Spectacularizing China: Cultural Heritage and Representation in Genshin Impact

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INTRODUCTION

Genshin Impact (miHoYo, 2020) was released in September 2020, against the prevailing trend of *guofeng* games in China. The term *guofeng* (literally "national style") refers to games that portray lifestyles, aesthetics, and artistic expressions rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Industry reports (GPC & CNG, 2021) indicate that most original gaming intellectual properties (IPs) in China are encapsulated within this *guofeng* category.

As a Chinese-developed open-world role-playing game designed for a global market, *Genshin Impact* presents multiple regions inspired by diverse cultural backgrounds, with the region of Liyue representing China. Described by *The New York Times* as "a smash hit from China" (Dooley & Mozur, 2022), the game has also sparked heated debates, particularly regarding the question of its "Chineseness" (Li & Li, 2023). Scholars have noted how *Genshin Impact* promotes traditional Chinese culture through its representation of elements such as Cantonese cuisine (Horn, 2025) and Peking opera (Que et al., 2025). Moreover, in July 2021, *Genshin Impact* was officially selected by China's Ministry of Commerce as one of the national "Chinese Cultural Export" projects (Ministry of Commerce, 2021), further situating it within the state's game-going-global strategy.

Our study compares *Genshin Impact*'s appropriation of Chinese cultural heritage in its representational design with that of *Canal Towns*, a game produced by Coconut Island Games, one of China's pioneering independent studios (Coconut Island, 2020). Unlike *Genshin Impact*, *Canal Towns* was developed primarily for domestic players, with its release version exclusively in Chinese. Through an analysis of the game's

representation of Chinese culture and archival research into the design teams' stated concepts and approaches, we argue that although both *Genshin Impact* and *Canal Towns* draw inspiration from Ming- and early Qing-dynasty heritage elements in their representational choices (Wardaya et al., 2024), the resulting aesthetic effects are markedly different.

Canal Towns, inspired by the renowned Ming-dynasty scroll painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* and informed by extensive research on historical vernacular dwellings, immerses players in the rhythms of everyday life in Yangtze river towns. It foregrounds ordinary residential, commercial, and industrial architectures set amid gentle hills and winding rivers in the countryside. Gameplay experiences are structured around daily practices and spatial routines, emphasizing quotidian social relations instead of spectacle. By contrast, Liyue constructs a spectacular China through extraordinary visual symbols. The design of its main town draws primarily from Fenghuang Ancient Town in Hunan, whose urban fabric follows the contours of the Tuojiang River, featuring stilted wooden houses (*diaojiaolou*) perched along the riverbanks—an architecturally distinctive form within China.

Meanwhile, players traversing *Genshin Impact*'s landscapes encounter artistic references to some of China's most iconic natural sites—Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, the Huanglong Scenic Area, and the Guilin karst landscape—all celebrated for their dramatic landforms and prominence as major tourist attractions. These sites are featured as destinations to be awed and consumed, rather than as ordinary spaces shaped by everyday labor, habitation, or recreation. This suggests that, much like the cinematic spectacularisation seen in early 2000s Chinese blockbuster films targeting global audiences (Chan and Stuckey, 2021), the imperatives embedded in China's game-going-global strategy may have encouraged the design team to spectacularize China's natural and cultural beauty. Such a mode of representation risks simplifying complex social realities while producing a visually legible and exportable image of China for global consumption.

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BIO

Dr. Hong Zeng is an Assistant Professor at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. She is a cultural studies scholar whose research focuses on the dynamics of gender and spatial politics in visual cultural production. Her work critically investigates how ideologies operate within creative industries and the diverse forms of resistance they engender. She has published in *Cultural Studies*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, among others. She is working on her RGC-funded projects, "Transforming National Culture into Intellectual Property: *Guofeng* Games in China's Online Game Industry."

Ms. Xiaoxuan Huang is a PhD researcher at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research focuses on the potential of videogames for museum digital transformation in China and cross-cultural understanding, which explores how game-based experiences can enhance audience engagement and contribute to the evolving digital strategies of museums in China. Her work aims to advance interdisciplinary dialogue between game studies, museum studies, and digital humanities.