

Meet the Maker

BY DERRICK SOBODASH

The Yin and Yang of Chinese Gaming

Largely unknown in the West, China has a rich history of video games that dates almost as far back as our own. And it's not all pirated knockoff junk, either.

For nearly twenty years, the land of the rising sun has been seen as paradise on earth for gamers, a sort of well where all the top console titles come from. But just a little further west of Japan, another rising dragon has slowly but surely been developing a game industry of its own—a story that's gone largely unreported in Western media even as outfits like Ubisoft, Epic Games and Square Enix set up satellite developers in the nation. If China has any sort of reputation in video-game land over here, it's usually as the butt of a joke about porting *Sonic the Hedgehog* or *Final Fantasy VII* to the NES. Which... well, yes, guilty as charged. But on the legal side, China's game makers largely took the opposite path from their Japanese counterparts; instead of looking toward Western mythology or science fiction for their themes, they turned to the world of *wuxia*, the fantasy version of ancient China that serves as the stage for much of its popular lore. This, combined with the country's—shall we say—laissez-faire approach to copyright, has resulted in a game library that's as fascinating as it is silly, as interesting to explore as it is to point and laugh at. Prepare, then, for a brief look at two decades worth of development you missed from an industry that produced thousands of games you'll likely never see...

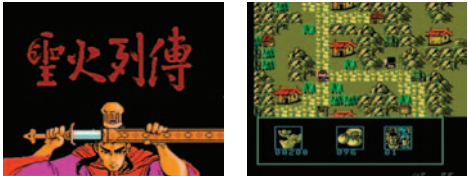




Waixing's *Journey to the West* sold 150,000 copies—and those were just the legal ones. Who knows how many pirate carts there are out there?



Final Fantasy: Magic Knight is a brilliantly-made RPG, but don't expect an official English release anytime soon—the title wholeheartedly rips off graphics and music from Square Enix's games.



Tale of the Holy Flame, released for the NES in 1991, was the first large-scale RPG produced for the Chinese-speaking console audience.

The NES and the pirates

When Nintendo released the NES in 1985, they single-handedly revived the game industry in the West. But while the 8-bit box spread like wildfire through North America and Europe, the \$149.99 sticker price kept it far out of reach in Chinese markets, where the average family made 50 yuan (about \$13) per month. Even ignoring the import tariffs the government would undoubtedly slap on the thing, the idea of getting an NES for the vast majority of Chinese was sheer nonsense—it meant essentially going a year without food.

Things changed towards the late 1980s as Famicom systems (the Japanese version of the NES) began to trickle into China as gifts from relatives and friends heading home. It wasn't long before the system—called the “red and white machine” in Chinese, after the Famicom's color scheme—was illegally cloned by companies in Taiwan and the southern industrial metropolis of Shenzhen. If you count every pirate knockoff of the Famicom as a single system, it is bar-none the most popular console in Chinese history—one mainland magazine estimates that half of all households had some kind of player by the mid-1990s, which translate to hundreds of millions of consoles sold.

One of the first manufacturers to the Famicom clone market was SUBOR, founded in 1987 and called Xiaobawang in Chinese. It advertised its clones aggressively in nationally-televised ads and became famous for its “study machines,” Famicom hardware packed inside a keyboard and sold alongside a suite of educational cartridges. It was the first very cheap computer system to be sold to Chinese consumers, and while parents bought it to help the kids with their homework, most children spent far more time

buying pirated Famicom cartridges and learning how to blow up their friends than memorizing equations.

These first carts were all pirated Japanese releases, some with new levels and other hacks inserted. *Battle City*, a simple tank-combat game produced by Namco in 1985, was the most popular, with hundreds of carts featuring different maps. *Super Mario Bros.* and *Contra* tailed close behind, though, with the latter commanding two unofficial sequels by Chinese outfits Yanshan and E.S.C.

Still, these basic early-era NES games weren't enough to satisfy gamers for long, and soon local software houses rose to the challenge of providing content for this untapped market. Sachen, a PC software developer based in Taiwan, produced its first NES games in September 1988; by the end of 1989 it had published 11 titles. The company's games mainly found release in South America, however, and it released very few games in Chinese—only titles like *Master Chu and the Drunkard Hu* and *Jurassic Boy* were widely known. C&E Inc, another Taiwan-based development house, released the first big Chinese-developed Famicom RPG, *Tale of the Holy Flame*, in July 1991. The game is a *wuxia* story set in the twilight hours of the Yuan Dynasty, when the Holy Flame Society forms to resist its final tyrannical emperor. C&E followed it up with more large-scale projects as the years wore on, including an RPG based on classical novel *Creation of the Gods* in 1995.

Mainland China's answer to this Taiwan-based industry was Waixing Science & Technology, a developer in Fujian province that began to publish games in 1993. The company's catalog would come to include more than 100 Famicom games, including unauthorized Chinese-language



The NES version of *Final Fantasy V* has nothing to do with any actual *Final Fantasy*—a fact that must have left at least one customer a little angry.



Shenzhen Nanjing's attempt to port *Final Fantasy VII* to the NES may be a little lacking in gameplay, but you've got to appreciate their brashness.



Pirated NES systems and games at a shop in Beijing. 8-bit games are difficult to find in China's big cities these days, but the Famicom still lives on in the rural areas.

versions of *Final Fantasy* and original title *Journey to the West*, the first Chinese-made game to sell more than 150,000 copies.

Asia's console craze caught the attention of Sega, which released its Genesis console in Taiwan in March 1991. The launch included Chinese editions of strategy RPGs *Sangokushi Retsuden* and *Warrior of Rome*, but Sega found the Taiwan market too weak and axed the system. However, the move wound up being a green light for developers eager to clone the superior 68000-based system, and companies in both Taiwan and China developed dozens of carts for cloned consoles. Chuanpu Technologies released a series of SRPGs based on classic Chinese stories like *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Creation of the Gods*, and C&E's *Beggar Prince* (released much later in English by Super Fighter Team) saw its first edition. Other companies aimed to append existing series, regardless of what the original copyright holders thought about it. SKOB's *Destiny of an Emperor III* was an unlicensed Genesis chapter in Capcom's RPG series, but *Final Fantasy: Magic Knight* was, in a way, even more blatant—it came in a box with imitation Yoshitaka Amano artwork and borrowed graphics wholesale from assorted Square SNES games to tell its otherwise original story.

By the late 1990s, SUBOR's study machines were yesterday's news. Retailers dumped the outdated Famicom and Genesis clones in favor of the new Sega Saturn and Sony PlayStation consoles. Worse yet, the industry's major players began to make some serious mistakes. With the death of the Famicom imminent, Waixing hemorrhaged money on PC development. *Legend of Chivalrous Aspirations*, its only computer game, bombed after two years in development. Desperate for a toumiquet, Waixing sued several piracy rings making unauthorized copies of its NES games—even though said games were often not-so-authorized themselves. Adding insult to injury, Waixing released a Chinese translation of *P.T.O.*, a Japanese World War II simulation where you can play as Imperial Japan and try to capture all of East Asia—the political equivalent of Electronic Arts releasing a first-person shooter in America starring an Al Qaeda fighter.

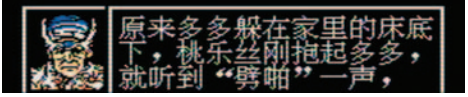
Today, in Beijing's electronics-store-heavy Zhongguancun district, cartridges are seen as shamefully low-tech. Combing the game stores that line both sides of East Gulou



Avenue is a heart-wrenching experience for the retro gamer; save for a handful of broken controllers, there are no traces of classic consoles. Even shops in the city's poorer Chongwen district wouldn't be caught dead with anything older than Sony's PlayStation 2. In half a day of combing the capital, the only vendor we found with any carts was a lone SUBOR retailer in Guanyuan market, Xicheng district.

Still, economic inequalities have ensured the Famicom a continued place in rural China. Pirate outfits still bang out new multi-game cartridges for the equivalent of \$1 a pop, and a few developers have even stepped up to make new games, over a decade after the last “official” NES release in America. Shenzhen Nanjing Technology, founded in 2002, has already released more than 70 Famicom titles; its lineup consists almost entirely of games back-ported from the PlayStation and Sega Saturn consoles. 3D graphics and full-motion cutscenes don't exactly work well with 1983-era technology, but that hasn't stopped Nanjing from releasing its 8-bit interpretations of *Final Fantasy VII*, *Resident Evil*, *Samurai Shodown RPG* and *Tomb Raider*, as well as Super NES classics *Chrono Trigger*, *Tales of Phantasia* and *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. These titles, while amusing to plonk around with for a few minutes, are not particularly high quality—they have eerie, repetitive music and frustrating levels of difficulty. Random battles in *Chrono Trigger* take nearly a half hour to complete, and *Final Fantasy VII* has been criticized for extensive use of graphics ripped from other games.

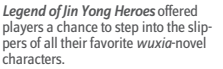
In a land as vast as China, the Famicom continues to have a future years after the rest of the world abandoned it. How long will it last? Probably not much longer—reports indicate that Asiatic Russia and Southeast Asia are the real growth markets for pirate NES stuff these days.



Some of the stranger China-born NES releases—*Pokémon*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Tomb Raider*, and a platformer based off *Titanic* (the cutscene text reads “Iceberg, iceberg straight ahead!”).



Sango Fighter was an unauthorized update of C&E's *Super Fighter*, both games were the closest thing PCs had to a decent *Street Fighter* home port in 1993.



Legend of Jin Yong Heroes offered players a chance to step into the slippers of all their favorite *wuxia*-novel characters.

The Massive PC Marketplace

While developers and pirates waged war to make money in the console game and study machine market, some software developers followed another route: the IBM PC. Personal computers first came within reach for Chinese city dwellers in the early 1990s, when computer stores could custom-assemble a 386-DX machine for 9,000 yuan (about \$1,000 in 1990 dollars). Unlike in the console world, Chinese development was present in the computer market from day one. PC releases began in 1989 with Softstar, Taiwan's largest PC game publisher; its *Rich Man*, a Chinese variant on *Monopoly*, may be competing with Falcom's *Ys* for the title of Most Re-made Game of All Time by this point. It's hard to say who made the first Chinese RPG, though; likely contenders are Softstar's *Xuanyuan Sword*, Soft World's *The Eight Swords of Shenzhou*, or Kingformation's *Legend of the Chivalrous Heroes*.

From the beginning, Japanese developers drew on pen-and-paper RPGs (and the Western computer games inspired by them) to build a fantasy world. These RPGs, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, tossed together all manner of characters, creatures and classes in a Tolkien-inspired world. China went the opposite route. Nearly every RPG drew on history and contemporary fiction, especially the *wuxia* martial-arts fantasy genre. Developers reveled in it, and even the most generic game was painted with a uniquely Chinese cultural color.

In the US, the release of *Final Fantasy VII* in 1997 made gamers go RPG crazy. Multiply that by approximately a billion and one can grasp the effect Softstar's 1995 release *Legend of the Swordsman & Fairy* (also known as *Chinese Paladin*) had on Chinese gamers. The game has it all—fencing, fighting, torture, revenge, monsters, chases, escapes and unrequited love—packed into a rock-solid isometric engine. But beyond its technical achievements, *Swordsman & Fairy* had some serious heart in its writing, a story easily the equal to, and often better than, Japanese RPGs. The hero Li Xiaoyao and his lady friends Zhao Ling'er and Lin Yueru are still popular cosplay choices for Chinese otaku to this day.

Swordsman & Fairy was later remade for Windows with full CD audio, ported to the Saturn as one of the platform's few Chinese releases, and became the first Chinese game to make the leap to Japan under the name *Senken Kikyouden*. Softstar itself remade the game in high-resolution, true color graphics for Windows XP; pirates ported it to every other platform under the sun, from the NES and Game Boy to cell phones. The game even went on to inspire a 2005 television drama under the same name.

Softstar's success turned the heads of business-minded software developers, and 1996 kicked off an explosion of game releases that continued unabated for the next nine



A wall of (legal) PC games at a store in Beijing. Piracy-proof MMORPGs have all but killed the market for single-player computer games in China.

years. Hit after hit followed for several years with titles like *Legend of Jin Yong Heroes*, a breakthrough RPG that plunged the player in *wuxia* writer Jin Yong's version of ancient China. Players took the role of a young man who is sucked into the world of the author's stories. In 1997, mainland developer Kingsoft (mainly famous for dictionary software by that point) published *Swordsman*, a *wuxia* RPG with action elements akin to *Diablo* rather than the turn-based combat that dominated Japanese and Chinese RPGs. While not the most profitable game, it still managed to sell triple what Kingsoft anticipated.

By 2000, *Xuanyuan Sword*, *Legend of the Chivalrous Heroes*, *Twin Heroes* and *Swordsman* had emerged as flagship RPG series, and start-ups eager to cash in on the RPG craze began pumping out clones. In 1999, 108 original Chinese PC games were published. In 2001, that number ballooned to 350, the bulk of them RPGs and many of them ripping off concepts and even content from top titles. *Tie of Heaven*, Dynasty's hit series, stood out in a sea of mediocre games as one of the best in terms of graphics, music and design.

A few years later, though, companies began to realize that PC games were not the cash cow they were hoping for. Original releases fell to 35 by 2006, and there were even fewer games released last year. The same is true of traditional game consoles in China, which are all but dead

in the marketplace; stores stock a token selection of Wii and Xbox 360 software and supplement it with an impressive box of pirates under the counter.

What happened? In a word—or, to be exact, in an acronym—MMORPGs. With the exception of *Swordsman & Fairy IV*, the PC market is saturated with online games, with virtually every major developer dropping their flagship series in favor of more profitable online editions. Store shelves are covered in the overstock of the past decade, and the new release wall dwindles daily.

A question of vision

Despite twenty years of success in China, almost no Chinese-made games have made it to US shores. In fact, less than ten have made it to Japan, and only about as many have official Korean translations, even though Korea is China's nearest cultural neighbor.

Why is this? A lot of it is a simple matter of technological know-how—something China didn't have much of in video games until very recently. "Speaking frankly, Chinese game development started late," Li Peimin, president of Kingformation, says. "The graphics and programming quality lagged far behind the US and Japan."

With the 8-bit NES still a viable game platform in China until the late 1990s, companies were at an inherent disadvantage in the international marketplace. Even worse, the



Legend of the Swordsman & Fairy (seen here in its Windows XP update) is arguably the most influential Chinese RPG of all time.



Famicom developers were tied to another country's console and went down with the ship when Japanese creators declared it dead. The Chinese market did create a console of its own: the Super A'can, a 2D-based system that looks and plays like a souped-up Neo-Geo. That may've been impressive to hardcore gamers, but it wasn't enough to survive against next-gen systems—the console was a massive flop in Taiwan, and creator Funtech quickly scrapped the project, recalled all unsold inventory, and doesn't even mention the thing at all on its web page. "The Taiwan market was not big enough to keep a console alive," says Li, whose company produced *Super Dragonforce* as its lone A'can release. "Although the A'can had much more power than the Super Nintendo and the Genesis, it was launched in competition with the Japanese Saturn and PlayStation. On top of that, the government did not have many policies in place to support the development of original hardware."

Culture issues also play a role. "Chinese games tend to follow the same storyline progression as Japanese and Western games, but the games heavily emphasize Chinese culture," Li notes. "The background is so strong that it's difficult for Japan or Western countries to get into." It's odd that the element that has made the games so wildly successful in Asia stands in the way of their export, but Jacky, a former Square Enix Beijing employee, echoes Li's sentiments: "[*Legend of the Chivalrous Heroes*] reminded me of the first time I read *wuxia* novels. I could be a hero in the novel, but we never found a proper way to convey our culture to people with non-Chinese backgrounds." Despite the popularity of Chinese martial arts movies in the US, Jacky and others say that Americans' interest in this genre leans more toward chop-socky action than story or atmosphere.

And then there's piracy, a topic that always looms in the background with nearly everything game-related in China. Not only did developers in the region have to compete with a thriving piracy industry which Asian governments mostly ignored, but industrial espionage was also rife. Panda Entertainment's popular *Sango Fighter*, for example, is nothing but an update of C&E's *Super Fighter*. "A *Super Fighter* developer left and joined Panda, taking the engine with him," says Brandon Cobb, president of Super Fighter Team, a software company that releases English-language versions of Chinese games. C&E sued Panda and won, forcing Panda to halt its sales of *Sango Fighter* in Taiwan—but the ruling didn't stop a dozen pirate companies from continuing to sell copies. *Sango* was



The Windows update of Kingformation's *Legend of the Chivalrous Heroes* features lavishly-animated battle scenes and some very well-dressed ladies.

eventually released again on the Super A'can, but C&E had stopped caring by then. (So how did there end up being an English version of *Sango*? After Panda's plans were put on hold by the Taiwan court, "another company translated it to English and sold it to a shareware company without permission," Cobb says.)

In the Famicom world, it was standard practice to hack out a company's credit screen in favor of one's own. Games were hacked so severely that it's often impossible to tell who originally made several games. *Chu Liuxiang*, a mystery-themed RPG based on a novel by Gu Long, was possibly released by Waixing and hacked by Hengge Dianzi, which retitled the game *Fantasy*. Similarly, the Famicom backport of *Phantasy Star IV* has seen release under five different names by two companies, as if they both kept forgetting they had released the game and chose to copy each other.

English at last

These barriers didn't stop Brandon Cobb from taking an interest. His first run-in with Chinese games was in 1993 on a dial-up BBS that carried releases from the Chinese Software Distribution Network, a piracy group that cracked and distributed Chinese PC titles. His first download was C&E's *Super Fighter*, the game for which his future company would be named. He was charmed immediately.

"Chinese games just give me a different feeling," he says. "It's the emotional response I get from them. US games just started to seem bland by comparison. I eventually told the president of C&E (John Kuo) about how I got the game. He said he was in the US in 1993 and checked the BBS scene here, and was shocked to see *Super Fighter* distributed." *Super Fighter* was released in Taiwan on February 20, 1993; it was cracked and spread worldwide by March.

C&E was already losing money due to piracy on its home turf and wasn't too interested in expanding to markets where it would face similar problems. It would be 13 years before Cobb's company translated and released *Beggar Prince*, C&E's Genesis RPG inspired by the tale of the Prince and the Pauper. As of this year, *Beggar Prince* has sold out of three production runs. "Japanese games had exposure [in America]. Chinese ones didn't. I thought that was unfair, because the Chinese ones were just as good if not better."

Super Fighter Team has another game on the way, and Cobb hinted that it may be a translation of Gamtec's *The Legend of Wukong*, a Genesis RPG loosely based on *Journey to the West*. If Cobb's outfit continues to find success, it could be a sign that after two decades, it might just be time for us to treat Chinese games seriously.

WHAT IS WUXIA?

Knights in shining armor and romantic tales of lords and ladies have captivated European audiences for thousands of years. The modern fantasy novel owes a lot to J.R.R Tolkien and his magical Middle Earth, but his elves, dwarves and ents have no place in the Chinese fantasy setting of *wuxia*.

Wuxia, often translated as "Chinese swords and sorcery," emerged as a unique genre during the last century, though its roots go back much farther. While the xia protagonist may share some similarities with the samurai, the knight and the gunslinger, he is a unique character. For one, the hero can be anyone—noble or humble. His tale often begins with an extreme tragedy, after which he devotes his life to becoming an expert martial artist and winning justice or forgiveness. After becoming a master, he wanders Jianghu, the world of martial arts, to right its wrongs—something that often brings him into conflict with the law.

Jianghu is a beautiful and harsh land; its thieves, beggars and Buddhist priests are ordered by alliances of sects, clans and martial arts disciplines. Differences are, more often than not, resolved by force. If monsters are to be found, they are fox spirits, jiangshi zombies and great big dragons; goblins, trolls and orcs need not apply.

Even if you don't know a word of Chinese, you can still enjoy *wuxia* in the form of Asian cinema. Genre titles well known in Western countries include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Ashes of Time* (1994).