

Experiencing China's Intangible Cultural Heritage in Role-playing Games: Comparative Studies between MMORPGs and Larps

Abstract: In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted to preserving intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through games. From a combined game studies and heritage studies perspective, role-playing games (RPGs) have a unique advantage in that they immerse the player in a character to experience and understand the basics of culture in an engaging way. Among different types of role-playing games, live-action role-playing (larp) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have a great potential to promote the learning of intangible cultural expressions and traditions that make them available to a wider public. In China, MMORPGs have had a positive impact on preserving China's intangible heritage in virtual space and larps, specifically in the form of Jubensha, are also playing an important role in the same way.

The purpose of this study is to delve into how the ICH of China is being represented in MMORPGs and larps as an educational tool. With that target in mind, a close reading of selected MMORPG games -- *A Dream of Jianghu* and *Justice Online* -- and a larp game -- *The Secret of the Gauze Lantern* -- was conducted. The goals of this research are to understand what cultural experiences are integrated in those role-playing games to introduce Chinese ICH and explore the main differences between them in representing those intangible cultural elements. After analyzing these RPGs in-depth, I argue that both MMORPGs and larps show potential to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of China; while MMORPGs present national-level intangible elements from different regions of China, Jubensha as a kind of larp focuses more on the indigenous traditions and customs of small-scale local areas.

Keywords: Role-playing games, intangible cultural heritage, Jubensha, MMORPG, China

Yuqiao Liu

yuqiao.liu.1633@student.uu.se

1. INTRODUCTION

China is a country with a rich diversity of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). So far, China has 42 elements inscribed on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and a total of 1557 nation-level ICHs recognized by the Chinese government (Yang 2021). To give some examples, acupuncture and moxibustion contains the wisdom of the ancient Chinese in the field of medicine. Taijiquan, or Tai Chi, is one of the traditional physical practices from ancient China, which can be found in various martial art movies. However, a noticeable fact is that most of these intangible heritage treasures are at stake because of the lack of young successors. In recent years, role-playing games (RPGs) have become one of the hottest platforms for promoting the awareness of intangible cultural heritage in China. Importantly, China's young generations show a strong interest in participating in RPG games as a part of their lifestyle. For this reason, merging intangible heritage elements with RPG games is a possible method to safeguard endangered ICH of China.

A Dream of Jianghu and *Justice Online* are two popular MMORPG games among China's Gen Z, which portray a part of ICH elements during the in-game activities. Meanwhile, the local government of China tends to promote the audience to experience indigenous intangible heritage examples through playing *The Secret of the Gauze Lantern*, a kind of larp game, also known as Jubensha in China. The object of this study aims to understand how China's ICHs are represented in MMORPGs and Jubensha, and compare their similarities and differences in depicting intangible heritage elements between these two types of RPG games through case studies.

2. THE INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF CHINESE CULTURE

Heritage is a concept that *is primarily not about the past, but instead about our relationship with the present and the future* (Harrison 2012). Traditionally, researchers focus more on physical cultural heritage, such as buildings, artifacts, books, and landscapes. However, culture is a living and continuously evolving aspect of human life, and immaterial cultural elements play a significant role in representing the living culture of human communities, their evolution, and their continuing development. In 2003, UNESCO officially defined intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

As a multi-ethnic country, Chinese culture is a broad concept that contains various ICH from different ethnic groups. While the majority of ICHs are mainly associated with Han people, minority groups in China have also kept their traditions and customs throughout its long history and enclosed living environment. However, many ICHs are in danger due to cultural uniformity and globalization. For this reason, the Chinese government issued the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People’s Republic of China in 2011 and had specific long-term plans to protect ICHs (Cao et al. 2018). At the same time, the Chinese government has invested a total of 7.76 billion yuan (about \$1.2 billion) over the past decade in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage projects.

In recent years, games have shown their great potential to represent China’s intangible heritage. Researchers within China demonstrate that digital games have a positive effect on safeguarding and disseminating ICHs, such as Hangzhou cuisine culture (Cui, Zhao and Wang 2021). An increasing number of offline board and larp games contain ICH elements with historical settings.

3. ROLE-PLAYING AS AN INTANGIBLE HERITAGE PRACTICE

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “role-playing” means changing one’s behavior to fulfill a social role. Researchers point out that role-playing is an ideal pedagogical method for experiential and active learning (Russell and John 2010). Participating in role-playing exercises is considered to be particularly effective for enhancing multicultural understanding (Junn 1994). This means that role-playing as a practice has its unique advantage of connecting with cultural and heritage studies.

Considerable scholarly attention has been focused on the potential of merging role-playing and intangible heritage studies. Hannigan (1998) uses the word “edutainment” to mean the “joining together of educational and cultural activities with the commerce and technology of the entertainment world.” At present, the gap between role-playing games and intangible heritage works continues to close. Mochocki (2020) states that intangible heritage permeates almost all types of role-playing games, such as tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), live-action role-playing games (larp), and hobbyist historical reenactment. Looking closely at computer role-playing games, *Virtual Warrane II: Sacred Tracks of the Gadigal* is a great example of safeguarding the Aboriginal intangible heritage of Australia through an immersive role-playing experience (Majewski 2018). Although the depiction of intangible cultural heritage is still limited in RPG games, role-playing as a practice is a useful pedagogical tool to encourage participants to experience cultural activities and understand the value of intangible heritage from all over the world.

4. JUBENSHA IN CHINA

Jubensha, also called murder mystery game, is a kind of live-action role-playing game popular in China. A typical Jubensha game usually takes place among a group of 4-12 players and lasts for 3-5 hours each session. During the course of the game, players will be given their own identity and background story in a murder mystery story and then placed in specific environments which are built and decorated to simulate the setting in the storyline. They are required to find the “Murderer” within a short time by interacting with NPCs, collecting criminal evidence, and discussing with each other.

Jubensha was initially from the West but grew rapidly in China’s role-playing game market. In 2013, the game *Death Wears White* was translated and introduced into China, which gave Chinese players an opportunity to experience this sort of offline role-playing game for the first time. The name Jubensha, also created at that time, implies the game usually involves murder mystery scripts in Chinese language. Over the next few years, an increasing number of tabletop role-playing games entered the Chinese game market but were only popular among small groups of board game lovers. Since 2016, Jubensha has seen explosive growth in its popularity owing to the hit TV show *Who’s the Murderer*, which premiered in 2016 and spanned 102 episodes over seven seasons. The game has steadily become more immersive and larger-scale, with costumes and scene decorations. At present, there are more than 30,000 Jubensha studios and stores in China, expecting to reach 23.89 billion yuan (around \$3.76 billion) by the end of 2022 (Meng 2022).

It is no doubt that Jubensha has become a huge hit among China’s Gen Z. According to the 2021 report on physical Jubensha consumer insight by Meituan (2021), nearly 75% of Jubensha consumers are under the age of 30, and over 60 percent play Jubensha more than twice a month. Chinese young people consider Jubensha as an ideal way to release stress and get away from the daily grind of life.

The success of Jubensha has significantly boosted the Chinese larp game industry, and new forms of larp games have emerged and been favored by customers. Today, visitors in Wuhan are invited to play a larp game, *The Riddle Reef*, with experienced actors and actresses and experience traditional performing arts on board a steamship. In other cities, an increasing number of specific themed hotels for larp games in China have emerged in recent years.

5. METHODOLOGY

Role-playing games contain plenty of heritage information, which is not obvious and is often hidden in the game world. For this reason, I will be doing a close reading of selected games. Close reading is an effective research method to deconstruct the structure of a complex passage and analyze its meaning in detail. Traditionally, close reading has been considered as a research method for deep analysis of how a literary text works, from poems to novels. But nowadays, game researchers utilize close reading as a way to analyze the representation of games and study meaning within a game.

The close reading process of this paper will start with playing these RPG games repeatedly and carefully noting down the key messages that can typically represent Chinese intangible cultural heritage. Ultimately, I will analyze the similarities and differences between selected MMORPG and Jubensha games.

6. ROLE-PLAYING GAME ANALYSIS

6.1 *A Dream of Jianghu*

Developed and published by NetEase, *A Dream of Jianghu* is a Chinese MMORPG based on martial arts culture. At the beginning of the game, the interface allows players to create a character avatar and determine their martial arts identities, from Shaolin to Wudang. During the journey, players can experience a diverse martial arts life in the world of Jianghu; update their equipment and skills; and learn various martial arts through main quests and daily tasks.

Although the game is largely set in the fantasy world of ancient China, it contains various experiences related to intangible cultural heritage through game activities. In 2019, *A Dream of Jianghu* added the game content “Intangible Heritage Block,” which allows players to participate in learning and experiencing eleven of China’s intangible heritage examples from different areas of China. Take the representation of Wood-block New Year Pictures as an example. First, after interacting with NPCs, players can have a basic understanding of this folk craft, such as its origins and popular themes. And then, side tasks guide players toward understanding the process of making a wood-block picture and ultimately require them to create their own. Finally, as a reward, players can not only get experience points and game coins but also receive a wood-block picture as a limited-edition prop.

Another example is Miao embroidery. Unlike the other ten intangible heritage examples portrayed in the game, which draw upon Han ICH, Miao embroidery is the remarkable handicraft technique utilized by the Miao people, who are ethnic minorities in southwest China. *A Dream of Jianghu* gives players an opportunity to experience the remarkable intangible techniques during play.

6.2 *Justice Online*

In *Justice Online*, the representation of intangible heritage has a close connection with game activities taking place during traditional Chinese festivals. For example, during the Lantern Festival, players can experience a nation-level ICH, *Lantern Riddles*, through various celebration activities and game tasks. In real life, guessing lantern riddles is a significant part that requires lantern owners to write riddles on a piece of paper and post them on the lanterns. If visitors have solutions to the riddles, they can pull the paper out and go to the lantern owners to check their answer. If they are right, they will get a little gift as a reward.

Justice Online gives the lantern riddle a second life in the digital world. At the beginning, the player needs to receive the tasks from NPCs and walk to the Lantern Riddles block in the city. Topics of these riddles often contain game content, common sense, and traditional Chinese culture. After giving the correct answer to these riddles alone or with friends, they can receive plenty of in-game rewards. Although guessing lantern riddles is only a temporary game that occurs once a year, it has become one of the best festival activities for players who can receive various rewards by using their wisdom. In the digital age, rapid urbanization and fast-paced life challenged the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, but computer RPG games keep this tradition alive in the virtual world.

Another intangible cultural element we can find from in-game festival activities is Mooncake gambling, which has been registered in the second batch of The National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of China. It is a 300-year-old custom designed as part of the celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival in the Fujian Province. In the game, the representation of Mooncake gambling reflects its core gameplay and traditions in an accurate way. Six players are assigned and roll six dice in turn. According to the dice combination, the player will receive a title of rank, from Xiucan to Zhuangyuan, and win specific game rewards.

Therefore, Mooncake gambling retains its core mechanism and rules in the RPG game world, which gives players a chance to learn this intangible heritage by playing. As the design team of the game said on the social network platform Weibo, “We must resolutely keep walking the path of passing on China’s cultural essence.”

6.3 *The Secret of the Gauze Lantern*

Supported by the government of Gansu province, *The Secret of Gauze Lantern* is a famous Jubensha that introduces one example of China’s intangible heritage: the Gauze Lantern. During this offline RPG game, the identity of each player is a time traveler from modern times, and their goal is to find the real secret in the chaotic town by deducting the critical information and discussing it with peers.

Walking through the Hekou ancient town, the player navigates and makes choices by interacting with non-player characters (NPCs) in different buildings. In order to collect critical clues and decrypt the secret behind the game narrative, they are required to understand the story and production process of Gauze Lantern at the beginning of the game. Then, Hekou Masters will give players various main and side quests based on the Hekou traditional folklore, and feedback from NPCs helps players discover the truth of the secret. Finally, players need to work together to make a Gauze Lantern by themselves, which is a considerable element influencing the end of the game. In addition, during the game journey, players can also get in touch with other local intangible heritage examples, such as the Huanxian Shadow play, pitch-pot game, and Dingxi paper cut. As a result, this Jubensha, as an offline RPG game, contains various intangible heritage experiences of the Gansu province and promotes experiencing them in an immersive game environment.

7. CONCLUSION

This article aims to map out how China’s intangible cultural heritage is represented in MMORPG and larp games. With the support of literature reviews, the analysis shows that both Chinese MMORPG games and Jubensha depict the ICH elements with their design and play a positive role in preserving Chinese intangible cultural heritage. While MMORPGs have the advantage of showing traditional crafts and folk activities from different areas of China in a fast and economical way, Jubensha, as a subclass of larp game, encourages participants to experience indigenous traditional skills in a hands-on fashion and by hand during through play and provide them in-depth knowledge of intangible culture and customs in the physical world.

Noticeably, MMORPG games tend to portray various forms of intangible cultural heritage of different minority groups through gameplay and festival activities but usually introduce the ICH knowledge at the introductory level. Conversely, Jubensha, as a type of larp game, mainly focuses on one or two specific customs and traditions of the majority ethnicity, the Han people. For this reason, designers of Jubensha often carefully embed their familiar intangible culture into the game narrative and gameplay and provide in-depth ICH experiences during play.

Due to space limitations, this paper only analyzes the representation of ICHs in two MMORPG games and one larp game. In the future, academic work should focus on finding and analyzing China’s ICHs from minority groups within RPG games and evaluate their effectiveness in minority ICH protection and preservation.

REFERENCES

- Cao, Mengtian, Sichao Zhang, Jie Zhao, and Yi Hong. 2018. "The Current Status, Problems and Integration of the Protection and Inheritance of China's World Cultural Heritage in the Context of Digitalization." *IOP Conference Series. Earth and Environmental Science* 199, no. 2: 22061.
- Cui, Chenyang, Zhao Youbing, and Wang Lejing. 2021. "Protection and Dissemination of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Based on Digital Games." *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 8, no. 4: 483-491.
- Hannigan, John. 1998. *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*. London: Routledge.
- Harrison, Rodney. 2012. *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108857>
- Junn, Ellen N. 1994. "'The Party': Role Playing to Enhance Multicultural Understanding." *College Teaching* 42, no. 3: 109-110.
- Majewski, Jakub. 2018. "Playing with Intangible Heritage: Video Game Technology and Procedural Re-Enactment." *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: Practices and Politics*, edited by Natsuko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith, 241–58. Routledge.
- Meng, Yang. 2022. "Popularity and Chaos of Live Action Role Playing Games in China." Cgtn.com. Accessed August 1, 2022. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-01-08/Popularity-and-chaos-of-Live-Action-Role-Playing-games-in-China-16EZPTu2c6I/index.html>
- Mochocki, Michal. 2020. *Role-Play as a Heritage Practice: Historical larp, Tabletop RPG and Reenactment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003130956>
- Russell, Carol and John Shepherd. 2010. "Online Role-Play Environments for Higher Education: Online Role-Play Environments." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 41, no. 6: 992-1002.
- Yang, Yang. 2021. "Nation Expands Intangible Cultural Heritage Item List." The State Council. http://english.www.gov.cn/news/pressbriefings/202106/11/content_WS60c2aba4c6d0df57f98db126.html

Yuqiao Liu is a game designer and researcher who received an M.A. degree in Game Design at Uppsala University. His research interests include game and culture studies, East Asian civilization, Chinese studies, Japanese history, and digital media studies.