Gaming, Nationalism, and Ideological Work in Contemporary China: online games based on the War of Resistance against Japan

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The development of China’s online game industry provides an example of the interaction of new technologies and politics in the commercialization and globalization of China’s cultural economy. The analysis of online games about China’s Resistance War against Japan (1937–1945) highlights the interplay of the state’s political agenda, business interests, and nationalist sentiments as online games are planned, designed, and consumed in contemporary China. It reveals that the Party-state has candidly integrated online game technology into its expanding propaganda domain and utilized it for propagating official ideology and sustaining economic growth.

Introduction

At 18:00 pm, 4 August 2007, the long-awaited Resistance War Online (Kanzhan Online), a Chinese-developed online game based on the War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945) was officially launched in China. Thousands of gamers immediately rushed onto the game’s website. Gamers designed their own avatar, chose a profession from 11 categories such as soldiers, agents, and doctors, and engaged themselves in the virtual war fighting against the Japanese invaders. Within ten minutes, all servers were full as the number of gamers greatly surpassed the company’s expectations. Three groups of servers were added two hours later with over 100,000 concurrent players playing at one time. 1 For the next two years until

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2009 *Resistance War Online* continued to be very popular. It was ranked one of the ‘Top Ten 2D Online Games 2008’, ‘Top Ten Original Online Games 2008’, and ‘Top Ten Chinese Original Online Games 2009’, according to 17173.com, one of the most popular gaming websites.

Over the last few decades, especially since the beginning of the millennium, computer games have become a ‘global socio-cultural phenomenon’. Studies on computer games have begun to emerge as an academic pursuit with a growing number of trade journals, websites, study groups, and conferences on the topic. Researchers are no longer only interested in digital games’ problematic implications or effects, but are analyzing them from different angles, including their aesthetic, narrative, economic, and technical aspects. Nevertheless, despite fast-growing gaming scholarship little is known about the culture of computer games in East Asia where the gaming phenomenon is most prominent. Except for some industry reports and marketing analyses conducted by Western enterprises for commercial purposes, there are very few studies on computer games in East Asia, especially on their implications for people and societies there. According to statistics published by the Chinese Ministry of Culture (MOC), the number of online gamers reached 120,000,000 in 2010. However, much research by Western scholars on the Internet in China tends to focus on its democratizing role and government censorship, and the fact that the majority of Chinese computer users go online for entertainment purposes, such as playing games, has been insufficiently explored.

As the number of Internet users in China continues to grow, the Party-state has begun to use the new medium of online games to propagate patriotic and nationalist values. This study focuses on a particular game genre, China’s home-grown digital games with the theme of China’s War of Resistance against Japan (1937–1945), examining the process by which patriotic games are planned, designed, and consumed in the context of rising nationalistic sentiments and the commercialization and globalization of China’s cultural economy. The purpose of the study is to advance our understanding of the complexity of contemporary Chinese nationalism, China’s commercialized cultural industry, and the Party-state’s effort to reinforce propaganda work in the Internet era.

Based on the analysis of major Resistance War-themed games, gamers’ forums and blogs, press releases and official documents, as well as interviews with game makers and government officials, the following observations can be made. First, Chinese patriotic digital games directly resulted from and added force to rising popular nationalism in the 1990s. The emergence of patriotic digital games was not only a reaction to the perceived rising militarism in Japan at the time, but also resulted from the attempts to profit from the nationalistic impulse of the gaming public. It proves

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3. Ibid.


that contemporary Chinese nationalism is indeed a complex phenomenon rather than merely an occurrence single-handedly orchestrated by the Party-state’s propaganda. Furthermore, as private game companies and the Party-state began to collaborate in the development of patriotic digital games, Chinese popular nationalism and official nationalism have become highly intertwined. State-sponsored patriotic games embody the complicated nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism: the boundary between what is official and what is popular is largely obscured. In addition, in the process of commercialization of the cultural sector, the Party-state has successfully integrated the private gaming industry into its propaganda mechanism through policy regulations, financial support, and partnership with private game companies. The Party-state has remarkably transformed its traditional propaganda methods aided by modern information and communication technologies available in the Internet era.

Gaming and popular nationalism

The nature of nationalism in contemporary China, whether it is ‘defensive’ or ‘aggressive’, ‘affirmative’ or ‘confident’, has long been debated among scholars. China Can Say No, which was published in 1996, was quickly followed by a series of nationalist writings such as China Can Say No Again, China Still Can Say No, Why China Says No, etc. Some of this nationalist rhetoric was a function of the worsening Sino–Japanese relationship. During the mid-1990s, that relationship was in crisis, triggered by a series of events including Japan freezing its aid to China as a protest against China’s nuclear testing on 29 August 1995, the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō to the Yasukuni Shrine on 29 July 1996, and Japanese right-wing group members landing on the Diaoyu Islands on four occasions beginning in July 1996. A careful examination of Chinese digital games based on the Resistance War clearly shows that contemporary Chinese popular nationalism largely emerged as a response to a series of events that marked the bumpy relationship between China and other countries, especially Japan, in the 1990s.

China’s digital game industry was highly involved in the rise of popular nationalism and national politics. Some Chinese commentators argue that the emergence of Chinese patriotic games was a reaction to Japan’s own militaristic war games. A Japanese console game entitled Admiral’s Decision first came out in 1996, in which gamers could play members of the Japanese army during WWII, conquering Chinese cities and cheering for victories under the Japanese flag. As a response to that game, a Chinese console game entitled Mine Warfare in the War of Resistance to


7. Digital or computer games in this study refer to both online games and games developed previous to online game technology, such as PC games, console games, flash games (based on adobe technology) and so on.

Japan by the Chinese Kingsoft company was launched in Tianjin in 1998. The launch ceremony was deliberately held in the Tianjin Museum of the Nanking Massacre and Nankai University, which was completely destroyed by Japanese bombs during the Resistance War.9

Several Chinese game companies attempted to leverage the rising popular nationalism in the 1990s into the creation of profitable games that reflected this anti-Japanese sentiment. At the time the Chinese market was saturated by games imported from foreign countries, mainly Japan, South Korea, and the United States. The Chinese company Shangyang decided to develop a patriotic game which they hoped would be a big hit. In 1996, Shangyang released the first domestically developed PC game Bloody Lion: Defend China. It was advertised as the Chinese version of Command and Conquer, an RTS (real time strategy) game designed by Westwood Studio (USA) for personal computers in 1994, and which was extremely popular in China. The gamers’ patriotic emotions were aroused and they had great expectations not only for Bloody Lion itself, but also for Chinese-made games as a whole, which this game seemed to represent. After seven months in development and a budget of 100,000 RMB, Bloody Lion was released on 27 April 1996. It sold out immediately and had record sales of 40,000 copies. Unfortunately, gamers soon realized that the game was so poorly made that some major functions did not work. Within days, 22,000 copies were returned by disappointed gamers. The game failed not because of content, but due to Shangyang’s lack of experience and limited time and budget.10

Over the next decade, other Chinese companies developed games to meet the nationalistic impulses of the gaming public. Beijing E-Pie Entertainment & Technology Co., Ltd produced a series of first-person shooting games based on China’s past or imagined future conflicts with Japan, including Resistance War I: Bloody Fight on the Shanghai Bund (2003), Resistance War II: Bloody Battle in Burma (2003), and Resistance War III: Bloody Battle on Diaoyu Islands (2004). While the second and third of the series were still in development, gaming scenarios came eerily to pass when the Chinese ‘Defending Diaoyu Islands Group’, whose goal was to proclaim China’s sovereignty of the region, arrived in a fishing boat in the waters west of the Diaoyu islands. On 23 June 2003, this group was confronted by Japan’s Coast Guard and was forced to pull back. The game makers at E-Pie were angered by Japan’s response and determined to finish Resistance War III: Bloody Battle on Diaoyu Islands ahead of the original schedule in order to show their support.11

In 2005, three Chinese companies sponsored a nation-wide flash game design competition to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the victory of the War of Resistance, showing that they believed anti-Japanese nationalistic games were still

popular. Although most of these games tend to be educational, providing background and facts related to the war, they appear to be graphically violent and bloody. Some stray very close to pornography. In a flash game entitled *Strike the Japanese Devil Soldiers*, the player clicks the mouse to strike the heads of Japanese soldiers that pop up randomly. The reward is the viewing of cartoon pictures of a Japanese woman. The higher a player scores, the fewer clothes the Japanese woman wears in the cartoon picture. If a gamer hits 40 Japanese soldiers within 100s, the Japanese woman would appear half-naked in the picture. Ironically, it was stated in the call for the game-design competition that the participants ‘are to act out of righteous anger but restrained by reason and to express their feelings toward their motherland maturely’.12

No evidence suggests that the games developed between 1998 and 2005 had government support or direct governmental involvement. Instead, these games show both the development of popular anti-Japanese sentiment and the eagerness of private enterprises to profit from this trend. As such, they illustrate the complex nature of contemporary Chinese nationalism. Peter Hays Gries has explained that although the mainstream Western view of Chinese nationalism as Party-state propaganda generated by the Party elite for its own instrumental purpose is not wrong, it is nevertheless ‘incomplete’ and risks ‘dangerously trivializing the roles that the Chinese people and their emotions play in Chinese nationalism’.

The emergence of Chinese patriotic digital games in the 1990s and early 2000s supports the argument that nationalism in the reform era is not a uniquely top-down phenomenon. Instead, the rise of various strands of popular nationalistic discourses since the 1990s has both internal and external conditions, as well as historical and contemporary dimensions.

The Resistance War-themed patriotic games developed during the 1990s and early 2000s were only popular among some of the nationalistic ‘angry youth’. As evidenced by the release of *Bloody Lion*, their quality was often poor compared with imported games made with advanced technology. It was not until the government classified online games as ‘cultural products’ and heavily invested in the online game industry in the new millennium that patriotic online games began to grow rapidly and became a joint endeavour between the Party-state and private companies.

**Online game policy: from ‘electronic heroin’ to ‘teacher of history and culture’**

Before the breakthrough of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) in 2001, electronic gaming in China primarily consisted of PC games played at Internet cafés, arcades, or at home, as well as illegal video games. The government’s major policies on digital games were centred on the issues of addiction and exposure to violence and

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Regulating the actual space where gamers congregated was one step taken by the government. A tragic fire in an illegal Internet café in Beijing on 16 June 2001 shocked the nation and finally resulted in a long series of government attempts to regulate Internet cafés. Twenty-four customers, mostly secondary school and college students, were killed and 13 were injured. Before this tragedy, it was common for the owner of an Internet café to lock the customers who wanted to play overnight in the café before he or she went home at midnight. In this case, when the fire broke out in the Internet café before daybreak, the students could not escape because the door was locked from the outside and the windows were iron-barred.

Incidents like these explain the worries of parents, teachers and others who oppose online games because of their association with Internet addiction. As one of the major opponents of online games points out, Internet games have become attached to Chinese society like ‘poisonous tumours’, bringing families to a frightening state, and ‘seriously weakening people’s sense of social morality’.

The allure of Internet games for children is like the poison of opium in China many years ago; it doesn’t discriminate between the poor and the rich, between those of high or low status. It doesn’t matter if you’re an unemployed worker, a wealthy businessman, or a Party cadre. The hopes of innumerable parents for their children’s future may well be destroyed by Internet games.

Some worry that, if not controlled properly, online games may become the electronic opium of the twenty-first century. The fact that the importation of opium directly contributed to the collapse of the Qing Empire helps to explain the existing deeply-felt concerns about online game addiction. The ‘real threat’ is not merely associated with ‘the bodies and minds of those addicted but also their family and society’s moral order’. This threat is felt keenly by some desperate parents who have even turned to programmes that use controversial electroshock therapy for treating Internet game addiction.

In 2001, a Chinese e-commerce company called Shanda became the agent of a Korean MMOG entitled Legend. This stands as a landmark event in China’s online game industry. Legend became extremely popular in China and the number of gamers playing simultaneously online reached a record 400,000. Legend brought in an annual

18. Ibid.
19. Alex Golub and Kate Lingley, ‘Just like the Qing Empire: Internet addiction, MMOGs, and moral crisis in contemporary China’, Games and Culture no. 3, (2008), pp. 59–75 at p. 64.
profit of 600,000,000 RMB for Shanda.\(^{21}\) By 2003, imported games accounted for 68% of the Chinese market.\(^{22}\)

Realizing the huge economic potential of the online game industry, the government’s policy began to shift in 2003. Although the problem of youth addiction to the Internet, and to Internet games in particular, has long been a real concern for worried teachers and parents as well as to those who campaign for social morals, the Party-state is determined to encourage the development of the online game industry. The negative image of online games, which links it to addiction, violence, and pornography, has been downplayed. As stated in the *People’s Daily*, ‘Long scorned and labelled as electronic heroin, online games now teach people history and culture in China’.\(^{23}\)

In order to boost the strength of China’s online game industry and increase its global competitiveness, China has taken the approach of combining market forces with the state’s regulatory and financial power. In October 2003, the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) listed online games as one element of the *National High Technology Research and Development Program (Program 863)* in order to increase the share of Chinese online games in the national economy, and in 2004 China’s General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) decided to make the development of online games the top priority in their work.\(^{24}\) It also launched the *National Online Game Publishing Project*, supporting the development of 100 ‘healthy’ Chinese online games in five years via administration, taxation, and funding.\(^{25}\) The GAPP’s 2005 plan for online games consisted of 12 projects, including the establishment of five national centres for creative network technology, four national bases for the development of online games and animation, and several Chinese online game core enterprises. It also supported the ‘1 + 10’ Project, which intended to establish an online games institution that would offer undergraduate and graduate degrees and 100 online games programmes in existing universities and colleges.\(^{26}\) In July 2009, the State Council issued the *Plan for Reviving the Cultural Industry*, which listed online games as one of the most important cultural products to be promoted.\(^{27}\)

The government also used its regulatory power to create a policy environment that was advantageous to the domestic gaming industry over foreign companies. While heavily investing in the online game industry and providing financial support to domestic game companies, the government began to deter foreign developers from entering the Chinese market. The formal and informal barriers the government set up included the MOC screening commission in 2004 and new requirements for the


approval of imported online games from GAPP and the State Copyright Bureau. In practice, this new policy encouraged foreign companies to establish joint ventures with Chinese companies because this was the only way they could get approval. Such a strategy enabled domestic companies to succeed through technology transfer.

In 2009, the sales of online games in China reached 25,620,000,000 RMB, and domestically developed online games made up 64.5% of total sales in China. Moreover, 64 Chinese games were exported with sales of 109,000,000 RMB. Within eight years, China’s online game industry had completed the transformation from predominance of imported games to a more balanced market share between imported and domestic games. 

Online games as ideological battleground

After 2000, the Chinese government began to realize that online games were becoming the new primary leisure activity among teenagers and young adults, and it became serious about the cultural and political impact of games, seeing the medium as ‘a key for winning the hearts and minds of a growing generation of young citizens’. As early as 2001, Jiang Zemin referred to the Internet as ‘a political, ideological and cultural battlefield’ and considered it the Party-state’s responsibility to guide and educate young people via the Internet. It is not surprising that online games in China have become the focus of censorship and regulation, economic development, and struggles over national culture, and that the government has ‘transformed online games from a mere pastime into a highly political environment’.

Under the influence of Joseph Nye’s soft power theory, which has found widespread popularity in China, many Chinese propaganda officials as well as intellectuals consider online games as a vehicle for ideological and cultural influences. The fact that the most popular online games in China are imported from foreign countries has caused great concern about cultural invasion via online games. As Chen Jiqing pointed out in 2009:

Western countries deliberately use online games as a platform to spread their democratic system and values. ... Western civilization is successful in many ways and is attractive to the youth. The Western concepts of democracy, freedom and equality are far from being perfect, yet they have been presented as perfect in the virtual game world. Young gamers are attracted to such concepts and may begin to have doubts about or even reject the mainstream values of our society. Thus a cultural identity crisis emerges and threatens our cultural safety.

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32. Jenkins, National Politics within Virtual Game Worlds.
33. Chen Jiqing, ‘Jingwai wangluo youxi dui da xuezheng de yingxiang ji duice’ [‘The influence of foreign online games on university studies and countermeasures’], Wenhua Xuekan [Culture Journal], (July 2009), pp. 120–123.
In the war of ideology, online games have clearly become an issue of cultural security. Thinkers thus conceive of online games as a battlefield for presenting cultural values that can bolster the security of the Chinese state.

On the 64th anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 2005, the China Youth Daily published an article by Liu Yu stating that several Japanese online games spread anti-peace values and concepts. It argued that these games allowed players to change and even distort history as they wished, and cited the example of Admiral’s Decision, a game by the Japanese KOEI company, which included many images that promoted Japanese militarism, encouraged war, and praised invasion. According to this article, the notorious war criminal Yamamoto Isoroku and the Yamato warship appear at the beginning of the game. Another major war criminal, Tōjō Hideki, also made an appearance in the game, commanding the Japanese army on the Yamato. The game also portrayed Japanese flags flying on buildings in Chinese cities and the Shanghai Bund on fire with Japanese soldiers cheering. In yet another Japan-produced game entitled Grand Modern Strategy 2004: Japan–China Border Dispute Break Out (SystemSoft-Alpha, 2005), the Chinese government is shown trying to shift its domestic conflicts overseas through anti-Japanese patriotic education. In that game, a war breaks out between China and Japan over the Diaoyu Islands and the East Sea where important resources are located. According to Liu, this game fabricated plots, triggered hatred toward China and spread the ‘China Threat’ theory. Grand Modern Strategy 2003: Resisting a Terrorist Country (SystemSoft-Alpha, 2003), featured China’s collapse. In Reverse the Far East Trial, gamers played an attorney who defended Japanese invaders against a Korean comfort woman in order to change the court-imposed death sentences of Japanese war criminals.34

Liu’s article argues that, as cultural commodities, online games abide by the law of commodity flow as economic goods, yet they differ from general commodities in that political ideology and cultural values are attached to them. As the flagship of state propaganda, China Youth Daily sent out a serious warning about these dangerous Japanese games and called for countermeasures to be taken on China’s part:

> History games are unique among online games. If we do not occupy (this market) it will be occupied by foreign manufacturers. Then other countries will dominate the right of speech, and China will be left in a position of being portrayed and being narrated rather than delivering its own understanding and sentiment about its own history.35

In some senses, then, the Chinese government was spurred to action by the appearance of what they believed to be inaccurate and a-historical games. In fact, by the time Liu Yu’s article appeared, the Party-state had already begun to react to those Japanese games by establishing a series of policies that signalled their intention to control the online game industry and to integrate it with its existing propaganda system. In January 2003, the MOC issued a Notice on Several Issues Relating to the Implementation of Tentative Measures for the Administration of Internet Culture (Guanyu shishi hulianwang wenhuao guanli zaxing tiaoli youguan wenti de tongzhi), in which online games were officially classified as ‘cultural products’ and thus had to

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35. Ibid.
be reported to the MOC for content supervision; and in July 2003, the China Game Publishers Association (CGPA), a ‘working committee’ for the online game industry, was established under the GAPP. The efforts to control and guide the development of online games continued in April 2005 when GAPP issued a comprehensive online games development plan, including the project to develop the *Chinese Heroes* game series.

It could be argued, then, that *Chinese Heroes* shows the coordination of the Party-state to create a game that would reflect elements of official ideology. The announcement of GAPP’s decision to produce *Chinese Heroes* was followed later in the year by the attack on Japanese games in the *China Youth Daily*. That same year, the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) announced its plan to produce several online games based on the theme of the Resistance War in order to commemorate the 60th anniversary of China’s victory over Japan. In fact, the CYLC’s planned game was to be a component of the *Chinese Heroes* game series initiated by GAPP. *Resistance War Online* (2007), *Nation’s Prestige* (2008), and *Unsheathed Swords* (2008) were the products of the CYLC’s project. Thus, by 2008, online games had become an ideological and cultural weapon in addition to being a profitable commodity.

**A ‘red’ game developer and its Resistance War-themed online games**

After the government classified online games as ‘cultural products’ and heavily invested in the online game industry, patriotic online games became a joint enterprise between the Party-state and private companies. It was at this point that popular nationalism and official nationalism merged and worked together. As Baogang He and Yinjie Guo explained,

> Official nationalism or state-led nationalism refers to any doctrine, ideology or discourse in which the Chinese Party-state strives to identify itself as the Chinese nation, or claims its goals embody those of the nation and are essential to the nationhood. It also denotes a process whereby the Chinese state sponsors, controls, and invents the content of patriotism and cultural symbols of the Chinese nation … Popular nationalism comes from ‘below’ and represents unsystematic, popular national sentiments.

The development of the online game industry demonstrates a pragmatic model in which the state provides incentives and support while private companies deliver products that are in harmony with the state’s ideology. While sometimes undermining each other with conflicting agendas, official nationalism and popular nationalism can overlap and influence each other in practice, as in the case of the development of the game *Resistance War Online*. In 2003, a Chinese entrepreneur couple, Li Ruijie and Zhang Yunxia, established PowerNet Technology, Co., Ltd. In the first two years the company was not very successful largely because a few giant

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game companies monopolized the Chinese market at that time. The turning point for the company came in 2005 when the CYLC planned to develop an online game to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Resistance War.\(^{38}\) Shortly after coming back from a trip to Japan where he saw that war criminals were worshiped in the Yasukuni Shrine, Li Ruijie submitted and won his bid to develop *Resistance War Online*, an online role-playing game based on China’s Resistance War against Japan.\(^ {39}\) Apart from being inspired by nationalistic impulses, his business instinct convinced him that a military and historical game, a genre currently ignored by the big companies, could be a true opportunity for his company to succeed.

Since the beginning of its development, *Resistance War Online* has been surrounded by political issues. Collaborating with the CYLC inevitably brought policy and administrative advantages to PowerNet, yet its high profile also created problems for the company. After a major Japanese newspaper reported on the project, the pressure on PowerNet began to mount. The company and the development team were asked by Chinese government officials to keep things low key, restrain their nationalistic emotions, and strictly follow the narrative of the Resistance War as printed in officially sanctioned textbooks. Initially the website domain address where the development team published its progress for marketing purposes was entitled www.pkjapan.com.cn, and the game under construction was called *Anti-Japan Online*. Eventually the website address was changed to www.pk1937.com.cn and the game was renamed *Resistance War Online*.\(^ {40}\) Obviously, the original ‘pkjapan’ and ‘Anti-Japan’ were too sensitive. The development team had to moderate their tone. At the same time, the company used the political environment to its advantage to market the game from its development stage. For example, the company website initiated several debates related to Sino–Japan relations, such as whether it is appropriate to lobby against Japanese goods.

On 4 August 2007, after two years in development, *Resistance War Online* hit the market. A considerable number of gamers were attracted to the game primarily because of its patriotic content, as revealed in gamers’ forums and blogs. According to the company’s statistics at the end of 2010, the average number of gamers playing *Resistance War Online* at any time is about 100,000, and 90% of the gamers are male.\(^ {41}\) Furthermore, 80% of *Resistance War Online* gamers are over 30 years old, born in the 1960s and 1970s. The history of the Resistance War is familiar to them and the operation of the game is relatively easy. These individuals have spending power and are willing to purchase the equipment and weapons needed to play the game. By contrast, it appears that young people born in the 1990s are not interested in the game because they know little about the Resistance War.\(^ {42}\) In 2007 and 2008, the net profits of the company were reported as 8,277,000 RMB and 36,660,000 RMB, and *Resistance War Online* became the most profitable.

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40. *Ibid*.
41. *Ibid*.
42. Zhang Ruoyu, ‘Zhongqing baowang de hongse qingjie’. 
product of the company, making up 59% of its total profit in 2009.\textsuperscript{43} Although it only takes up a small portion of the Chinese market, its profit is huge due to the sheer size of the market.

In 2008, one year after the official launch of \textit{Resistance War Online}, PowerNet underwent a major reorganization. This was due in part to the cultural system reform, which was an effort to commercialize the state cultural industry. The company Youth Online, which was owned by CYLC, bought 20% of its shares and became PowerNet’s second largest shareholder. The reorganized company adopted a new name ‘ZQgame.com’, in which ZQ stands for CYLC. In December 2009, the company became the first online game company to have an initial public offering (IPO) on the Growth Enterprises Market (GEM), with 25,000,000 shares available for sale. The purchases of its total shares reached 2,500,000 RMB on 2 February 2010.\textsuperscript{44}

PowerNet has successfully transformed itself into an online game company with CYLC as its partner and benefited from sufficient financing and favourable policies such as special license permits. It is indeed a ‘red’ company because it mainly produces online games with patriotic and Chinese cultural elements. More importantly, its association with CYLC promises the company a bright future. In China the biggest risk to the gaming industry, like many other industries, is an unexpected change in government policy. With its ‘red’ theme and the CYLC as its second largest shareholder, the company is guaranteed a competitive position in the gaming industry. Following the success of \textit{Resistance War Online}, the company has developed \textit{Unsheathed Swords} and a number of other games with Chinese cultural elements. As a result of these advantages and its growth in recent years, the company is said to have ranked number 15 in Chinese online game companies in 2009.\textsuperscript{45}

The content of the games produced by ZQgame.com and its antecedent company, PowerNet, is also significant. The Resistance War to Japan largely defines China’s national identity in the post-Cold War era. While the War of Resistance against Japan is now seen as China’s ‘good war’, there are many issues that shape group and personal understandings of why the war was ‘good’.\textsuperscript{46} To the Chinese Party-state, the Resistance War is a ‘good war’ because it serves not only as political leverage to pressure Japan but also as a national memory to unify the divided forces of Chinese society under the banner of patriotism. Moreover, it helps maximize the Party-state’s legitimacy, which nowadays largely depends on its economic performance. As the deputy head of the Publication Bureau of the Central Propaganda Department pointed out in a speech given at the June 2009 Computer World Internet Branch Annual Conference:

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  \item \textsuperscript{43} ‘Zhongqing baowang Li Ruijie: yi xin wangyou chanpin cu yeji zengzhang’ ['Li Ruijie at ZQgame.com: increase growth by creating new online games'], available at: http://www.wayx5.com/news/item.asp?id = d3Q5dXV6dDwlleSwLkmCRhnxdezQ6dzaz3kLj (accessed September 2011).
  \item \textsuperscript{44} ‘Zhongqing baowang shangshi chenggong yinfa shangshi chao’ ['The success of ZQgame.com leads the trend of online game companies entering stock market'], available at: http://stock.jrj.com.cn/ipo/2010/02/0414096929516.shtml (accessed June 2010).
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Zhang Ruoyu, ‘Zhongqing baowang de hongse qingjie’.
\end{itemize}
Online games develop intelligence and thinking and have got all young people organized via modern means. At the same time (online games) have generated great profit for our websites. Their contribution is very significant.47

It is clear that online games in China have allowed the Party-state to ‘kill two birds with one stone’. Through policy regulations, financial support, and partnership with private game companies, the Party-state has turned the Chinese online game industry into a profitable industry as well as a vehicle of soft power and an instrument for patriotic education.

The gaming industry might likewise feel that the War of Resistance is ‘good’ in the sense that it provides business opportunities and helps generate huge profits. A recent empirical study suggests that Chinese entrepreneurs in the post-Reform era tend to choose to side with the state because they can benefit most from working within and sustaining the system rather than challenging it.48 With the help of the business-minded nationalistic game makers, the state has utilized the CCP legendary myth of the Resistance War to strengthen its legitimacy. It is fair to say that popular nationalism and official nationalism merged with the development of the Resistance War-themed online games.

**The official narrative of the resistance war in online games**

The Resistance War-themed games embody what the Chinese state wants the people to remember about the Resistance War because their storylines are strictly based on the officially sanctioned narrative. Therefore, they serve as a lens through which to observe the CCP official historiography of the Resistance War. This official historiography has changed since the end of the Cold War, and the most obvious and remarkable manifestation of the new official attitude toward the war experience in public culture was the much more positive tone taken towards the role of the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek.49 Since the 1990s, in order to assure a peaceful reunification with Taiwan, the Party-state has begun to acknowledge the Nationalist resistance effort during the war and to commemorate prominent Nationalist resistance heroes in movies, books, and exhibitions, and has even named places after them.50 In fact, both Jin Zhenzhong and Ji Xingwen, important Nationalist

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generals, appear in the narrative of the Resistance War in history textbooks for secondary schools.\footnote{Jiunian yiwu jiaoyu sannian zhi chuji zhongguo lishi [Chinese History Textbook for the Three-Year Junior High School Component of the Nine-Year Compulsory Education], Vol. 4 (Beijing: People’s Education Publication, 1995), pp. 64–69.}

The games produced by ZQgame.com, Resistance War Online and Unsheathed Swords, both take this approach. Nation’s Prestige, a less-popular Resistance War-themed online game by Guangdong Data Communication Network Co., Ltd in collaboration with the CYLC in 2008, likewise reflects the more positive tone toward the Nationalist government, yet in different ways.

In Resistance War Online, the first and perhaps the most popular online game based on the Resistance War, gamers can only play the part of Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-led armies: the Eighth Route Army, the New Fourth Army, and the Northeast Anti-Japanese Coalition. However, this does not mean that Resistance War Online does not depict the Nationalist resistance forces. In fact, Resistance War Online reconstructs important battles which the Nationalist army fought independently or in collaboration with the CCP armies, such as the Battle of Shanghai, the Battle of Taierzhuang, the Battle of Pingxingguan, the Battle of Changsha, the Battle of Taiyuan, and the Battle of Kunlun Mountain. Indeed, the Nationalist armies and individuals dominate the game’s ‘instances’, which are special areas where historical events are constructed and groups of gamers can enter and complete activities privately without other gamers’ interference.

In Unsheathed Swords, the Resistance War is divided into two battlefields: the Nationalist army’s battlefield in the unoccupied region, and the CCP army’s battlefield in the occupied region. Once the gamers enter the game site, they are given two choices: they can either fight with Li Yunlong, a regiment commander in the CCP-led New Fourth Route Army, or join Chu Yunfei, a regiment commander in the Nationalist resistance force. The CCP’s positive attitude toward the Nationalists’ contribution is evident in the way the game reconstructs the war.

Furthermore, Unsheathed Swords was adapted from a popular TV series of the same title. The hero was Li Yunlong, and the TV series depicted not only the fierce battles he fought but also his interaction and friendship with Chu Yunfei. They were comrades-in-arms during the Resistance War but opponents in the Civil War afterwards. During the Cultural Revolution, Li Yunlong was persecuted and shot himself with a Browning pistol, a gift from Chu Yunfei, who was heartbroken when he received the news in his home in Taiwan. Although Unsheathed Swords successfully leveraged the popularity of the TV series, the characters were inevitably simplified in the game, which emphasized playing experiences instead of character development. Nevertheless, the fact that the CYCL sponsored a war game based on such a story suggests that the Party-state’s stance toward the experience of the war and CCP–KMT relations during the war has changed even further.

Nation’s Prestige also reflects this new interpretation of the Resistance War. It not only reflects the new line on the Nationalist government but also depicts people from all classes of society. Gamers can play soldiers, scholars, martial arts masters and even Green Gang members. It reflects Chiang Kai-shek’s idea of a ‘total war’: from east to west and from north to south, men and women, young and old, fight the
Resistance War in unity. Chiang’s idea of the war was quoted in promotional materials about Nation’s Prestige, although his name was not mentioned. Nevertheless, these games as well as the others do reflect a new, more positive assessment of the role of the Nationalist armies in fighting the Japanese.

Gamers’ experiences of the virtual Resistance War

Resistance War Online and Unsheathed Swords are both two-dimensional massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). Like all other MMORPG, these games involve a very large number of players who interact with one another within the virtual game world, which continues to exist and evolve while the player is away from the game. They have the general features of combat MMORPG, such as various battle scenes, war strategies, and air—sea—land dynamics as well as the capacity to support cross-server drills of tens of thousands of gamers. Aside from its entertainment value, the political agenda of these two games is quite explicit. As stated in its widely-published game description, the purpose of Resistance War Online is to ‘correctly guide the young gamer to deeply understand the profound significance of the war against Nazism’, that is, to understand the war from the officially desired perspective.52

Despite the Party-state’s efforts to project a positive image of online games and the online game industry, some parents, teachers, and intellectuals are still uncertain about the merits of using online games for patriotic education. Some believe that patriotic education is a serious matter, and should not be promoted by online games. These groups argue that games have caused addiction among a growing number of youth, which has in turn caused severe disruptions to their studies and daily lives. Some accuse the developers of the Resistance War-based games of making profit out of the Resistance War while treating the history of the war lightly. For example, the game’s rule allowing the Chinese resistance forces to fight each other is said to defame the resistance forces. Others argue that some patriotic games distort historical facts and lack even basic knowledge of the Resistance War.53

Although patriotic games initially attracted hundreds of thousands of players, the number of players has declined in recent years. The most obvious reason is that these games cannot compete with other imported or domestic games made with better technology. A large number of players are attracted by the ‘red’ themes of the patriotic games, but soon find that these games are not as fun as games with other content and they gradually stop playing.

Others have linked the decline in numbers to the high prices of in-game items such as weapons and uniforms, and to unpleasant practices of fellow players. China’s online games all follow the in-game item payment model, namely, the games are free to play but the player has to purchase equipment while playing. The sales of the in-game items constitute the main income of the game’s operators, who are usually also the original game developers. In some games, the in-game items can be very

expensive and the chance of equipment being damaged in the battle is very high. In fact, gamers’ complaints about the high equipment damage rate in *Resistance War Online* appear repeatedly in the online game forum. Some gamers accuse the game company of being too greedy and charging too much. As one gamer pointed out:

Majority players are deprived of having fun. . . . Nobody likes killing city monsters every day because it can just get you one level higher. . . . What else can you do? You need equipment, which you have to pay for. Even used equipment and DIY [Do it yourself] equipment is expensive. OK, you grit your teeth and invest some money. You are about to gain 10 points. Suddenly your equipment is wrecked, and your money is gone. . . . You take out all your money and get a piece of decent equipment, but BD [PowerNet] puts out something new and you have to pay more money. The rich players don’t care and they have fun every day; the poor players can no longer hang on . . . At each rip-off, a group of players will leave. If this goes on, very soon the end [of the game] will come. . . . We the proletarians should be given a chance to survive. The capitalists cannot exist without the existence of the proletarians.54

Such frustration is a very common experience among the *Resistance War Online* players. Although playing the game is free, gamers have to pay for expensive equipment if they want to wage a serious battle. Despite its patriotic theme, *Resistance War Online* is fundamentally a profit-driven game. The ultimate concern of the Party-state is correct ideology, but business prioritizes profits. The above player’s experience clearly reveals the conflict between ideology and profit in the privatization process of the cultural industry. As the Party-state increasingly depends on private investment in the previously forbidden cultural industry, it will become more challenging for the Party-state to control the content of the product.

The Party-state intends to utilize patriotic online games to indoctrinate and entertain the populace, yet such patriotic games may not fulfil this purpose. The player’s experience, for example, highlights the divergence between rich and poor, a prominent characteristic of the current social conditions in China which sharply contrasts with the current regime’s slogan of constructing a harmonious society. The Party-state intends to use its legendary war experience to maximize its legitimacy and unite the nation against one common enemy in an increasingly fractured Chinese society. But *Resistance War Online* fails to reinforce the ruling ideology calling for a socialist harmonious society which features democracy, equity, and justice.

The Resistance War-themed online games have actually created a virtual platform for conflicts among the Chinese people. Feuds among resistance forces are another much discussed experience in *Resistance War Online* forums and gamers’ blogs. Since it is more efficient and faster to move up to higher levels in a group than in single-person play, many gamers organize various groups. Some groups are huge and have hundreds of members, but these groups also frequently engage in large-scale battles among themselves. A long-time *Resistance War Online* player, whose avatar was called Library Flyer, posted a lengthy article to commemorate the second anniversary of the opening of the Nanjing Server on 19 January 2008, in which he recorded his experience of several years’ inter-group battles as a special force assassinator. His writing is filled

with stories of conflicts among different guilds. For example, Library Flyer gave a
detailed account of his contest with the head of ‘Iron Blood China’, nicknamed Kitchen
Knife, which happened on 18 September 2008. Many gamers watched the contest. The
battle ended in his ‘instant killing’ of Kitchen Knife, who had agreed to leave ‘Iron
Blood China’ if he lost. But the angry Kitchen Knife reneged on his promise to quit the
group, and instead managed to get another group involved so the feud continued.55

These virtual resistance forces are supposed to fight against their common enemy,
the Japanese, but internal feuds sometimes distract them from this fight. In Library
Flyer’s account, there is no mention of the Japanese in the entire narrative. The day of
the showdown between Kitchen Knife and the head of the ‘Iron Blood China’ gang
was, in fact, the anniversary of the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Resistance War
Online had staged a special military operation against the Japanese to commemorate
the anniversary. Instead of taking part in the special operation against the Japanese,
Library Flyer fought another resistance soldier. Many other resistance soldiers were
onlookers during the contest. In this case, and in others, the players are easily
distracted from the patriotic nature of the game and have, instead, turned the games
into feuds among the Chinese resistance forces.

Ironically, the internal feuds between forces are actually closer to the historical
reality than the notion of perfectly united resistance against the Japanese. One can
easily find similarities between the feuds among the virtual resistance forces and the
conflicts among military factions and warlords in modern Chinese history. The
phenomenon of feuds remains despite several decades of ideological, societal,
cultural, and technological changes in Chinese society. The reasons behind this are
beyond the scope of this study. However, it is fair to say that the Party-state’s strategy
of ‘indoctrainment’56—indoctrination and entertainment in a single package of
online games—has not been entirely successful.

In addition, it is ironic that Chinese patriotic games with an anti-Japanese theme
turn out to have strong pro-Japanese elements. The artistic style of Resistance War
Online reflects some characteristics of Japanese manga, a Japanese comic book style
which enjoys global influence, especially in Taiwan, South Korea, and China. The
avatars of the Chinese resistance soldiers in Resistance War Online and other
Games and game play involve a global element and transcend geographical, cultural,
and social boundaries. It is a challenging task for the Party-state to implement its
patriotic agenda in an increasingly globalized environment.

Conclusion: transformation of ideological work in the Internet era

China’s digital game industry was highly involved in the rise of popular nationalism
and national politics. This study of the emergence of Chinese patriotic digital games

55. ‘Tiqian zhuhe Nanjing fu kaifu liang zhounian bing yici jinian wode kangzhan zhi lu’ [‘Congratulate the

56. Wanning Sun, ‘Semiotic over-determination or “indoctrainment”: television, citizenship and the Olympic
Games’, in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Michael Keane and Yin Hong, eds, Media in China: Consumption, Content
in the 1990s and early 2000s reveals that popular nationalism in contemporary China came into being without direct involvement of the government. Patriotic games during this period of time, mostly PC games and video games, were designed by nationalistic game developers who reacted to the perceived rising militarism in Japan or produced by business-minded game developers who attempted to profit from the anti-Japanese sentiment at the time. It supports the argument that contemporary Chinese nationalism is not merely a top-down phenomenon and that Chinese people and their emotions have played an important part in it.

The analysis of patriotic digital games based on China’s Resistance War against Japan (1937–1945) highlights the interplay of the state’s political agenda, business interests, and nationalistic sentiments. After the government classified online games as ‘cultural products’ and heavily invested in the online game industry, patriotic online games became a joint endeavour between the Party-state and private companies. Thus, Chinese popular nationalism and official nationalism became highly intertwined.

As the CCP tries to transform itself from a revolutionary party that rules by ideological right into a party in power that rules by popular consent, its propaganda efforts have also undergone a major transformation. In the information age the Party-state has embraced the Internet as an effective tool for ideological work and its propaganda methods have been enhanced by information and communication technologies. China has not only developed a sophisticated censorship system to control the flow of information on the Internet but has also made the Internet ‘a new locus’ for propaganda.57

The Party-state views the Internet as an ideological battlefield and utilizes digital games as a weapon to win the hearts and minds of the country’s youth. Under the new government policy, 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. The case of ZQgame.com illustrates that, the Party itself, through the Communist Youth League of China, has ventured into the game of partial ownership and control of online game companies.

It is worth noting that the Party-state’s online games policy is based on the notion of ‘killing two birds with one stone’. The Party-state’s decision to be involved in the online game industry is not only based on ideological concerns, but also on an awareness of the huge economic potential of the online game industry. Through policy regulations, financial support, and partnerships with private game companies, the Party-state has turned the Chinese online game industry into a profitable industry. As a vehicle to convene the Party-state’s ideology, contemporary patriotic online games are no different from the popular rice-seedling songs in the Yan’an period, or the eight model plays during the Cultural Revolution. However, there is a major difference; the rice-seedling songs and the model plays were largely consumed freely by the populace; patriotic online games, instead, are a ‘cultural commodity’. They function not only as an ideological instrument but also as a means to make a profit for the private game companies and their shareholders—including the Party-state.

Over a decade ago, optimistic scholars anticipated that the Chinese propaganda state would erode as a result of the commercialization of media. More recent studies find instead that the Party has been very adept at utilizing commercialization to enhance its propaganda system. The fact that the Party-state is pushing forward the commercialization process of the cultural sector as part of its cultural system reform does not mean that it has loosened its control over cultural products. Instead, commercialization of the cultural industry has contributed to the entrenchment of state control in the cultural sector. The Party-state has adopted new means of control, such as offering favourable contracts, licenses and permits to operate. Although the overall power and efficacy of China’s propaganda state today has indeed declined a great deal due to the commercialization of the media and the cultural sector, the CCP propaganda apparatus remains fully capable of controlling whatever kind of information it intends to reach the public, and the issue is really one of ‘selective enforcement’.

The study of state-sponsored patriotic online games presented here shows how the Party-state has successfully integrated online games into the national propaganda machine within the framework of a commercialized cultural industry. The state provides incentives and support while private game companies deliver products. The commercialization of the cultural sector works ‘to kill two birds with one stone’. On the one hand, it has provided the necessary institutional imperatives for private enterprises in the cultural sector to pursue innovation, sometimes even to the extent of offering content that challenges the Party-state. On the other hand, these companies have developed a vested interest in maintaining the current political-economic order by following the Party line in pursuit of financial gains.

However, this pragmatic model is not without problems. The Party-state and private game companies each have their own agenda. While the Party-state is primarily concerned with correct ideology, business prioritizes profits. There is always contention between the ‘Party line and the bottom line’. Despite their patriotic theme, state-sponsored online games are fundamentally profit-driven. The experience of the gaming public with these state-sponsored patriotic online games is not necessarily in harmony with the officially desired ideology. As the Party-state increasingly depends on private capital and enterprises in the commercialized cultural industry, it has to face the risk that sometimes the product delivered is not exactly what it expected.
