foreign consumers. In other words, fan communities go beyond an essentialist understanding of Chineseness given the increasing cultural hybridization of GI but instead, define Chineseness as constructed in the perception of cultural others. To contribute to the research that looks at how local consumers in the South construct contextualized, alternative meanings of cultural and ethnic authenticity (Vann, 2006; Wherry, 2006; Young, 2016), this article reveals these local meanings are also in flux, dynamically constructed, negotiated, and rejected in the ongoing communications in local (online) communities. It thus provincializes the concept of authenticity in the context of contemporary China.

The article shows that cultural authenticity is a power-ridden concept. Using the GI case, it elaborates on how the social construction of authentic Chineseness is shaped by domestic and global power relations. On China's social media platforms, players have actively drawn on state rhetorics and nationalist discourses to legitimize their claims on GI's in/authenticity. While the critics borrow narratives from the state-promoted patriotism to question the political "correctness" of GI and miHoYo, fans also use official discourses of China's soft power, "going out," and "the China story" to support their authenticity claims. This shows that the omnipresent state (censorship) power has simultaneously fueled and restricted the authenticity debate. Showing patriotism and alignment with national interest has become increasingly crucial for cultural producers to gain legitimacy in contemporary China on the one hand, and cultural producers face a consistent risk of losing legitimacy and being censored on the other.

The focus on "cultural export" in the authenticity debate also reveals how players situated Chineseness in China's relations with other countries in the changing power dynamics among China, Japan, and the West. In GI's case, the authenticity of Chineseness is primarily defined by the perception and recognition of non-Chinese, particularly those on Western social media platforms. Admittedly, the China-West confrontation still plays a vital role in shaping players' imagination of Chineseness, and China's image in the Western gaze preoccupies players' definitions of "cultural export."

However, transnational cultural flows between China and other Asian countries, Japan in particular, also become an important source of reference. On the one hand, Japan is perceived as a successful example that exports its culture to a global market and beats Western cultural hegemony, making it a role model to learn from. On the other, Japan is also considered a threat and colonizer that erodes Chinese cultural authenticity. The complicated relationship shapes players' ambivalent perception of the Japanese elements in GI.

Adopting the epistemological approach of China-as-Method, this case study of a Chinese-produced video game theorizes authenticity beyond dichotomous thinking such as that between North and South, West and China, and core and periphery. It showcases that the construction of cultural authenticity is shaped by others defined in a contingent, contextual, and multilateral way. This case study illustrates how inter-Asian referencing, as proposed in the approach of

China-/Asia-as-Method (Iwabuchi, 2014), contributes to developing the concept of authenticity from Asian experiences. Given the intensified cultural exchanges among Asian (and African) countries, we echo the call for using inter-Asian referencing as “a significant maneuver for making concepts and theories derived from Asian experiences translocally relevant and shared” (Iwabuchi, 2014, p. 44).

The state’s cultural policy of encouraging the indoctrination of national identity in cultural products and promoting Chinese culture in overseas markets serves as a vital background for GI’s global popularity. Given the increasingly powerful nationalism discourse in China’s cyberspace, future research should probe into how competing forces within nationalism, especially the ambivalent relations between state nationalism and popular nationalism, may affect the acceptance of top-down propaganda packaged in cultural products. We also suggest investigating how other Chinese games and cultural products on the global market balance the political interests of China and economic revenue in the global market. Future studies could also examine how overseas consumers perceive the Chineseness of GI and other Chinese cultural products.

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