

Book Review

Nellie Ting Yang*

Li Guo, Douglas Eyman, and Hongmei Sun, eds.

Games and Play in Chinese and Sinophone Cultures

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024, 302 pages.

ISBN 9780295752402

Given the Cold War legacies of Chinese studies and the philological orientation of Western Sinology, it is hardly surprising that Anglophone scholarship has covered only limited ground on the topic of games and play in Sinophone cultures. The subject has long been regarded as too trivial for politically inflected historical inquiries and is difficult to approach within a textual tradition that has historically marginalized ludic expression. This volume signals a welcome shift in both cultural attitudes and academic priorities within Sinophone studies, reflecting the broader media turn that has reshaped the field over the past decade, while each chapter remains methodologically anchored in the rigor of its respective discipline. That said, it also reveals significant

Manuscript received: May 31, 2025; completed: July 3, 2025; approved: November 5, 2025.

2025年5月31日收稿，2025年11月5日通過刊登。

* Nellie Ting Yang, PhD candidate, Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, Yale University.

作者係耶魯大學東亞語言與文學系博士候選人。

challenges faced by the nascent field, not least the need to carefully navigate between existing ludological discourses, often underpinned by universalistic assumptions, and the specificities of China's own historical and cultural contexts, in order to establish a coherent framework and develop critical conceptual tools that do justice to both.

The introduction lays out the rationale for the collection through two core propositions: first, that a ludic perspective provides a critical vantage point for resisting hegemonic structures; second, that regional game studies help “creolize” ludic theory, counteracting both nationalistic essentialisms and sweeping cultural generalizations (3). The implication is that games and play create subversive spaces of autonomy, and that theories of play, when regionally attuned, offer potent frameworks for recognizing this subversive potential. However, as this review demonstrates, the idealized synergy between ludic theory and regional case studies proves more fraught in execution than in intent.

Furthermore, in the introduction, the character *you* 遊 / 游 and several related compounds such as *youxi* 遊戲, *you yu yi* 游於藝, *you xin* 遊心, and *you ren you yu* 游刃有餘 are invoked to characterize a distinctively Chinese conception of game and play, with the claim that the two notions are traditionally undifferentiated (4-5). Yet, given the wide temporal span covered by the volume, this reliance on isolated lexical items and broad-stroke philology without adequate attention to their diachronic transformations results in a serious reductionism. For example, the authors assert that “although Western game studies scholars distinguish the concepts ‘game’ and ‘play,’ in Chinese they are not differentiated, as *you* and *youxi* can refer to both” (4). However, in premodern Chinese, the proposed terms rarely ever denote games in any systematic sense. Instead, *xi* 戲 was far more commonly employed in naming and conceptualizing structured ludic activities, as seen in compounds such as *xiangxi* 象戲 (Chinese chess), *yixi* 弈戲 (typically referring to Go), and *paixi* 牌戲 (card games). An overemphasis on *you*, then, risks mischaracterizing Chinese ludic culture by reinforcing associations with freedom or ease while

overlooking other crucial dimensions such as skill and simulation.

The volume's thirteen chapters fall into two broad sections: the first eight explore premodern ludic topics, while the final five investigate contemporary Sinophone gaming culture. The volume begins with what is arguably its clearest challenge to cultural essentialism. In his chapter on Go, Zach Berge-Becker interrogates the enduring view of the game as a rarefied, intellectual pastime associated with literati self-cultivation. Drawing on late imperial sources, he reveals a more variegated and at times ambivalent social ecology of gameplay—one that includes professional Go players and moralistic critiques of the game's dangers. The chapter raises a foundational question for Sinophone ludology: what forms of play are legible in the textual archive, and which have been occluded by literary ideologies? Berge-Becker eschews theoretical abstraction, but his argument carries significant theoretical weight, especially in its resistance to the retrospective idealization of Go as a timeless expression of Chinese intellect.

The second chapter introduces a distinctive archaeological perspective that stands apart within the volume, though César Guardé-Paz's argument about the cultural significance of gaming resonates with later chapters that also link games to forms of egalitarianism. Focusing on newly discovered game-board-like stone inscriptions in Hong Kong, Guardé-Paz highlights the unique media properties of these artifacts as evidence of the routineness and embeddedness of gameplay at these sites. From this material, he infers aspects of the community culture that once engaged with these environmental remnants. Coupled with evidence of interregional trade and labor in the vicinity, Guardé-Paz argues that the egalitarian structure of games, where all players are equally bound by the same rules, enabled gameplay to momentarily dissolve cultural and social differences during cross-cultural encounters. While Guardé-Paz's speculative reconstruction of ludic communities at these sites is largely compelling, his concluding reference to Johan Huizinga's use of the psychoanalytic term "abreaction" feels somewhat misapplied (51). It conflates gameplay as a

temporary respite from daily labor with the psychoanalytic notion of catharsis, specifically the release of repressed impulses. Although this theoretical slippage is relatively minor here, it points to a broader pattern of uneven theoretical engagement that becomes more noticeable in some of the later chapters.

Chapters Three to Eight may be grouped together for their shared focus on one or a few selected late imperial texts and, with the exception of Chapter Three, fall broadly under the category of literary studies. The subject of the third chapter, two nineteenth-century board games by the late Qing scholar Yu Yue 俞樾 (1821-1907), raises methodological questions about how board games can and should be analyzed. The extent to which games may be read as narrative media, how “narrative” is to be defined in this context, and how ludic mechanics operate with, against, or independently of a game’s semiotic content are longstanding debates in game studies. Yet in practice, such analyses often depend on case-by-case discretion. For games adapted from earlier versions, as in the cases discussed here, inter-rendition comparison offers a useful lens for distinguishing layers of innovation from inherited structure. Huntington carefully traces how Yu Yue modifies Gao Zhao’s 高兆 (fl. seventeenth century) earlier version, such as replacing the role of the poet with that of the Confucian scholar and eliminating the figure of the beauty, while also acknowledging the possibility that Yu may have been drawing from an unknown or lost intermediary version, thus cautioning against premature attribution of innovation (75, note 4).

Her methodological care also extends to the way she negotiates the relationship between narrative and mechanics, even as she acknowledges the occasional disjunction between the two. For example, she argues that the game’s design—continuing until all players are ranked, rather than concluding with a single winner—implies “an implicit assurance that each role can find his own way to success” (69), though she also concedes that, financially, a clear loser still remains. A similar interpretive ambivalence surfaces in statements such as the following, which appear to strategically avoid attributing allegorical

meaning to authorial intent: “A properly constructed game could teach players that a scholar must sometimes depend on a fisherman though he would never trade places with him, that exams were only a few spaces along the path and not the whole path, and that one should celebrate other people’s fortunate encounters with gorgeous scenery or sacred mountains as much as one’s own” (72). This framing allows for allegorical resonance without insisting on definitive intentionality.

Those seeking a seamless reconciliation between gameplay and narrative may find such tensions unsatisfying. Nonetheless, Huntington’s deft navigation of Yu Yue’s authorial voice, adaptive interventions, and autobiographical inflections is anchored in a strong command of both the textual tradition and the media specificity of board games. This attentiveness leads to more measured and persuasive claims, such as her argument that Yu Yue’s contribution lies in how he “deepen[s] and balance[s] the fabric of allusions and differentiate[s] the stages of play” (65). In doing so, she avoids overdetermined readings and instead foregrounds the complexity of meaning-making in games as both literary and ludic artifacts.

If Huntington’s chapter treats game design as a form of playful writing, the five chapters that follow variously explore the idea of writing as game or play. This shared approach is not coincidental but reflects a deeper methodological vigilance regarding the nature of literary research: specifically, the recognition that when analyzing literary representations of games, the true object of study is often the text rather than the game itself. A common, and at times overcompensatory, response to this tension is to frame writing itself as a form of play. Yet if writing, regardless of whether it takes games as its explicit subject, can always be construed as play, then a critical question arises: what, if anything, is special about “writing about gameplay” compared to or within the corpus of “writing that plays?”

In other words, the arguments in these chapters often speak either to the ludic elements represented within the text or to the nature of the writing itself

(or its genre). The former is most clearly exemplified by Jie Guo's chapter, which adopts a more modest research outlook: to demonstrate how game scenes function primarily to "facilitate the narrative's overall supply of erotic titillation" in early Qing eroticas (112). Yet, there is a recurring temptation to seek a synthesis of the depicted ludic activities and the game-like nature of the frame narrative. In this respect, Jiayi Chen's chapter stands out as the most successful, demonstrating how the texts themselves function as metagames of reading. Without relying on rigid definitions of what qualifies as a game, she deftly guides readers through the self-contradictory narratives of several Ming-Qing gambling tales, revealing a phenomenological parallel between the acts of deception at the heart of gambling and the interpretive challenges inherent in reading the genre.

Also touching on generic aesthetics, Patricia Sieber argues that Yuan *sanqu* 散曲 songs are shaped by an "aesthetic of play" (78), which manifests through the thematization of ludic motifs, the immersive experiences the songs offer, and the subversion of conventional tropes, features she frequently interprets as implicitly set against the world of officialdom. While she offers a close and thoughtful reading, this oppositional reading raises the classic dilemma of the hermeneutic circle: to what extent does officialdom provide the necessary lens through which such texts are understood, and to what extent is its presence projected back onto the text by interpretive habit? For instance, must *chang* 場 imply the bureaucratic sphere, when *guanchang* 官場 was already commonly used as the name for three-player kickball games? And must the stance of a spectator be understood as paralleling the examiner's role in the civil service exams, simply for naming (or reporting) a champion in the match?

In some other chapters, it is unclear whether the argument targets games themselves as defiant arenas or the literary work's broader game-like properties, which is the primary confusion I have about Li Guo's article. Guo focuses on drinking games played by courtesans in the nineteenth-century novel *Qinglou meng* 青樓夢 (*The Dream in the Green Bower*), purportedly

a not insignificant presence in the work according to Guo's calculation that the games "occur in more than two-thirds of the sixty-four chapters" (118) (a number I struggle to reconcile with my own count, perhaps due to our different definitions of drinking game). Citing leisure studies and the questionable idea of leisure as "egalitarian utopia" (123), Guo calls the courtesans in the novel "ludic heroines," hinting that the "temporary social relations of leisure" (124) between the courtesans and the patron grants the former some level of self-determination. Yet this framing overlooks the fact that such "leisure" is itself a commodified performance within a system of patronage. The veneer of play cannot obscure the reality of labor, even if transactions are not immediately enacted.

Then, by abruptly introducing the unexplained premise that "if fiction writing itself is equated with a narrative game" (119), Guo signals an ambition to move beyond the depiction of individual game scenes and toward a broader interpretation of the novel's narrative structure. However, this assumption is subsequently taken for granted in a manner that is difficult to follow. Roger Caillois's claim that games are inherently "unproductive," end as they begin and produce no goods, wealth or products—already a debatable proposition, particularly once one considers whether gambling qualifies as gaming—is invoked without qualification to reinforce the idea that the novel, by ending in Buddhist renunciation, mirrors a game's structure (126). In fact, references to Caillois appear throughout the chapter in ways that are often tenuous or obscure in purpose. For instance, when Guo describes the "predestined bond" between the hero and heroine as "a situation of *alea* (chance)" in Cailloisian terms (125), it raises the question of why predestination, a notion of fixed outcome, should be framed as the opposite, and how such a taxonomic gesture meaningfully enhances our understanding of the novel.

An underdefined engagement with theory also appears in Hongmei Sun's chapter on one of the most influential Chinese novels, *Xiyouji* 西遊記 (*Journey*

to the West). The work has often been interpreted through the lens of game and play, not least because of the resonance of *you* in the title.¹ While the hesitation to rigidly define conceptually loaded terms such as “game” and “play” is understandable, this definitional openness has methodological implications, particularly when such terms are deployed flexibly across differing critical frameworks. For instance, bets and dares may or may not constitute games, depending on one’s definition of play. Sun begins by referring to them as games, but later invokes Caillois’s theory to argue that they violate “the most basic rule of play” (164), resulting in a definitional inconsistency where she ends up bickering against her own premise.

In addition to Caillois, Sun’s primary theoretical interlocutor in this chapter is Gregory Bateson, whose “map-territory” analogy she engages with at length. Bateson’s most well-known contribution to ludology is his argument that a playful gesture both refers to and differs from the act it imitates. For example, a playful nip between two dogs “denotes the bite, but it doesn’t denote

-
- 1 The explicit association between *xiyouji* and *Journey to the West* dates far back to the Ming with Li Zhi’s 李贄 (1527-1602) commentary that “profound truths are transmitted through *yoxi*” 遊戲之中暗傳密諦. In the early twentieth century, Hu Shih 胡適 (1891-1962) and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) rejected centuries of allegorical overreading, emphasizing the novel’s roots in folk storytelling and its character as a satirical, ahumorous work grounded in literary play rather than religious or philosophical doctrine. This dynamic between *Journey to the West*’s religio-philosophical discourse and its comic mode is further explored by Chiung-yun Evelyn Liu’s 劉瓊雲, whose title suggests that the novel’s meaning-making unfolds in a game-like fashion. See Chiung-yun [Liu], “Sacred Teaching and Facetious Talk: Playing with Meanings in the Shidetang *Journey to the West*” 聖教與戲言：論世本《西遊記》中意義的遊戲, *Zhongguo wen zhe yanjiu jikan* 36 (March 2010): 1-43. Aside from the chapter being reviewed here, recent works have seen increasing attempts to apply classic ludological models to the novel. For example, Johan Huizinga is invoked in both Zhu Hungbo 竺洪波, “Multiple Metaphors behind the ‘Playing’: An Explanation of Hu Shi’s Interpretation of *A Journal to the West* [sic]” “遊戲” 背後的多重隱喻——對胡適《西遊記》“遊戲”說的新解釋, *Wenyi lilun yanjiu* 34, no. 1 (2014): 196-203, and Tai Yu Jing 戴禹靖, “The *You of Xiyouji* and the Game Mindset of Late Ming Literati” 《西遊記》之遊與晚明文人遊戲心態, *Malaixiya Hanxue kan* 4 (August 2020): 119-30.

what would be denoted by the bite.”² He likens this symbolic ambiguity to the relationship between a map and a territory—a metaphor originally introduced by Alfred Korzybski. Just as a map represents but is not identical to the territory, in play, the signifier and the act are simultaneously distinguished and entangled: a playful nip is not an actual bite, yet its meaning is legible only in reference to the real bite from which it diverges.

Using this as her guiding metaphor, Hongmei Sun turns to the episode in the novel where the Buddha challenges the Monkey to somersault out of his hand. Believing he has succeeded and reached the edge of Heaven, the Monkey later discovers that what he took to be a distant cliff is actually the Buddha’s fingers encircling his freely inflatable palm. Sun interprets this as an instance of the Monkey’s inability to distinguish between the map and the territory: the “map” being the Monkey’s misperception of his surroundings, and the “territory” being the Buddha’s resizable hand. In Sun’s characterization, the former represents the “game” and the latter the “reality,” which initially appears external to the game but is ultimately revealed to be encompassed within it (161-62).

From a strictly Batesonian perspective, it is evident that Sun may be searching for the wrong “map” and “territory.” By referring to the expanding geographical space as a “non-game realm” (162), her spatial rhetoric subtly reconfigures Bateson’s play/non-play distinction in literal spatial terms, taking the map-territory analogy almost too literally. In doing so, she overlooks Bateson’s central philosophical thrust: the analogy concerns systems of codification and (meta)recognition. The supernatural redrawing of spatial boundaries such as the Buddha’s elastic palm does not in itself rupture a playframe (assuming one exists), nor does it necessarily mark a transition from play to non-play. To be fair, the analogy does resonate with the Buddhist concept of expediency, particularly in how provisional appearances are

2 Gregory Bateson, “A Theory of Play and Fantasy,” *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2 (1955): 39-51.

acknowledged within a larger ontology of emptiness. Yet rather than pursuing this direction, Sun's reading and Bateson's theory often seem to operate at cross purposes. Her analysis shifts the stakes toward a problem of (un)reality, and this term lacks a stable definition in her discussion: at times, it denotes the distinction between dream and waking life; at others, it signals the difference between original and simulacrum. It is in this latter context that Jean Baudrillard is introduced (164-65), despite the tenuous comparability between the Monkey's supernatural theatrics and the conditions of postmodern hyperreality that Baudrillard theorizes.³

Shifting to the contemporary Sinosphere, chapters nine through thirteen showcase the versatility of game studies, featuring not only four video game analyses ranging in theme from critical gerontology to globalization, but also an intriguing ethnographic study of card games designed and played by Internet addicts, based on the author's fieldwork at a Chinese Disciplinary Treatment Camp. This diversity attests to the resilience of ludic culture—its ubiquity and adaptability across varying scales of production and consumption—and to the varied forms of agency it affords, whether to senior citizens, pathologized youth, or the unwitting subjects of neoliberal information regimes. That said, the volume's regional breadth would benefit from deeper engagement with ludic communities beyond Mainland China (an effort notably advanced in Keren He's contribution). Likewise, while playful writing seen in Republican tabloids is briefly discussed in the introduction, the inclusion of one or two case studies from the twentieth century could help more structurally bridge the chronological divide between the late imperial and contemporary periods, and offer insight

3 Baudrillard's theory of simulacrum highlights how production in contemporary society has shifted from material goods to signs, images, and information, creating a world dominated by simulation rather than substance. As media, advertising, and digital technologies proliferate, representations no longer refer to any underlying reality but circulate independently in a self-referential system, what he calls *hyperreality*. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

into continuities or transformations in the cultural life of play.

Both thematically and methodologically, these chapters serve as a productive complement to the volume's premodern inquiries. As the limits of premodern materials often allow for more tortuous access to game ecologies than contemporary analyses, such limitations give rise to distinct but equally generative lines of inquiry. Yet, this divergence should not be construed as a difference in productivity. Rather, it underscores the importance for hermeneuts and media archaeologists of premodern cultures to remain attuned to the ludic as a critical category, even as our work is shaped by fundamentally different corpora, interpretive frameworks, and historical stakes.

Overall, the volume represents a valiant and timely effort to take the first serious step toward addressing a long-neglected theme in the study of premodern Chinese culture. While the search for robust critical frameworks is an ongoing struggle evident across several chapters, the collection's ambition and scope are commendable. One hopes that this volume will encourage further scholarship that not only expands the historical and regional range of inquiry, but also continues to refine the conceptual tools needed to understand the ludic as a vital dimension of Sinophone cultural production.

