

Defence of Chinese state-sanctioned history against perceived attacks from *Honor of Kings*

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Honor of Kings (wangzhe rongyao, Tencent 2015) is a multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA), released in the Chinese market in 2015 and internationally under the name *Arena of Valor*, in 2017. Like other MOBA games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), *Honor of Kings* involves players selecting heroes and competing against each other in teams or, more rarely, individually to attack their opponent's territory and defend their own. *Honor of Kings* is a mobile game, and its gameplay is less complex than *League of Legends*. It is also the first major MOBA game to be produced in mainland China.

Honor of Kings has been very successful in China, with some reports putting the registered users at 200 million (Shijia 2017; Cowley 2017). With this success has come government scrutiny. From March 2017 critical articles begin to appear in the society, culture and opinion sections of *The People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as well as a widely discussed article in *Guangming Daily* (Zhang 2017). The most widely reported of these critical articles (Li, G. 2017) led to a short-term drop in Tencent's share price, and prompted Tencent to introduce systems to prevent young players spending too much time at the game (Reuters 2017). The criticisms have been mainly focussed on the supposed addictive nature of the game, a concern that has been prominent in official Chinese discourse on games for more than a decade (Bax 2015; Szablewicz 2010). However, the criticism has a second strain to do with the game's depiction of Chinese history (e.g. Li, J. 2017). Many of *Honor of Kings'* heroes are drawn from Chinese history, but the game makes major changes in line with its fantastical theme and to accommodate its gameplay. Several articles both in the *People's Daily* and in other newspapers (e.g. Gong 2017; Shi 2017) worry that children

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playing the game will become confused about Chinese history, with some citing a high school essay that was circulated online in November 2016, in which the student mixes up the real historical figure of Jing Ke with his in-game version (Sina Games 2016).

The Chinese government has always struck a balance between exploring the propaganda potential of new communications media and reigning in their negative impact (Brady 2008 2). Around the year 2000, the Party-state became engaged in game production directly, in some instances through partial ownership (Nie 2013 516). Nie (2013) suggests that “digital games have been able to shed their negative image as ‘electronic heroin’ and to take on a new identity as teachers of culture and history” (516), pointing to online games set during the War of Resistance against Japan as an example. As online gaming has continued to grow in social and economic importance, the relationship between industry and government has evolved, with the state increasingly relying on private initiative and public-private partnerships (Jiang and Fung 2017 5). When an online game draws on China’s historical and mythological past, the producer benefits from Chinese audiences’ familiarity with the game’s setting. This might “[parallel] the authorities’ agendas to promote nationalistic fervor” (Jiang and Fung 2017 15) but might also go beyond or against such attempts, as the official criticism of *Honor of Kings* seem to suggest. Thus China’s cultural and creative industries policy, including policy dealing with how and why China’s historical and mythological past can be employed, is multifaceted and includes a mix of market-driven incentives, soft power ambitions and concerns with national cultural security (Keane 2013 chapter 1).

But does this game’s use of historical and mythological characters mean what the Party thinks it means? If popular texts are terrains on which occur “struggles for meanings” (Fiske 2011 4) between dominant and subordinate social actors and institutions, one would expect to find interpretations that compete with the Party’s official criticism of *Honor of Kings*. Zhihu, a popular question-and-answer website, provides us with an opportunity to investigate how the Chinese public make sense of the official and conservative criticisms of *Honor of Kings*. As government control of social media generally tightens in recent years, users and scholars broadly perceive Zhihu to allow for a relatively high degree of freedom of expression and relatively nuanced debate (Jin et al. 2015; Wong 2014).

We have selected the 10 most relevant Zhihu questions and subsequent comments and answer as our sample. To date, Zhihu debate around official criticism of *Honor of Kings* has peaked in March 2017 and July 2017. The March 2017 debate was triggered by *The People’s Daily* reposting a critical *Guangming* article (Zhang 2017), and the July debate 2017 by opinion pieces in *The People’s Daily*. Zhihu users were, however, already discussing *Honor of Kings*’ representation of Chinese history as early as November 2016. The 2674 answers to the 10 questions (some of which have been read almost 2 million times) will allow us to achieve a fuller picture of the meanings and uses of history in contemporary China.

Our analysis of the material is still ongoing but we are currently testing how the overarching concept of *popularised history* might be able to capture the public’s response to *Honor of King*’s deployment of characters from the Chinese past in a way that incorporates counterresponses to the official responses. The overarching concept will be able to capture and organise themes including, but not limited to, China’s position in global flows of popular culture, both celebration and rejection of “great man theory”, the

suggestion of other kinds of history, and the responsibilities (if any) of a commercial's company's use of history.

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