

# Negotiating Visibility: Erciyuan Culture in Contemporary China

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper examines how erciyuan culture (二次元, literally “two-dimensional”) has negotiated its visibility in Chinese public discourse through the case of *Genshin Impact* (HoYoverse, 2020). The term erciyuan refers to practices centered on manga, anime, and games in China, which are borrowed from Japanese otaku culture yet carry specific subcultural connotations. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation, this paper explores how subcultural communities, commercial entities, and the state are contingently articulated around erciyuan culture. This articulation has made erciyuan culture highly visible in current China, while simultaneously transforming its cultural practices.

Articulation theory offers a useful way to understand this phenomenon. As Hall explains in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, articulation is how elements “come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects” (Grossberg 1986). *Genshin Impact* exemplifies such articulations. The game brings together three competing articulations whose tensions define debates over Chinese erciyuan culture.

First, *Genshin Impact* is built upon erciyuan culture: HoYoverse, the developer of the game, is itself rooted in erciyuan culture, with its slogan “tech otakus save the world” signaling this position. The game’s intricate and fragmented narrative inspires players’ fanworks, which lie at the core of erciyuan cultural practices (Greting et al. 2022). The game also performs what Suan (2017) terms anime-esque conventions, using visual and narrative styles typical of Japanese anime. These features make the game appear to have “all the characteristics of a Japanese invention” despite being Chinese, as observed by the New York Times (Dooley and Mozur 2022).

Second, the game employs explicit features of Chinese culture. The Liyue region features architecture inspired by classical Chinese aesthetics, and the character Yun Jin performs in Peking opera styles. These elements have become central to how Chinese state media strategically reframe the game. State media emphasizes the game’s representation of tradition while strategically ignores the anime-esque conventions, regarding *Genshin Impact* as a vehicle for cultural export, thereby advancing China’s soft power strategy. As Tang and Li (2025) observe, this strategy

exemplifies a pragmatic approach to tradition, which treats tradition as a flexible resource for soft power and modern governance.

Third, *Genshin Impact* achieved unprecedented commercial success. Powered by its gacha mechanic, the game has generated billions in global revenue. Against the background of China's post-pandemic economic slowdown, such commercial triumph proved particularly significant, rebranding erciyuan culture from "problematic Japanese influence" to "profitable erciyuan economy." This made erciyuan culture highly visible in current China.

This convergence was unprecedented. In the 2000s, state policies restricted foreign animation on television while erciyuan culture shifted to the internet (Li 2024, 63). Though marginalized in public discourse, erciyuan culture thrived online over two decades, developing distinctive practices and values. Meanwhile, two parallel dynamics emerged: some erciyuan members sought to legitimize this subculture within nationalism discourse, while the state, recognizing erciyuan's appeal among youth, attempted to incorporate it into official narratives (Lin 2018). These efforts long failed to achieve significant breakthrough. *Genshin Impact's* commercial success made this tension impossible to ignore. The game thus became a locus where subcultural members, commercial entities, and the state actively negotiate the meaning and value of erciyuan culture.

To examine these articulations, this paper analyzes three types of materials: (1) game texts from *Genshin Impact*, including visual design, narrative elements, and cultural representations in regions like Liyue; (2) state narratives from news organizations like People's Daily, examining how they frame the game as cultural export; and (3) player discussions from online communities such as Bilibili and Zhihu, focusing on the fan debates over the game's relationship with mainstream discourse.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than offering a narrative of incorporation or resistance, this paper reveals an ongoing negotiation marked by the state's selective recognition of economic value, commercial capital's dual imperative to satisfy both erciyuan members and state discourse, and erciyuan members' internal conflicts over the costs and benefits of mainstreaming. Understanding these dynamics illuminates how transnational popular culture circulates and changes within specific political economies, and how subcultures navigate the tension between seeking mainstream recognition and preserving their distinctive cultures.

## ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

1 Analysis focuses on two cases: (1) Bilibili creator Muc Xukong Zhiyi's "cultural investigation" video on Liyue (Muc Xukong Zhiyi 2021), which actively interprets *Genshin Impact* as cultural innovation and export; (2) The Zhihu thread "How should we view the 'cultural export' of *Genshin Impact's* The Divine Damsel of Devastation performance?", where opposition voices argued the game "is meant to entertain people, not to be used as your tool" (translations by author, Zhihu Yonghu 3f3t4X 2022). These contrasting practices demonstrate how erciyuan members understand and negotiate their culture from conflicting positions.

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## BIO

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