

# Creating an Oriental Fantasy: Transnational Game Production and New Nationalism in Honor of Kings

Zhou Zheng  
Communication University of China, Beijing, China

Keith Negus  
Goldsmith, University of London, UK

## Abstract

*Honor of Kings* has become one of the most mainstream mobile game products in China, attracting the attention of a huge number of active users and Chinese game regulators. Drawing from research on audio designers at TiMi Studios, a subsidiary of Tencent Games, this paper explores how Chinese based designers work with international collaborators, including major figures such as Hans Zimmer, Howard Shore, and US based Chinese composer Tan Dun. It discusses how the transnational production of game music incorporates traditional Chinese musical elements into an epic, international style, constructing a new national identity that encourages gamers to identify with Chinese traditional culture. The music produced by Chinese and overseas artists offers eclectic and hybrid musical motifs that are perceived domestically to communicate new types of Chinese identity. The paper provides insights into the transnational creative practices of game designers, and the commercial strategies of Tencent. It explores how designers make musical decisions in relation to the way gamers interact with game characters and events, the arrangement of the music for symphonic performance, and broader considerations about the sounds of commercial popular music.

## Keywords

transnational production, HOK music, oriental fantasy, domestic exoticism, new identity

This paper focuses on one aspect of a larger study of the transnational production of the game *Honor of Kings* (hereafter *HoK*). It investigates the role of music supervisors, designers, and composers, and explains how Tencent/ TiMi studio use external collaborators to create what the producers have called an ‘oriental fantasy’, using elements of traditional Chinese music and instrumentation, along with musical references from other regions of Asia. The theme songs are composed by a team of multinational composers, and the game produced largely for domestic Chinese gamers. In certain respects, the music can be thought of as a type of ‘domestic exoticism’ that mimics, uses, and parodies the orientalism found in western art music and Hollywood films. Yet, the music produced by Chinese and overseas artists offers eclectic and hybrid musical motifs that are perceived domestically to communicate new types of Chinese identity.

The paper contributes to three broad areas of contemporary popular music research. First, that of ludomusicology, the study of music in games with attention to how the practices of design and production afford dynamics of user interaction and the drama of the play environment. Second, by focusing on sound design and media composition in the making of games we address a neglected aspect of cultural production and research on the music industries. Third, the paper adds to enduring discussions about the construction of musical meaning. Here we

examine how music plays an important part in the representation of fictional characters and signifiers of national identity and explore the way this is mediated by the interaction between corporations (in this case Tencent), political regulation (the Chinese government), and the international structures of collaborative production that link composers from around the world.

The research for this paper involved interviews with staff at Tencent, conducted by Zhou Zheng, and studies of production practices. We will first introduce the concept of ‘the Oriental Fantasy’ constructed in *HoK*, as well as the design ideas of its music supervisor. We then move on to analyze the specific approach of the transnational production strategy of music in *HoK*, and make some brief comments about how the music constructs an orientalist fantasy.

*HoK* is a multiplayer online battle arena mobile game developed and run by Tencent Games, TiMi studio group. It was officially launched on Android and IOS platforms in November 2015 and still being updated as this paper is being written. The game is mainly based on competitive matchmaking, with players playing against each other in 1v1, 3v3, 5v5 modes in group matches. There are 109 heroes which can be divided into six categories: tank, warrior, assassin, wizard, archer, and supporter, defined according to their skills. Players can independently choose their favorite heroes to form a team to fight, improve their combat power, cooperate with teammates to kill the opponent’s heroes, destroy the opponent’s defense tower, and finally push down the opponent’s base camp (crystal) to win.

*HoK* is constantly updated with new versions, and theme songs are constantly being created and launched. These songs appear on the game’s login interface, lobby interface, score interface, character selection interface and interactive movie, which are often associated with character’s new skin in updated versions.

Hongfei Zhao, the music supervisor of *HoK*, shared the audio design ideas for the game at the third Tencent Game Developers Conference (TGDC) held by Tencent Institute of Games in 2019. He was a full-time composer of game songs before he joined Tencent Games. In Tencent, he was put in charge of one audio group of Tencent Timi Audio Center, mainly responsible for the game projects such as *HoK*, *Saint Seiya* and *King of Chaos*. He stressed how *HoK* uses music, sound effects, and voice to create a sound logo for the game. The music in *HoK* should sound good, impassioned, and national. The music styles in *HoK* merge into one theme he described as ‘the Oriental Fantasy’. In a public interview, he explained sound design requirements and strategies, and explained the national aspects of the game sound in this way:

National means that each of the songs has national tunes, national musicians or national instruments. We especially want to put the truly good but forgotten traditional cultures of China into the *Honor of Kings*, a platform that could show Chinese culture, so that local gamers can hear it and recognize it (Zhao, 2019).

Yet, in creating a national based music, the team decided to use composers from different countries, directing them and liaising according to what he called a ‘global flow’. This involved exchanging ideas by telephone, video conference, or letter, followed by the creation of a series of demonstration recordings (‘demos’). The demos would be critically discussed and assessed before proceeding with recording and production. Over 50 composers for the game have been drawn from north America, Europe, and Asia. This has included many internationally recognized composers of Hollywood film music, such as Hans Zimmer and Howard Shore.

Zhao emphasized that all composers must produce according to *HoK* criteria, and that the Chinese audio designers make the final decision. TiMi Audio Group is the hub between the game designers and the composers. The main duties of the Audio Center are to design the game sound. This includes not only music, sound effects and voice supervising, but also development functions, mixing and debugging.

One important feature of audio for *HoK* is narrative function. The game is set in a huge imaginary world with complex relationships between characters. It is difficult to tell a story clearly, which means it needs the help of music. The ‘Oriental Fantasy’ serves to unify the narrative worldview for this game. He explained the idea of the ‘Oriental Fantasy’ style in these terms:

Oriental and fantasy are two words. Oriental refers to Asian ones, like the music instruments or national tunes of China, Malaysia, Thailand and so on. We just need to add a little bit of these elements into music so that we can produce a completely different kind of impression from western music. Another one is Fantasy. Jazz, rock, or epic orchestral music - each style has its own fans. The audio designers analyze why it’s popular, what is good about it, and then they take and blend them as a hybrid style, which is called Fantasy. In fact, this is also a common practice in international composing. The Oriental and Fantasy determines the design boundary and impression of *HOK*’s music (Zhao, 2019).

Zhao's explanations give insights into the music design aims of blending elements identified with China, Asia more generally, international popular music genres, and Hollywood films. Chinese traditional culture is not simply reproduced in music but reconstructed through a hybrid music practice.

## Cooperative creative relationships at the level of production

*HoK* entails collaborations with composers from many countries, including UK, USA, France, Canada, Poland, Japan, Korea, and Singapore. In addition to composers, the scope of transnational cooperation also includes recording studios, bands, singers, mixers, and recording engineers. There is no invariable pattern to these collaborations. In most cases, the orchestral recording was finished by a non-Chinese team in studios outside China. For example, the original soundtrack was produced by composer teams from Hans Zimmer's company, including Hans Zimmer from Germany, Jeff Broadbent, and Duncan Watt from US. The orchestral music of this soundtrack was then recorded at Abbey Road studios in London (see video 1).

In some cases, recordings have been made with Chinese musicians performing on Chinese instruments. In the Chinese Lunar New Year series songs released in 2018, the transnational production involved the Hungarian Budapest Scoring Symphony Orchestra and Chinese musicians Karen Han and Celia Liu, for those songs involved traditional Chinese instruments Erhu and Pipa (see video 2).

In this situation the theme music was composed entirely by Chinese composers and musicians. The reason for this kind of solely Chinese team is that the music composing involves complex performance methods, understanding of ancient sheet music notation, and the technical skills to perform with Chinese instruments. The song 'Ying on Fire' in 2021 created for the character Yun Ying was composed by Chinese composer Liu Dong, while played on the pipa by Zhao Cong, the leader of the China National Traditional Orchestra (see video 3 and 4).

This game is associated with other music that is entirely produced by Chinese composers but not used in game as narrative or character themes. These recordings feature performances by Chinese singers and are used for HOK's e-sports competitions, game's anniversary activities or platforms promotion (see soundtrack 1, 2 and 3). Zhao Hongfei stressed that composers are required to maintain the unity of the 'Oriental Fantasy' concept. On this point, we turn briefly to make a few points about the game sound within the context of government regulation and identity construction.

## The regulatory environment and traditional Chinese identities

Tencent have been subject to stricter regulations in China since 2010, policies that cover production permissions, content control, and distribution arrangements. Games that fail to comply with government regulations will be removed from the market, which can lead to financial losses for game companies. In 2014, the Chinese President Xi pronounced the equal significance of traditional and Internet-enabled culture. In 2016, he also called on Chinese people to boost their awareness of and confidence in Chinese culture, and to develop what he called 'cultural confidence', a phrase he also used just prior to this paper being completed. The Chinese government has expectations that cultural and creative industries, like audio-visual industries, can express traditional Chinese culture to help build a sense of national identity. An empirical study of correlations between Tencent's business actions and Chinese cultural policy changes between 2011 and 2019 showed that Tencent has effectively adhered to the country's calls for rejuvenating traditional Chinese culture and improving its international competitiveness (Guo & Liu, 2021).

As an audio-visual practitioner, Tencent has built up a series of risk precaution strategies which have been widely used in its cultural business to comply with applicable laws and regulations and to follow the latest policy changes (Tencent, 2018; Zhang, 2019). In 2017, It declared that the company aimed to produce high-quality cultural productions via creatively reinterpreting the traditional Chinese culture or actively going abroad as a response of the country's calls for traditional Chinese culture rejuvenation and cultural exportation (Jiemian News, 2017). Tencent Games, as part of Tencent's 'pan-entertainment' strategy, also actively responded to the government requirement for audio-visual companies to 'revitalize traditional culture' by framing their games in these terms in order to accommodate the national regulations. The strategy manifests itself specifically in the case of music in *HoK*, which reconstructs many traditional Chinese elements and incorporates these with components drawn from other parts of Asia in the expectation of building an orientalist identity, that is both Chinese and international.

## Contexts of transnational collaboration and construction of new Chinese identities

Because *HoK* is domestically-oriented, addressed exclusively to China, the significance of transnational musical collaboration is to build an orientalist identity for the Chinese players by global composers. To accompany the game, corresponding documentaries focus on the creativity of different composers. For example, US composers Matthew Earl and Jason Walsh talked about how they came up with the theme music for the character Ming Shiyin in their documentary. They wrote the song like a pop song, and recorded it using Chinese instruments the guzheng and xiao played by Earl (see video 5).

In composing music for *HoK*, composers have drawn on their own experiences, knowledge and background, and this has affected how these have approached and chosen to use traditional Chinese cultural elements. The purpose of such a strategy is to evoke associations with specific cultural contexts for local players. Furthermore, the TiMi studio also evaluates new music scenes based on their potential in terms of the cost of input and the popularity of the music. For example, the supervisor Zhao created a New Year music series to emphasize the ritual sense of the Chinese Lunar New Year. This series entailed collaboration with German composer Thomas Parisch in 2017 and 2018, with Japanese composer Hiromi Mizutani in 2019, and with Chinese composer LiuDong and Polish composer Michal Cielecki in 2021. (see soundtrack 4, 5, 6 and 7) The design team also organized an 'Honor of Chinese Festival' music series with local composers to advertise the Ching Ming Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Qixi Festival (Chinese Valentine's Day, and Mid-Autumn Festival (see soundtrack 8). The audio designers have released a music series inspired by the Dunhuang murals, Gansu Province, to call on gamers to understand and protect cultural heritage in the Dunhuang district specifically, and across China more generally (see soundtrack 9, 10 and 11). What's more, the audio designers of *HoK* reconstructed the canto from the Kunqu opera *Peony Pavilion* (see video 6) and the Shaoxing opera *The Butterfly Lovers* (see video 7), to encourage gamers to acquire a taste for Chinese opera (see video 8 and 9).

The Chinese-American composer Tan Dun composed a symphony series using five ancient instruments as a metaphor for the Chinese five noble spirits (benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, majesty, and courage). Tan Dun's *Five Tiger Generals* is an example of how game music can express a new Chinese identity through the selection of traditional Chinese instruments within the context of transnational production.

Tan Dun's *Five Tiger Generals* series construct the image of Chinese combat heroes. The term refers to five heroes in the Chinese historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and is adopted to also represent the five male characters of the same name in the game. Tan Dun's music uses five Chinese ancient instruments to represent the noble spirits of these five generals, matching the sonic qualities of the timbre of instruments with the characteristics of the five generals (see video 10). For example, the Xiqin has a low volume and muted sound, corresponding to General Zhao Yun as a gentle and cautious person; the sound associated with Chiba (Shakuhachi) represents the loyalty and integrity of General Guan Yu; the Bili has a loud and dynamic sound, drawing a straightforward image of General Zhang Fei; the Sheng has a bright and hard tone, showing General Huang Zhong as a stable and calm person; and the Pipa has a bright and compact tone, that refers to General Ma Chao who was skillful in battle. The *Five Tiger Generals* was adopted as a special theme for the *HoK* symphonic concert performances in Chengdu, Chongqing, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Taiyuan, Shenyang and Hohhot during 2021. The orchestral performances took the music outside of the game context and was an attempt to demonstrate to young audiences that Chinese ancient instruments can be powerfully expressive when played by orchestral ensembles in a contemporary setting (see video 11).

Interviews with personnel at TiMi studios suggests that cooperation with overseas composers provides a means of attracting the audiences of these composers to the game, and can potentially increase the number of players. The recognition of these audiences is considered important for the way it can contribute to the game's recognition for the quality of the music (Zhou Zheng, 2022). The transnational production of music for the game provides a medium for young generations to pay more attention and give more recognition for Chinese traditional instruments when arranged for orchestral performances or integrated with electronic music. The narrative of the music and songs adds to the pleasures and drama of the game, connects with public interest in Chinese ancient instruments and the traditional culture, and provides a response to government regulatory calls for national cultural confidence.

Tencent Games presents *HoK* as 'Connecting to Chinese culture' (Tencent Mobile Game Assistant, 2022). This concept informs the strategies that structure the entire process of production, sound design, and music composition. In some respects, it could be argued that Tencent Games has contributed to the construction of a new Chinese identity, accommodating to government regulation. However, the issue is complicated by the participation of teams of multinational collaborators. The patterns of transnational production are part of a broader

series of chains which characterize the modes of production used by Tencent Games. The *HoK* sound world is constructed through mixing ancient Chinese traditions with sonic versions of China derived from European classical music and Hollywood film.

By way of conclusion, our ongoing research raises a number of questions for further study and discussion, three we conclude on here: Does the Oriental Fantasy theme created by Chinese and overseas artists genuinely communicate new types of Chinese identity? Or does it actually contribute to a new hybrid form of oriental exoticism? At the same time, do the collaborations we have referred to offer glimpses of opportunities for future types of transnational creativity and post-national or cosmopolitan music composition? These are questions that will be explored through further research, and which we hope readers and other scholars can debate and study.

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