

Revisiting the Aura of Token in Museological Puzzle Adventure Gamebook *Migong*

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine receiving a lost work from a Qing Dynasty court painter in 1766. Hand-bound in the traditional four-hole stitching method, book corners wrapped in silk, with the text written in the Qing Dynasty's Wuyingdian movable typeface, maintaining the conventional top-to-bottom, right-to-left layout. It is accompanied by a collection of identifiable history items, some of which are exhibited in the Palace Museum: court paintings (such as architecture, ritual vessels, and portraits), a former hand-drawn map of the Forbidden City, a Qianlong Tongbao coin¹, and a Yanpi ancient method Xuan Paper².

Now, it invites its receivers to observe and touch the texture of these artifacts closely and requires them to use the unique functions of these tokens to solve puzzles, perform specific rituals, and execute performances. This is the puzzle adventure gamebook *Migong: Ruyi Linlang Tuji* ("Mystery Palace: Map of Treasures in the Palace"), published by Forbidden City Publishing House in 2019. The crowdfunding event for this project was launched on October 24, 2018, with a goal of 100,000 RMB. By November 30, it raised 20.2 million RMB and pre-sold 122,000 copies, approximately 200 times the original goal (modian.com). As of 2024, the Forbidden City Publishing House has published three *Migong* gamebooks, achieving significant sales in China and through cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Amazon, promoted as China's *Ship of Theseus*³.

The history of gamebooks (also known as "puzzle adventure books") dates back to the 1940s and flourished in the late 1970s, exemplified by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series (1979-1998) and *Fighting Fantasy* series (1982-1995). In China during the 2000s, gamebooks typically appeared as supplements or paratexts instead of standalone publications, such as the paper-based mini role-playing game *Naiqi De Damaoxian* ("Naiqi's Big Adventure", 2003-2006) serialized in *Kids Cartoon*

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magazine, and the detective game comics *Xiaodangjia Zhentan Youxi Manhua* encapsulated in instant noodles (mid-2000s). Since the 2010s, the rise of digital texts and visual novels has significantly constrained the living space for gamebooks. Until post-2018, “digital interconnectedness had become so pervasive that a sense of fatigue had begun to seep in”, and several analog games have made a surprising comeback (Arnaudo, 2023, p.15). Within this context, the *Migong* series has emerged as a rare cultural product in China that has achieved widespread acceptance and commercial success. This study posits two reasons for its popularity: 1) the proliferation of interactive/visual novel mobile games and the surge of Jubensha game stores since 2015 have familiarized audiences with the gameplay and fun of gamebooks, building a considerable user base; 2) the trend of *Guochao* aesthetics, particularly the historical-themed cultural merchandise of the Palace Museum, has also attracted many enthusiasts. Similarly, *Migong* embodies such a unique “cultural fragrance,” borrowing Iwabuchi’s (2002) term, of *Chineseness*, which has become its core attraction.

This study aims to analyze how *Migong* series employ historically themed physical artifacts as game items to enhance the cultural flavor of the gamebook and invite players to perform their own puzzle-solving ritual. It argues that these culturally imbued tokens possess a quality akin to Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura (2008[1972], p.20), thereby innovating the gaming experience: players encounter authentic, albeit replicated, historical objects and engage in processes of observation, touch, placement, and recreation to interpret the cybertext (Aarseth, 2006), seek pathways, and gain feedback, thereby creating a sense of the “here and now” (Groys, 2016, p. 144) immediacy, which was once claimed to be the missing nature of mechanical reproduction.

Although the sense of authenticity is often distorted in digital spaces, analog games may serve as a new presentation for the aura and authenticity of artworks: players’ experiences of analogue games can closely resemble the aesthetic engagement with classic works of art. By representing and reinterpreting historical objects, *Migong* demonstrates its capacity to forge a deep connection between players and cultural artifacts, transcending the distance in time and space, and thus reviving an aesthetic experience of “aura”.

This study posits that analogue games can establish such a productive distance between the player and the reproduced object, endowing it with a “mysterious aura fragrance” (Bolter et al., 2006, p.135). When analogue games facilitate a “here and now” experience through ritualistic interaction, enable players to sense the historical, emotional, and cultural resonances embedded in the artifact, and invite players to leave their personal mark in response to the artifact’s presence, they cultivate a richly immersive aesthetic experience of aura.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

ENDNOTES

¹ Qianlong Tongbao is a copper coin minted during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty (1736-1796). The obverse side of the coin is inscribed with the four characters “乾隆通宝”.

² Yanpi ancient method Xuan Paper is a type of Xuan paper made from the bark of the Yanpi tree. It has a delicate, semi-transparent appearance and is known for its expensive production cost and complex manufacturing process.

³ *Ship of Theseus* (also known as *S.*) is an interactive book created by Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams. The book is distinguished by its unique format and complex narrative structure, blending novelistic prose, handwritten notes, illustrations, and other media to create a multi-layered reading experience.

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