Chinese Cultivation Games and the Cosmotechnics

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the historical context of Chinese cultivation games and examines their cosmotechnics through the case study of the independent game *Project Search* (With in/out Linhai 2022), designed by one of the co-authors, Jiadong Qiang. The paper aims to initiate a dialogue on the historical, cultural, and cosmotechnical dimensions of Chinese cultivation games through an analysis of the history of these games and an exploration of the concept of cosmotechnics.

Cultivation (*xiuxian* or *xiuzhen*) is a genre of Chinese fantasy influenced by Chinese mythology, Daoism, alchemy, and other traditional Chinese elements. In Chinese culture, Daoist cultivation is described as a process in which humans can gain supernatural powers and become immortal by practicing martial and mystical arts. Cultivation fantasy, as a genre, first got its popularity during the Republic of China period (1912-1949), whereas contemporary cultivation novels are mainly published online "under the influence of mass-market fantasy novels translated into Chinese from the West, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's (1892–1973) *The Lord of the Rings* series (1954–55) and J. K. Rowling's (1965-) *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007)." (Ni 2020b, 750). With the popularity of online cultivation novels since the 2000s, cultivation games have also become a prevalent genre in the Chinese mobile and online game market in recent years. For this paper, we will loosely define a cultivation game as a fantasy game genre that thematizes cultivation in which the player can become a cultivator and experience the process of immortality cultivation.

The history of cultivation games has to be traced back to the emergence of cultivation novels. As religious studies scholar Zhange Ni (2020a, 9) points out, the emergence of online cultivation fantasy has a clear religious and political origin. "Most of the *xiuzhen* writers were born in the 1970s and '80s, who spent their childhood and adolescence witnessing the phenomenal popularity of *qigong* [a set of cultivation techniques] and the resurgence of Chinese religions in general and Daoism in

particular." The government's ban on *qigong* (as well as other forms of 'superstition') has in a way facilitated the rise of cultivation fantasy: people turn to literary imagination to practice cultivation that is not allowed to exercise in public. However, this political aspect of cultivation fantasy has taken a different track. In an article published on the Chinese official newspaper People's Daily (*renmin ribao*), the English site of the biggest Chinese online literature website – Webnovel.com – has been praised for its efforts in "transplanting the pay-to-read mechanism, reader recommendation system and writer training system of Chinese online literature overseas." In this article, a special mention has been given to a serialized cultivation novel *Cultivation Online*, indicating the reappropriation of cultivation fantasy by the authority as a form of 'cultural confidence'. This cultural reappropriation is similar to cultivation games. This specific fantasy genre's religious and political origin can hardly be found in mainstream cultivation games as they have often been criticized as no more than a 'skin'; the core of those games is no different from Western RPG.

The concept of cultivation games can inspire alternative discussions beyond comparisons of Western and Eastern game genres. We use the Chinese independent cultivation game *Project Search* to expand upon this concept through the notion of cosmotechnics. *Project Search*, developed by *With in/out Linhai*, a cultural group supported by the local government and China Academy of Art, is an online multiplayer visual novel game based in Linhai , Taizhou, Zhejiang Province, China. Through site analysis (Figure 1), meetings with local Daoist cultivators, cultivation novel writing, 3D scans, and 3D object design, we created a cultivation gamespace in the context of Linhai that allows local people, tourists, students, and researchers to reconsider Daoist culture and traditional Chinese urban context within and beyond gaming communities.

Figure 1: A map of Linhai from Linhai Chronicles, inspirations for a cultivation game in Linhai.
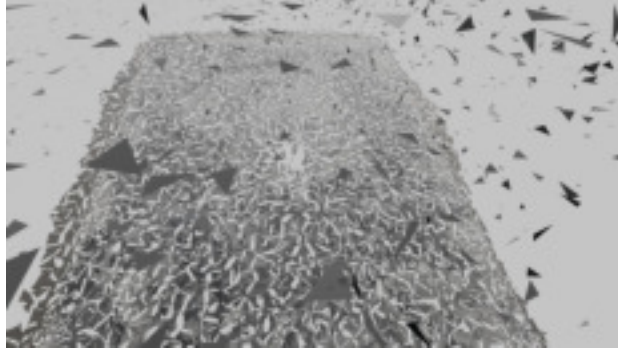
Figure 2: Non-normative gamespace, player's view, a screenshot of the game scene, Project Search, 2022.

Figure 3: Linhai old town 3D scan with drones in the air in the distance, player's view, a screenshot of the game scene, Project Search, 2022.

Figure 4: Cultivator's tearoom, player's view, a screenshot of the game scene, Project Search, 2022.
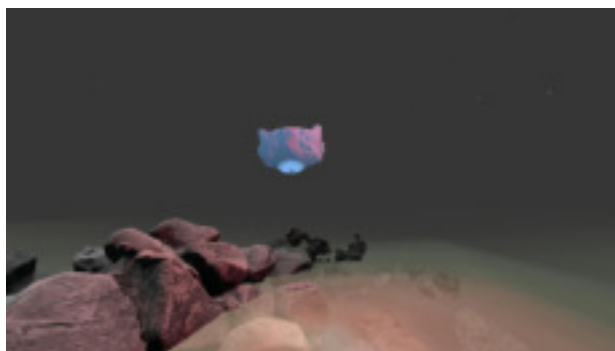
Figure 5: HMD (head-mounted display) as an avatar, player's view, a screenshot of the game scene, Project Search, 2022.

Figure 6: Play, listen, and read, Project Search installation in Linhai, 2022.

Project Search employs the theory of cosmotechnics, which unifies the cosmic and moral orders through technical activities and challenges the traditional concept of technology (Hui 2017). Unlike most game studies frameworks rooted in Western culture, *Project Search* suggests that cultural and technological development in cultivation games cannot be directly compared to the West due to differences in epistemology and philosophy. Therefore, developing a new framework that combines technological development, various game studies theories, and the pursuit of multiple cosmotechnics within and beyond cultivation narratives is important. Through the development and play of *Project Search*, we examined non-normative features such as non-collision, mistiness, incompleteness, imperfection, and picturesqueness (Figure 2), and sought to "relearn" the cultural, technological, and affective specificities of visual novel gaming practices.

We conducted ethnographic studies in Daoist temples and local art communities in Linhai to examine technology and cultivation from the perspective of cosmotechnics, which includes various ways of understanding urban context, local Daoist culture, and cultivation practice. *Project Search* presents a cultivation gamespace as an alternative technological future rather than focusing solely on singular technological

advancement. The gamespace, designed using 3D scans of Linhai's old town (Figure 3), establishes a dialogue of retrofuturism between Chinese and Western cultures, combining Daoist cultivation practices with 3D scanning (Figure 4), head-mounted displays (Figure 5), and drone modification. A cosmotechnics approach to cultivation games allows for reimagining traditional Chinese cultural and technological practices differently from Western technological progress. The popularity of cultivation games may inspire a different imagination: not as a reflection of Western stereotypes of China's rapid economic and technological growth, but as a cosmotechnics that looks to the ancient past, relearns, and builds on the imagination of an alternative technofantasy gamespace (Figure 6).

Integrating design techniques such as non-collision, mistiness, and imperfection based on ethnographic studies in *Project Search* creates an emotionally rich and culturally immersive experience for players. These elements evoke a sense of alternative technofantasy imagination, reflecting Daoist principles and Chinese cultural heritage. Compared to standard game-making, this approach prioritizes the affective and cultural aspects of the gaming experience over technological advancement. It fosters a deeper connection to the game's narrative and world, contrasting with conventional game design, which often focuses on linear progression, precise mechanics, and clear visuals. This alternative approach highlights the value of cosmotechnics in game design.

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