

Tangible and Terrifying: Cultural Heritage Representation in Chinese Horror Games

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Chinese horror games, cultural heritage, tangible heritage, intangible heritage, cultural memory, interactive media

INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, Chinese horror games¹ have gradually increased in number. Although academia lacks a unified theoretical definition of “Chinese-style horror,” this gaming genre has achieved considerable scale and distinctive cultural characteristics in the market. Most current Chinese horror games are rooted in Chinese traditional culture and folk traditions, making them carriers of cultural heritage in the digital age, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

This study explores the representation of Chinese cultural heritage in Chinese horror games, framing the research with the dual analytical dimensions of "Tangible (Perceptible Heritage)" and "Terrifying (Affective Heritage)" as the core framework. Defining Chinese horror games broadly as horror titles developed in Chinese linguistic variants (Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien) and targeted at Chinese-speaking players, the research draws on Xenia Zeiler's classification of cultural heritage-related games and Laurajane Smith's theory of heritage as a meaning-making process. Through case studies of *Paranormal HK*, *Detention* and *Firework*, the study analyzes how these games reconstruct iconic material spaces and embed intangible folk customs, symbols and rituals to materialize perceptible cultural heritage, and how the horror mechanism takes these tangible elements as triggers to amplify and embody diverse affective heritages—including Hong Kong's urban spatial oppression and local folk ghost lore, Taiwan's historical political trauma and surveillance anxiety, and the rural social reflections and collective melancholy amid China's early 2000s modernization.

The findings indicate that Chinese horror games act as vital and unique carriers of Chinese cultural heritage: they transform perceptible heritage into interactive experiences, and the horror genre serves as a key link connecting tangible and affective heritage, revealing collective memories, anxieties and reflections rooted in Chinese culture. Furthermore, these games function as unintentional digital archives of cultural elements, while also presenting social commentaries on modernization and regional development. The study also notes the underexploration of Chinese digital games' cultural heritage embedding in existing scholarship, highlighting the research value of Chinese horror games in enriching the study of cultural heritage representation in digital media.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In this study, the term “Chinese horror games” refers broadly to horror game developed in Chinese languages, including Mandarin, Cantonese, and Hokkien, and targeted primarily at Chinese-speaking players, acknowledging both regional diversity and shared cultural-linguistic ground.

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BIO

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