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Gaming Chinese Soft Power: A Study of Swedish Players' Reception of Genshin Impact as a Cultural Export

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概要

本论文调查:1) 中国文化如何通过电子游戏《原神》得到反映呈现和输出, 以及 2)《原神》的游戏体验如何影响了瑞典游戏玩家对中国的看法。近几十年来, 软实力在中国的重要性增加了, 而电子游戏是一种新的战略。五位瑞典《原神》玩家接受了采访, 了解表达了他们的游戏体验以及在通过游戏中形成的对中国文化和社会的看法。本论文比较了对国内和全球的《原神》版本之间的差异进行了比较。本论文发现, 文化不仅体现在游戏中的璃月地区, 也体现在呈现其他文化中。本文的结论是,《原神》对瑞典玩家对中国的看法有积极和消极两方面的影响。

Abstract

This thesis investigates 1) How Chinese culture is represented and exported through the video game Genshin Impact, and 2) How the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influences Swedish players' perception of China. Soft power has increased in importance in recent decades in China and video games are a new strategy. Five Swedish Genshin Impact players were interviewed about their experience and perception of Chinese culture and society in the game. An observational comparison of the domestic and global versions was done. This thesis finds that culture is represented both in the in-game region Liyue but also in how Genshin Impact represents other cultures. In conclusion Genshin Impact influences Swedish players' perception of China in both positive and negative ways.

Keywords: Genshin Impact, transnationality, video games, soft power, 原神, 软实力, 电子游戏

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1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine how and what aspects of Chinese culture are being represented in the video game Genshin Impact (GI, 原神). It explores if GI has acted as a soft resource in exporting culture to international players and therefore impacting their perception of China.

This is examined through an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How is Chinese culture represented and exported through the video game Genshin Impact?
- How is the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influencing Swedish players' perception of China?

This thesis uses the two approaches of 1) briefly analysing and comparing the international and domestic to China versions of GI, specifically the in-game nation *Liyue* and 2) interviewing Swedish GI players on their experience of the game and perception of Chinese culture and society. The thesis will begin with an account of the setting of GI followed by a report and discussion of the concepts brought up in the interviews with relevant theory.

This thesis argues that while GI is popular and disseminates Chinese culture and a positive image through its localisation in the in-game nation Liyue, its choices of representation bring both a positive and negative influence to the Swedish players' perception of China. In the end it acts as a soft power to spread Chinese culture but also works to further China's role in the global gaming industry and is a strong contender to reckon with in the future.

2. Background

2.1 Soft power

The term soft power has become increasingly popular among Chinese politicians in recent decades along with the understanding of its importance for the country's ambition on the global scale. Mingjiang Li writes that at the meeting on January 4 2006 held by the Central Foreign Affairs Leadership Group, party chief and President Hu Jintao stated that "The increase in our nation's international status and influence will have to be demonstrated in hard

power such as the economy, science and technology, and defence, as well as in soft power such as culture" (Li, 2008). A tarnished reputation cannot be compensated for solely by an impressive economy. This is recognised further under the rule of Xi Jinping, who raised initiatives such as "the Chinese dream". In an announcement in 2014 Xi declared that "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world" (Shambaugh, 2015).

Neighbouring country South Korea has benefitted from soft power as a tool in nation branding. The Hallyu wave is one soft resource that has presented the country with a favourable image (Lee, 2009). In contrast to democratic countries like South Korea, Chinese soft power often goes hand in hand with state-led censorship, especially in the media industry (Xu and Schirato, 2015). Taking a look at the articles under culture in the newspaper China Daily it becomes clear that the ruling party also has an agenda of promoting traditional culture of heritage importance. China has previously taken to long-established methods of disseminating culture and language. However the soft power initiatives of installing Confucius Institutes in other countries have been met with suspicion and accusations of spreading propaganda (Luqiu and McCarthy, 2018).

2.2 Video games

Technology has always been a way of expressing and even constructing culture itself, continuously inventing new forms of cultural expression. Among the different aspects of culture and technology, video games are gaining increasing importance. As a carrier of culture video games have many ways to develop cultural representation from world layout to transmission of knowledge, ideas and values within the story narrative and characters. This shows the ability of games to be more than a form of entertainment but also educating and carrying ideology (Cerezo-Pizarro *et al.* 2023). Video games also differ from other forms of leisure activities in that they are an immersive experience where players are dissimilar, generating endless constructions of meaning within the game narrative. With video games on the rise and constantly developing new elements of play it is a rather new field of research sure to bring forth relevant data relating to the research aim.

2.3 Genshin Impact

Genshin Impact is an open-world role-playing game launched on 28 September 2020 from the Shanghai-based company MiHoYo (米哈游). It is a free to play game creating its revenue through voluntary in-game microtransactions and is playable across the platforms mobile, PC and Playstation. Due to the *gacha* setup, meaning that after a certain in-game currency spent the player is guaranteed a randomised object (in this case often a new character or weapon), players are encouraged to spend real-world money in order to acquire the desired result. According to statistics from the tracking firm *Sensor Tower*, GI was ranked the third revenue generating mobile game in the world two years after its release. It even ranked second for mobile player spending outside of China, showing the global success of the game (Chapple, 2022). To date, the fantasy anime-style landscape is made up of six nations with the final one to be released in an update in 2025. The regions all correspond to different real-world countries, with the nation *Liyue* acting as China and *Mondstadt* resembling the Germany area. These represent China's transnational visions. Players of GI in the body of "the Traveller" meet a multitude of different characters throughout the storyline in search of their lost twin. While journeying through the regions they solve quests, make friends and participate in the local culture. *Liyue Harbour*, the capital city of the nation Liyue resembles China by being the city of trade and commerce. Other analogies to China can be seen in the architecture, geography, fashion and culinary choices and of course the place names and cultural references to Chinese holidays such as the annual Lantern Rite Festival.

MiHoYo was commended by the Department of Science, Technology and Education at the General Office of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (文化和旅游部) in 2022 for being a case of digital innovation in culture and tourism, according to the Chinese game industry research website GameLook. It was the only gaming company to be placed in the top ten cases for its "exploration of cultural communication and tourism promotion model with games as the carrier" (GameLook, 2022).

3. Literature and Theory

3.1 Soft power and culture

Joseph Nye coined the term soft power in the 1990s and explains it to be "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants" in contrast to ordering a country to do the very same through 'hard power' such as military means (Nye, 1990). This concept was formed with American foreign relations in mind and tends to expand in meaning when discussed in the Chinese context by Chinese scholars (Repnikova, 2022). Repnikova analyses this discourse in her book *Chinese Soft Power* and writes that scholars often do not necessarily separate soft and hard power, where hard power can be argued to be the foundation of or prerequisite for soft power through, for example, economic growth. Furthermore, it has become clear that culture with its ambiguous meanings is the core of soft power and that when the phrase is used in the speeches of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping it is actually synonymous with the term 'cultural soft power' (Repnikova, 2022). When speaking about soft power and the Chinese dream it implies showing the Chinese ideology and traditional culture as a way to resist influence from the West domestically and legitimise China's narrative internationally (Repnikova, 2022). Chinese academics underline the urgency of the symbiotic cooperation of soft and hard power drawing the mind to Nye's own smart power (Repnikova, 2022), with Guoming Yu stating that "the strength of our voice does not match our position in the world. That affects the extent to which China is accepted by the world. If our voice does not match our role, however strong we are, we remain a crippled giant" (Guo and Lye, 2011 cited in Zhao, 2013).

3.2 Soft power and video games

Sport has long been a field exercising both hard and soft power, and China launched a Football Development Plan in 2016 in the hopes of it becoming a part of China's global recognition (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). The recent rise of the esport industry in China has opened up a new field to be capitalised upon and in "Esports diplomacy – China's soft power building in the digital era" the writers state that "China looks to broaden its geopolitics limits and spread its power globally by wielding soft power beyond its borders through esports diplomacy" (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). They write that since the current theory on esport diplomacy is lacking they have proposed a theoretical framework based on models of sports diplomacy and Chinese public discourse of esports to give space to further the

knowledge in this area for future research. The esport diplomacy model explains how "esports has been transformed into a public diplomacy instrument through China's quest to build soft power" through the three themes esports events, esports human capital and esports producers and products. This model does not fully work on GI as it is not a sport but a leisure game. However, it can be counted as a product that works towards development in the gaming industry, tourism and socio-economy and therefore is an example of cultural identity and attraction.

3.3 Genshin Impact

Despite GI being a recent game, released in 2020, there has been a number of papers written on the research topic of it bearing and disseminating Chinese culture. Fen[1] and Wang[2] (2024, 2023) similarly approach the aspects of what they believe represent Chinese culture in the game, writing about the landscape, characters, music and spiritual core of the game as well as the challenges GI faces with translation localisation when attracting an international audience. They both concluded that taking the popularity of the game into consideration GI has succeeded in expressing Chinese traditional culture. However, judging by the rhetoric used, the papers are written from a biased Chinese perspective and may therefore have presented an overly positive image of reality.

Unlike the works mentioned above this study does not limit itself to the in-game nation Liyue but also delves deeper into the transnational make up of GI and explores representations of Chinese society as well as traditional culture. In addition, it employs the perspective of Swedish players to see what parts of Chinese culture are actually making an impact. One study, "What Inspires Retellings - A Study of the Game Genshin Impact" (Greting, Mao and Palosaari Eladhari, 2023), has done fieldwork among international GI players but on the topic of GI and fanfiction.

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[1] Fen, Y. (2024). The International Communication of Chinese Culture in the Context of Games - A Case Study of Genshin Impact. In: *2023 2nd International Conference on Educational Science and Social Culture.* Tianjin, China, December 22-24 2023 https://doi.org/10.1051/shsconf/202418704031

[2] Wang, X.(2023). Chinese Games and Cultural Dissemination: A Case Study of Genshin Impact. *Communications in Humanities Research* 8(1): pp. 19-30. DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/8/20230947.

The sparse amount of research done on GI and Chinese games as a soft power tool disseminating Chinese culture and values makes this an important field for further study as China grows as a global gaming competitor.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is organised into two parts with a data report and analysis adopting an interpretive content analysis followed by a discussion. The data is also divided into two parts. The first one being my own observations of the differences in global and domestic GI. Then the interview results are discussed in six different sections relating to the research questions. The theoretical framework of this thesis is created through the data report being explained and analysed through a number of concepts; censorship, language, race, soft power and transnationality. The discussion consists of theory in part from Jef Folkerts' (2010) discourse on video games as a cultural product from which meaning can be created, and in part from Shaoyu Yuan's (2024) investigation of video games as a tool for soft power in China. These are used to explain how Chinese culture is represented in GI and how it influences the players.

4. Methodology

4.1 Data selection

Two methods were employed in order to research what representations of Chinese culture can be found in GI and how it influences international players' perception of China. The main one was through qualitative interviews with GI players and the second one was an observation of the game.

4.1.1 Interviews

In order to answer the two research questions, I interviewed five Swedish GI players about their gaming experience and perception of Chinese culture. For the sake of simplifying the search process of suitable candidates I chose to represent international players with Swedish gamers only. I employed a version of the snowball sampling technique where I asked people in my surroundings if they knew of GI players likely willing to participate in the research until I had a desired number for the study's time frame of two weeks in October. In order to be a suitable candidate, the participants had to have played GI for at least 2 years since at the time GI had recently celebrated its four-year anniversary. Consistent players for half of that

time were deemed enthusiastic and knowledgeable enough about the game to satisfy the aim of the study.

The interview included a section of questions on the in-game region Liyue as that is where the most examples of Chinese culture can be found. The rest of the interview covered their perception of China in relation to the game as well as overarching questions on their gaming style and preferences to understand their responses further.

Whereas the majority of the interviews were held in English, one was held in Swedish to accommodate the interviewee's most confident self-expression. Furthermore, while two of the interviews could be held in person, three of them, considering geographical difficulties, were conducted as online video interviews. See appendix for the full set of interview questions.

4.1.2 Participant Observations of GI's Domestic and International Versions

In order to detect differences between the global version of GI and the Chinese domestic version I took advantage of the status as a GI player myself and exercised my participatory observation experience to compare the two. Since I play on the global version, I decided that watching playthroughs of the game on the video-sharing platform Bilibili would help me gain sufficient material for the Chinese version, as well as reading about the topic online and learning of the overarching differences. Playthroughs mean players recording and uploading themselves playing a game. Bilibili was selected as it is a popular channel for anime, comics and games in China. The search words used were a variation of 原神 *yuánshén*, 璃月 *líyuè* and 游戏过程 *yóuxì guòchéng* which correspond to Genshin Impact, Liyue and playthrough.

4.2 Analysis process

The data analysis centred around both the research questions "How is Chinese culture represented and exported through the video game Genshin Impact?" and "How is the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influencing Swedish players' perception of China?" To be able to analyse the interviews they were first audio recorded. Then a combination of transcribing and taking notes of the answers to each question was used. The responses were then manually grouped into sections treating different subjects; what the participants were like as GI players, their perception of GI being a Chinese game, their perception of Chinese culture in GI, their thoughts on race in the game and how GI has influenced them. The key concepts were summarised into paragraphs whereupon it was divided into sections in the data report and

explained with the help of related material. That could be research from books and essays, news articles or official statements. In cases where primary sources were unavailable secondary sources had to suffice in order to give a better picture of what was being discussed. The findings from the data report were then discussed again using relevant theory to answer the research questions.

4.3 Ethical considerations

The interviewees after recommendation were contacted via social media and received a message regarding their participation and the aim of the study. They were informed that they should feel free to withdraw at any point of the interview stage. Their audio recorded replies would then be deleted after having been strictly used by myself during the time period of writing the thesis. Although a few of the interviewees had no concerns regarding anonymity their identities were promised to remain anonymous and thus their names were switched out to character names from GI.

4.4 Scientific limitations

A consideration with game analysis is the interactivity aspect of video games. Researchers have to take into account that the "pre-composed" messages of linear media here depend on the playing style and skills of each player and thus will create meaning depending on what the different people like to do in the game. Considering that the data sampled is from a pool of five people from one country also makes it infeasible to generalise the GI community as a whole. The outcome of this study may also depend on the interviewees' varying knowledge of China beforehand, and the snowball sampling technique employed could also entail selection bias where some of the participants might share traits with each other. This has the potential of skewing the results. The main point however remains that this thesis is able to showcase the perspective of Swedish GI players and invites further discourse in the hopes of a deeper understanding of the research as the Chinese gaming industry continues to flourish.

5. Data Report and Analysis

5.1 The Setting of Genshin Impact

In order to attempt to answer the question "How is the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influencing Swedish players' perception of China?" it is important to note if there are any differences between the global and Chinese versions of GI. GI can be played on three global

servers, Asia, North America and Europe taking the different time zones into account. In addition to these there is the Chinese domestic version for Chinese players. The website and app HoYoLab, a community forum for the players of games from the company MiHoYo, also has a separate Chinese version said to hold more events such as birthday celebrations for the in-game characters. Fans online have suggested that the Chinese HoYoLab enjoys more features due to it having been developed for a longer time. Another speculation is that because of the popularity of Genshin in China and the high revenue from the domestic market, MiHoYo wants to appease the Chinese players.

5.1.1 Censorship of Clothing

Observing the gameplay of the Chinese version there appears to be no differences in the global servers when it comes to the open world and quests. GI is a gacha game and therefore heavily character-centred. As of the latest 5.2 version update, 91 playable characters have been released. As a GI player in early 2022 it was hard to miss the announcement of a redesign of the four female characters, Amber, Mona, Jean and Rosaria. An official statement in January 2022 from GI on the Chinese HoYoLab states in translation that “We are very sorry. In response to relevant review requirements, we will make adjustments to some characters and performances in the game…” (Qwer4790, 2022). This brought fans online to the conclusion that the game undergoes state investigation and is censored in turn.

Figure 2. Jean

Figure 2 shows a comparison of the original and censored versions of the character Jean. The redesigns are typically more modest, with less skin showing and without form fitting clothing.

However while the new censored versions were switched out in the Chinese version of GI, in the global one they were only added as alternate outfits and it is the players' choice whether to use them or not. However, when the characters appear in the storyline they wear the modified clothing even in the global version. This shows that while the gaming company needs to adhere to the party's regulations they only need to censor in China and continue to appeal to the global audience. "Protecting the ideological thinking and morality of young people" has previously been grounds for reviewing the gaming culture in China (Pun, Yin and Fung, 2019 in Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023). This censorship could be involved in the number of restrictions that have been put on gaming platforms to combat addiction to online games for minors. In a notice issued by the National Press and Publication Administration explicit rules were laid out regarding time spent gaming for minors and legitimate identification when signing up (国家新闻出版署, 2021). This was stated to protect children and their health, which can also be applied to regulating revealing clothing among the characters to maintain a modest image.

5.1.2 Language

Language is also a distinction. In the Liyue Archon quest, shortly upon entering Liyue Harbour, the capital city of Liyue, Paimon who is the traveller's companion says in Chinese:

> 但我们这些外国人如果在璃月这样称呼岩神，就会降级无礼的外国人。
>
> [But if we foreigners call the Geogod like this in Liyue, we will be downgraded to rude foreigners.]

the English version being:

> But it's seen as impolite for people from outside Liyue to refer to the Geo Archon by that name.

It is clear that this is a translation that keeps the rough meaning from the Chinese while still suiting the English language and atmosphere of the game. Examples are the choices to change 外国人*wàiguórén* which most often translates as "foreigners" to "people from outside" and 无礼 *wúlǐ* "rude" to "impolite". The English might also add words that are absent in the Chinese as with "Geo Archon" in:

> 所以，还是和璃月人一样，多用用岩王帝君这个名字比较好。

> [Therefore, it is better to use the name Geo King more often, just like the people of Liyue.]

English version:

> So we should refer to the Geo Archon by the name Rex Lapis, like the people of Liyue do.

Comparing the voice lines there do not seem to be any major discrepancies and it can be safe to assume that all of the storyline constructs the same meaning in both versions. On the other hand what actually differs are the person names. Following that "岩神" *yánshén* is translated to "Geo Archon" instead of "Stone God", "岩王帝君" *yánwáng dìjūn* could be translated to "Geo King". However, the English version, "Rex Lapis", is Latin for "Stone King". The use of Latin could refer to "Geo King" not fitting the solemn or grand connotations of "帝君" *dìjūn* being a title of reverence added to the names of gods. This shows that both versions of the game aspire to give the same impression, granting that language will always present contrasts in the game and create confusion between players when characters and place names are pronounced differently. The English version incorporates the *pinyin* and translation of Chinese characters e.g 凝光 *níngguāng* is Ningguang and 无妄坡 *wúwàng-pō* is Wuwang Hill. The Chinese version sounds out names from outside of Liyue. Tartaglia for example becomes 达达利亚 *dádálìyǎ* and Mondstadt is 蒙德 *méngdé*. In the last example the German connotation is kept through the use of 德 *dé* from 德国 *Déguó* Germany. Language cannot be deemed a major difference between the two versions as even in the global version English is not the only international language. GI can also be played in both Japanese and Korean, with names being pronounced in accordance with those languages' own sounds for the characters. The fact that the game is playable in English and languages other than Chinese shows the transnational views of the game and that it caters to the global market and not just the domestic and therefore has become a tool of soft power for China.

5.2 Playing Genshin Impact

Five Swedish Genshin Impact players were interviewed. For ethical considerations, they were assigned short Mondstadt character names at random; Jean, Lisa, Eula, Mona and Mika and are referred to as such throughout the thesis.

GI players	Age	Gender	AR (Adventure rank)	Started year
Jean	22	Gender neutral	58	2022
Lisa	19	Woman	56	2020
Eula	19	Woman	60	2022
Mona	21	Woman	56	2021
Mika	22	Man	60	2021

Figure 3 Background of the GI players

Adventure rank counts for how many experience points a player has gathered through their gaming with 60 being the highest, showing that the participants indeed are big GI players. Looking at age and gender one could examine to which demographic GI succeeds in exporting culture. However due to the pool size of the participants in this study it would not be wise to draw any conclusions.

5.2.1 Swedish players of Genshin Impact

The five participants were all similar in being big GI players but differed somewhat in gaming style. Jean and Lisa used to play daily but have recently only checked in around once a week. Eula and Mona also have highs and lows but had been playing pretty much every day at the time of interview, as had Mika. The players indicated that they got hooked right away and continued playing due to the characters and to progress in the exciting story line. The interviewees provide a concrete example of how well the game has done internationally as it has loyal gamers all the way across the globe in Sweden. The fact that Jean and Lisa no longer play as frequently but still check in shows that GI has succeeded in its endeavour to capture an audience and can in this way surely work as a soft power tool. At the very least it strengthens the gaming industry in China seeing that all participants except Eula have spent money in the game for the reasons of getting new characters or better weapons. In response to the question of why they choose to play GI and Chinese games they expressed that there

“wasn’t a deep reason”. Jean felt excluded from the friend group in school who all played GI and then like Mika found out it was a free to play game. Eula initially hesitated since it clearly was a time-consuming game but gave in and created an account. That GI is a gacha game, gaining revenue from in-game purchases, evidently works to its advantage. At least these interviewees who ended up spending money after loving the game probably would not have started playing if it was behind a pay-wall. Although the participants are not “whales” in gaming terms, meaning they do not spend unrealistic amounts of money, the revenue they still bring GI starts from a few hundred Swedish krona each.

It is clear that GI has developed its own community internationally. Except Mona all participants are familiar with GI content outside of the game such as on social media apps like Tiktok, X (Twitter) and Instagram. They enjoy looking at fanart and Lisa, Jean and Mika have watched Genshin Impact Youtubers. Jean has also cosplayed characters, Mika has read fanfiction of the game and Eula does the small events on the app for players HoYoLab for primogems. HoYoLab as previously noted is the official community forum and primogems is a type of currency used in the game. The participants cannot be alone in their shared joy for GI as there would have to be other gamers producing and viewing the content for it to exist across so many platforms. As far as answering the question of how Chinese culture is exported it is safe to say that if it were to disseminate Chinese culture there is a big audience both in-game and outside ready to receive it.

All of the participants answered that they have at one point played a Chinese game other than GI. While Eula plays Honkai Star Rail, a game from the same company, Jean played it for a few months after its release in April 2023 and then stopped due to not having developed the same interest for the lore. Mona plays Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (决胜巅峰), which Mika plays occasionally, and Lisa used to play the love simulation game Mr Love: Queen’s Choice (恋与制作人). Both games are unrelated to GI. When it comes to Chinese entertainment outside of video games Mona will watch “anything that ends up on my feed if it’s good” whether that be Chinese music or TV dramas. Eula has watched a few episodes of a *donghua* (animation, 动画) series and is interested in watching more. On the other hand, both Jean and Mika share a love for web novels and *donghuas*, often in the *danmei* (耽美) genre, featuring romance between male characters. The former has an entire bookshelf of translated Chinese web novels, with Mika also owning two series and having watched the *donghua* counterparts. Lisa does not partake in any media apart from GI stating that her interest lies more with Japanese entertainment. The other four interviewees also expressed an interest in

neighbouring East Asian countries, whether it be Japanese and Korean music, anime or games such as Mario and Zelda: Breath of the Wild. This suggests that at least some of the attention South Korea and Japan have garnered from cultural soft power in recent decades may have shifted to include China too. For some, GI is the first encounter with Chinese entertainment, as with Lisa and Eula, whereas Mona seems to be frequently encountering drama series and music.

5.2.2 Is Genshin Impact Chinese?

The simple answer to whether or not GI is Chinese is yes, but it is not that straightforward. All of the participants were well aware that GI is a Chinese game from the company MiHoYo, but would argue that for a person going into the game blind and exclusively interacting with it in English it would be difficult to guess that the game is Chinese. Eula said that judging from the art style the first assumption would have been a Japanese game. Jean says that since it has become a global game in popularity and is designed with several countries and different cultures "it's easier to dismiss it as something" showing the Chinese transnational points of the game and desire to appeal to the whole world. Mika also did not reflect over which country GI was from, assuming it was from an Asian country, either China or Japan, judging by the name. Lisa explains that she heard about GI online, that it was similar to Zelda: Breath of the Wild but with different magical powers. "It was a given that I would like it" – Lisa. The common theme here is that it seems to connect back to Japan and Chinese transnationality.

The title of an article from the New York Times is *Beating Japan at Its Own (Video) Game: A Smash Hit from China* (Dooley and Mozur, 2022). It brings up the debate of GI being similar to the Japanese game Zelda: Breath of the Wild and that since China's own attempt at soft power has not had much success, the next step was to turn to Japan as a world leader in video games soft power. GI's graphics are in fact often described as anime-style. Also the fact that "Genshin", the Japanese romanised pronunciation of 原神 instead of the Chinese yuánshén, is the global marketing name of the game could prove a point that MiHoYo might benefit from branding the game as Japanese to pass as an anime game rather than Chinese in order to take advantage of Japanese gaming soft power .

Furthermore, there is the choice of playing GI in Japanese. While the interviewees chose to mostly play in English, both the texting and the voice overs, since it makes it easy to understand, Mona has tried every language, English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean but now plays in English and tends not to read dialogues; "I can pick up a book but if I'm playing a

game that's not what I wanna do". Jean, who has only ever played the English version, claimed to watch most content dubbed anyway and said that there are nuances you only understand if you speak the language. Lisa, having previously played in Japanese, and Eula happen to be Japanese language learners and Eula said that because of the recent strike amongst the English voice actors she switched to Japanese. Eula was going to choose Chinese since it is the original language but thought it might confuse her language learning. The Japanese dub having voice actors from the anime industry might add to the allure as well as reaching the Japanese audience.

The anime-style design and the story starting in Mondstadt did not help to ascertain the authenticity of GI in that it is very similar to Japanese Zelda: Breath of the Wild. However, as Eula expressed that upon entering Liyue and whenever a lot of care is put into that region as with the yearly Lantern Rite Festival it is a reminder of GI being Chinese. According to Mika, that probably would not have been the case if it was Japanese. Similarly Lisa referred to the Chinese opera character Yunjin as being an instance of "it's well made because the game actually is Chinese".

That the game is Chinese can also be seen through controversies that appear around the game. Most of the participants at one point mentioned the colourism controversy with the characters having very light skin in the Natlan and Sumeru nations in contrast to dark skin as would be the norm in their corresponding real-world regions. China will often be brought up in conversation as an excuse for why certain decisions are made or as a reason to bad talk the game. These types of controversies made Eula and Lisa remember that "Oh yeah, it is a Chinese game and maybe they have other values there".

So although none of the interviewees went into the game explicitly thinking of it as Chinese, seeing the obvious Japanese influences in the game design and marketing strategies through the use of different languages, it undoubtedly becomes clear that it is from China and could point towards the country wanting to use the same techniques to go global and gain soft power of their own.

5.2.3 The Uniqueness of Liyue

While the thoughts are mixed on whether it is acceptable to inaccurately represent other parts of the world, players seem okay with how GI performs its own culture in Liyue and this can say something about how the developers want China to be portrayed. Rather than Liyue being

represented more accurately than other nations, Eula considers Liyue to have been treated with more respect, specifically regarding the clothing. Raiden Shogun, a warrior and the leader of *Inazuma*, Japan, is not given the same respect when she is put in a short kimono impractical for her position. This suggests there being a gender issue in the game to sell attractive characters. Jean suggested there was "a lot of necessary care and caution put in knowing that Chinese culture would be represented". Mika's mind is drawn to Liyue being the land of *mora*, the currency used in GI, and that makes Liyue stand out as a prosperous nation. Jean also claims that Liyue was given a certain grace by representing one country only in comparison with some of the other nations – "some cultures are smushed together in unclear ways". According to Jean, it is not done with negative intent and China does not think negatively of other countries and it would not have added to the game to make the nations correlate 1:1 with real countries. In other words, nations designed in the world of *Teyvat* (GI) do not have to demonstrate real countries or eras in time. That they in some cases do, Liyue and Inazuma for example, can put a certain spotlight on the nations.

The Lantern Rite Festival is a big event celebrated near the Lunar New Year every year. With beautiful lantern decorations and an enjoyable storyline the participants meet old characters and the game comes together. Eula loves it and pins it as one of the most fun recurring events and Mona points out that it is the only event that changes the whole game design with decorations. Therefore this shows the pride Liyue holds. Jean expresses that "it really just feels like the heart of the game every year". Together with celebrating a Chinese tradition in the game, representing Chinese culture, it makes Liyue stand out and influences the players' perception of how China looks at itself.

Eula thought that the company would be more close-minded and not represent other cultures with care but was pleasantly surprised with how the lore turned out. Lisa and Mona were interested in how Inazuma would be portrayed in regard to China and Japan's shared history and Mona was surprised it was not worse. Although Inazuma is bestowed with a story of dictatorship and civil war, leaning heavily into Japanese imperialism, Lisa found it fascinating in general to see how for example they looked at European culture as representing freedom. This suggests that Swedish players equate the game with a manifestation of a Chinese outlook on the world and that GI has changed their preconceived notions for the better, bringing China closer to the rest of the world.

5.2.4 The Perception of Chinese Culture in Genshin Impact

To investigate the question "How is Chinese culture represented and exported through the video game Genshin Impact" a good way to start is with what the interviewees responded in relation to *Liyue*, the Chinese nation in GI. When asked to describe Liyue in a few words the keyword was either calm or bustling. They talked about climbing in the mountains in the Minlin region with the calming soundtracks and used words such as open, light, beautiful and golden. They described Liyue as colourful and spiritual, pointing to the lore and old ruins easily found in the countryside. The word colourful was also connected to the main city in Liyue, recounted as an alive place with a bustling atmosphere and pretty architecture. There was an emphasis on heritage and reminiscence of historical China. Mona was reminded of a historical Chinese fantasy drama with pine tree mountains and landscape and considers Liyue to be intended to portray a "fantasy, daydream China". Eula supposed it is intended to be "a mighty trading region" since a lot of the in-game dialogue is about Liyue being a central hub for merchants.

The interviewees understood that they were seeing an ancient China with fantasy elements, which is exactly what MiHoYo wanted to portray. In a Youtube video MiHoYo relayed their visions for the Liyue design explaining that they were "reimagining Chinese motifs through the lens of a fantasy world". Judging by the positive feelings and descriptions evoked among the interviewees MiHoYo succeeded in their mission of creating a game that shared "our vision of the 'Chinese aesthetic' with players all around the world" (Genshin Impact, 2020). The video continued with explaining the topographical choices made when deciding what natural features should be the most prominent in Liyue. As they wanted to make sure the Chinese elements were well received they gathered a lot of visual resources from popular tourist destinations in China and selected Zhangjiajie (张家界) as one of their main inspirations.

Figure 4. Zhangjiajie National Forest Park

Figure 5. Jueyun Karst Genshin Impact

The participants were aware that Liyue is based on real locations, which shows that the beautiful nature aspect and vibe of Liyue was able to reflect back on China. Eula believes that Jueyun Karst is the region that was inspired the most by a real tourist location in China. Lisa assumes that there are many cities located next to the sea just like Liyue Harbour but that the geography of Liyue, being large and with many different parts, is what is the closest to China. Jean's favourite part is also the main city because it feels so alive but does not think it is based on something 1:1 but imagines that there have to be areas where old architecture is preserved although not in a metropolitan city. In contrast, Mona's favourite is not the city but the small villages but does not believe they look as nice in real life but would rather be very poor. In Mona's case the fantasy element of the game does not seem to have transferred into reality, which suggests that a video game cannot be the sole soft power move for a country.

The characters of Liyue do not seem to be where a lot of culture is represented. Lisa thinks most of the characters are exaggerated to be memorable and the types of personality appear in all the nations. There are a few characters from Liyue that connect to specific parts of Chinese culture or people. Lisa mentioned Baizhu with his apothecary bridging over to Chinese traditional medicine. Several participants responded that Yunjin made a big impression on them with her Chinese opera singing. There is speculation among fans that the armed sailor Beidou takes inspiration from the famous Chinese pirate Zheng Yisao (Ching Shih). Lastly Eula took a new stance on the question by mentioning the out of region character Tartaglia from Snezhnaya (Russia) and argues that through him easily adapting, being impulsive and quick to action shows the contrast to Liyue, which seems to be hanging on to the past.

5.2.5 The Racial Question of Genshin Impact

In answer to the question "How is the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influencing Swedish players' perception of China?" and as previously mentioned, a way the interviewees became aware of Chinese society was through the colourism controversy. The backlash concerns whether the game, which is fiction, should be allowed to whitewash characters that are based on dark-skinned people in the real world. Lisa was quick to mention the stereotypical white skin beauty standard of China and that it has to be a big part of society if it is included in a game to the extent that some characters get lighter with each update. Mona did not blame the company and argued that the culture regarding how games are perceived

must be different and that it is their game and they should first and foremost focus on the Chinese market, implying that dark-skinned playable characters would not sell as well in China. This raises the question of whether this perception is an accurate assessment of Chinese society.

In the book *Modified bodies, material selves: beauty ideals in post-reform Shanghai* (Starr, 2023) the author sheds light on the Chinese society's fondness of pale skin, with women feeling inclined to buy skin-whitening products in the hopes of fitting into the beauty standard as much as possible. In this sense Lisa would be right to equate the partiality for light-skinned characters in GI to what Chinese society generally sees as beautiful. Mika points out that when there actually are dark-skinned characters they tend to be NPCs, non-playable characters, and villains that players can fight as is the case of the Eremites in the Sumeru desert. Here there seems to be a distinction between good and evil, an unintentional show of racism in the game.

Cheng in the book *Discourses of Race and Rising China Mapping Global Racisms* (2019) relates instances where racism can be seen in China with an example of a Chinese mother, not wanting her son to marry an Indian woman, making racist remarks. Even if it is not the intention of MiHoYo, the struggle of GI to portray darker skinned characters comes across as racist or colourist and it reflects back on China and the society's values. As Mona implied, dark-skinned characters would not sell well to Chinese players, which matches the sentiment highlighted in Cheng's book. While it is positive for GI to adhere to Chinese values domestically, on the global market it becomes a somewhat negative image demonstrating that while Swedish players love the game they still have reservations.

5.2.6 The Influence of Genshin Impact

To answer the research question, GI has influenced Swedish players' perception and knowledge of China. Eula rated her knowledge of Chinese language, culture and history a three out of ten having previously studied Chinese in school. Lisa also gave it a three out of ten pointing to having a basic understanding of Chinese characters by virtue of studying Japanese. Mona on the other hand rated the language knowledge a zero out of ten but admitted to having a little above average historical knowledge having written a secondary school paper on Mao Zedong's abolishment of traditional opera. Jean and Mika estimated a four out of ten for Chinese culture saying that it is not impressive but more than an average person in their surroundings. As previously mentioned, some of the participants had interests

in other parts of Chinese entertainment such as *donghua* and some of them have a connection to Japan that has moulded their knowledge of China. Mika for instance is interested in learning Chinese at university but GI is probably not the sole motivator. GI itself has also made an impact. Mona already had an interest in Chinese opera but Eula said "I definitely got into Chinese opera for two weeks" after loving Yunjin's performance in the game. Lisa accounted for having gained knowledge from the Lantern Rite Festival, Baizhu's traditional medicine and architecture and Jean said that seeing people online discuss what was shown in the game versus real life made it easy to learn small things rather than a whole contemporary culture. Lisa added that the game showed the way of life with for example the shops in the harbour of Liyue city but that it might be a past China and not the modern technology-heavy one. This is similar to Inazuma and the strict Shogun rule not being equivalent to present-day Japan.

All of the GI players would visit China given the chance. Lisa said that GI has provided a connection to the country that was not there before and it would be nice to buy merchandise when visiting as well as mentioning the general tourism allure of China being a big country on the other side of the world. "If I was there [China] and they had a Genshin concert I would go. If I was already in China but it's not a reason to go there." – Mona. Jean expressed wanting to do a food tour through East Asia and said that GI makes the food look so delicious and has definitely opened up a curiosity for that part of the world. Eula was reserved to the idea of visiting China, finding it difficult to navigate a new set of social norms but would love to see Chinese opera one day, which is specifically because of GI. Mika wants to visit all of the real life versions of Liyue's nature and culture but is at the same time not comfortable with visiting the state as homosexual and transgender. Once again it is clear that no matter how loved a game is it cannot override all of the other reputations a country has gathered. GI works as one reason among many for people who are already interested in visiting. But its main influence is providing a positive image of China through an open-world layout where the players themselves get to explore and create meaning.

5.3 Discussion

To come back to the research questions, Chinese culture is represented through the whole experience of Liyue for GI players. Folkerts gives a detailed account of how the process of constructing meaning in a role-playing video game like GI works. He explains that video games as a cultural product are a system of signs referring back to the real world (Folkerts,

2010). In other words, they assign meaning to the real world. GI players know Liyue is supposed to be a representation of China and as always when seeking to understand representations imagination is being used. Whether that be reading a novel or playing as a character in a game, individual meaning is created. In that way there will be individual representations of China created all the time in combination with the conception they already have of the country (Folkerts, 2010). That is how, returning to the research question, GI influences Swedish players' perception of China. The positive descriptions given by the interviewees of Liyue have in turn given a positive representation of China. In that way GI is a positive image of China. On the other hand that is also how there surfaced backlash in relation to the representation of characters in other nations, specifically Sumeru and Natlan. Where players had the notion that the people were going to be dark-skinned since the regions were based on the real world, the fact that they were not gave rise to confusion and assigned meaning to how the beauty standard in Chinese society must be.

Additionally, how Chinese culture is exported and influences Swedish players, as demonstrated in the data report, can be seen in the popularity of the game. Yuan states that video games having the ability to create meaning, culture and values have become an important soft power tool. He relates this to the digital silk road initiative (DSR) in that video games have become important in both the economic and cultural diplomacy sense (Yuan, 2024). DSR is a strategic push from China beginning in 2015 to gain ascendancy in global technology and digital infrastructure. With gaming companies and video games as part of this technological movement they both invite China to the market and generate money but also become platforms for cultural exchange as seen in GI. However, since it is difficult to ascertain whether miHoYo has benefitted from this push by the Chinese state it is not possible to draw the conclusion that China exercises soft power by means of miHoYo. In that case, miHoYo would simply be acting as a private company pursuing commercial interests. But even so, without being an active stakeholder, the Chinese state might still be considered to be exercising soft power through its positive stance (and indeed absence of a negative stance) toward the game. Irrespective of any links between the Chinese state and miHoYo, the popularity of GI works in representing Chinese culture and furthering the influence of China in the global landscape. Swedish players spend money in the game as well as access the lore and meaning created with Chinese culture and therefore may develop an affinity toward China.

6. Conclusion

In answer to the research question “how is Chinese culture represented and exported through the video game Genshin Impact?”, GI does represent Chinese culture in two ways. This is primarily through its depiction of Liyue as a nation based on China, giving the players a positive image of the country. But also in it being a Chinese game itself. It shows that China is capable of making games like those of the already big gaming giants like Japan and the US and helps maintain a Chinese presence in the gaming industry. GI as a conscious soft power strategy is also seen in the transnational visions of the game. These aspects all provide answers to the research question “How is the gaming experience of Genshin Impact influencing Swedish players’ perception of China?” While the image throughout Liyue is positive and sparks players' interest in Chinese culture, some of the choices of representation in other GI nations ignite controversy and shed light on Chinese society when it comes to its outlook on race and beauty standards. Judging from the backlash this is one negative influence on many players’ perception of China. However, since the study included a small group of Swedish GI players any conclusions drawn from their involvement do not reflect Swedish GI players as a whole. The results do answer the research question but additional aspects are sure to be found from a broader research group.

As video games are a relatively new and growing strategy of exporting soft power in China, and GI was released only in 2020, this is a very interesting field for further research. In the future one could also include the perspective of Chinese players in comparison to international players in relation to GI. The contrast between former and active GI players’ perception of China could also be interesting. To what extent GI indeed can be counted as an instrument of Chinese soft power remains to be explored in further detail.

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Appendix

Interview guide

- How old are you?
- For how long have you played Genshin? How often?
- What is your AR? (Adventure rank)
- Have you spent money in the game and for what reason?
- What is your favourite activity to do in the game?
- In what language do you play Genshin? Have you ever tried another language?
- Do you partake in other Genshin content outside of the game?
-
- Do you play other Chinese games?
- Do you consume other forms of Chinese entertainment or media?
- How would you rate your knowledge of the Chinese language, culture and history?
-
- Did you know Genshin Impact is from the Chinese company Mihoyo? Do you know where it is based?
- Why do you choose to play Chinese games?
- In what way do you think playing in English affects the perception of Genshin being a Chinese game?
- At what points, in game or outside of playing, do you get reminded that Genshin is a Chinese game?
- What are the Chinese elements you recognized in the game?
-
- How would you describe Liyue?
- What do you think Liyue is intended to portray?
- Do you think Liyue being the land of contracts represents China?
- What is the main message of the Liyue Archon quest according to you?
- What is your favourite part of the region and do you think it has a real life location?
- What do you think of the Lantern Rite Festival and do you play it every year?
- Which characters are the most memorable to you and how would you connect them to your perception of China?
- Do you think Mihoyo portrayed Liyue more accurately than other regions in the game? Why and how?
-
- In what way has your knowledge of China changed? (Language, culture and history)
- Has the game changed your view on visiting China in any way?
- In what ways has the game made you aware of Chinese society, way of life and thinking?
- Has how Mihoyo portrays other cultures in the game changed your view on how China sees the world?
- Do you think Mihoyo has done a good or bad job of portraying Chinese culture?
- Do you have any other thoughts on the game? Perhaps regarding the marketing or other regions in the game.