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## The Romantic Reconstruction of Su Shi: Historical Nostalgia in Mobile Game Literature

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### ABSTRACT

This study delves into the profound impact of mobile game literature on the romantic reconstruction of Chinese historical figures and traditional culture. Focusing on the image of Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) within the mobile game *Mo Hun* (墨魂 “Ink Spirits”), I investigate how the game narratives challenge prevailing stereotypes while crafting a modern and relatable image of Su Shi. The distinct nature of game narratives, diverging from traditional media, coupled with a dynamic player community, fosters a collective sense of historical nostalgia among young Chinese people. This narrative transformation not only meets contemporary yearnings for a romantic historical imagination but also underscores the potent role of literature in reshaping the reception of historical figures.

**KEY WORDS:** mobile game literature, Su Shi, historical nostalgia, narrative transformation, romantic historical imagination

### Introduction

In 1082, Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) was exiled to Huangzhou黃州 due to the Crow Terrace Poetry Case烏臺詩案, and wrote the famous song lyric to the tune of *Nian Nu Jiao* (念奴嬌 “The Charms of Niannu”) entitled *Chibi Huaigu* (赤壁懷古 “Meditation on the Past at Red Cliff”). In this lyric, Su Shi reminisced about the Battle of Red Cliff that had taken place approximately 800 years before. In the most well-known lines of this lyric, he describes how the young general Zhou Yu (周瑜, 175-210), who has extraordinary looks and just married a famous beauty, commanded the war with ease and defeated the powerful enemy. Obviously, what Su Shi created was a romanticized image of Zhou Yu in the Battle of Red Cliff, a youth who achieved incredible victory, with a beauty who added to the allure of the event. While this portrayal was probably not the historical truth, it has become an enduring influential representation of Red Cliff in Chinese literature.

Su Shi, strolling and chanting by the Yangtze river, has a thousand years later become a source of historical reminiscence. Su Shi, more often known as Su Dongpo蘇東坡, a talented writer suffering from slander and

persecution, an upright official, repeatedly experienced setbacks. Yet he faced life with optimism, a perfect romanticized image of ancient Chinese literati.

It is unimaginable to talk about Chinese traditional culture without mentioning Su Shi. He was a rare polymath difficult to label. In contemporary descriptions of Su Shi, he is referred to as a writer, politician, official, thinker, calligrapher, painter, and gourmet. While this list may seem endless, it is not the way Su Shi or his contemporaries understood him. Su Shi is an extremely important cultural figure whose works have repeatedly appeared in textbooks at compulsory education levels in China. The most important and widely known pieces of these works are his writings related to the Battle of Red Cliff, including two *Chibi Fu* (赤壁賦“Rhapsody on Red Cliff”) and “The Charms of Niannu: Meditation on the Past at Red Cliff”.

Nowadays, the romanticized image of Su Shi and traditional Chinese culture merges modern media and entertainment culture, re-constructing historical figures. We taste historical nostalgia through popular culture. A new perception of history deeply influences popular culture products. This article will look at the mobile game *Mo Hun* (墨“Ink Spirits”) as a case study. Compared to other media, this game represents a highly distinctive medium in terms of storytelling. Despite growing scholarly recognition of narrative significance in games, especially video games, the impact of game narrative on contemporary literary culture remains largely unexplored. This study aims to investigate how narrative in the mobile game *Mo Hun* constructs a modern image of Su Shi, and examines the contemporary reception and understanding of Chinese traditional history and literary culture. Additionally, it explores how gaming, as a unique narrative medium, offers a variant form of historical representation.

### Mo Hun: Rewriting the Historical Figure in Mobile Game

I employ *Mo Hun* as a research case as the first mobile game on the Chinese market to focus on Chinese traditional culture and history with a strong emphasis on storytelling. *Mo Hun* can be classified as an ACG mobile game, nevertheless its storytelling in the game is closer in genre to the visual novel. The term ACG originates from Japan, originally referring to anime, manga and game. Nowadays it refers to one specific art style. In China, usually called 2D (*Er Ci Yuan* 二次元), an ACG game generally refers to games with anime or manga-style art, or games that cater to ACG fans. The focus of ACG games is to create a virtual world with several game

characters for players to interact with. Typically, ACG games consist of two main parts, *lihui* (立繪 character illustrations) and 劇情 (*Juqing* “story plot”). As China’s mobile game market thrives, many similar role-playing ACG games emerge. *Mo Hun* is distinctive as the first game to use Chinese classical literature and traditional culture for its main contextual theme with all game characters deriving from history.

It is a common practice in Japan to create game characters based on real historical figures, classified into two categories: historically-based and fictional. The various Three Kingdoms games serve as a good example of the former, as with *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* produced by Koei. The latter includes games like *Fate/Grand Order*, in which players can summons famous historical figures as their servants, such as Jiang Ziya (姜子牙, active in ca. 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE) in Chinese history. Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇, 259-210 BCE) is another good example, as is Yang Yuhuan (楊玉環, 719-756). However, these game characters are designed to have magic power and live in a world that is completely different from historical time and space to which they belong. They have little connection with their historical background. *Mo Hun*’s setting is special in that it is a partly fictional world where the game characters, known as “ink spirits”, are not actually the poets in the history or their spirits after death. Instead, ink spirit comes from the essence of the poets’ literary works loved by later people. The ink spirit does not necessarily possess the same personality and memory as the poet. In the game, however, an ink spirit is referred to by the poet’s name. For example, there is ink spirit Su Shi, while the historical figure Su Shi is referred to as the poet Su Shi. In the game, the place where the game takes place is called *Mohen Zhai* (墨痕齋 “Inkmark Studio”), a space independent of the real world. Ink spirits live in Inkmark Studio, and one character, Lan Tai 蘭臺 is the manager of Inkmark Studio. Lan Tai can summon ink spirits to return and nurture them, unlocking their stories.

*Mo Hun* has a lot of stories within the game, and the main plot mode is called *Su Yuan* (溯源 “Source Tracing”). After fulfilling certain conditions, a player can accompany an ink spirit into a virtual world created by a particular piece of literary work, a simulacrum of its story, a new interpretation by modern game creators. This parallel comprises a virtual world created in Source Tracing. Game creators offer representations, and thus new understandings of Su Shi’s life and literature. On the one hand, this kind of interpretation subtly responds to common stereotypes of Su Shi held by modern people, while on the other hand, it constructs an alternative romanticized image of Su Shi.

A well-known pre-modern cultural figure in China, Su Shi is an important character in *Mo Hun*. The game presents Su Shi through four Source Tracing stories, six daily plots, twelve pure-text documents, and some short daily interaction chats. Among them, the Source Tracing stories and documents are the primary narrative contents in the game. This paper will analyze these narratives to explore how *Mo Hun* reconsiders and reconstructs Su Shi's life and image, romanticizing Su Shi and traditional Chinese culture.

Su Shi's four Source Tracing storylines in the game are all based on his works in exile in Huangzhou, including "Nian Nu Jiao", *Han Shi Yu Er Shou* (寒食兩二首 "Two Poems on the Rain on Cold Food Festival"), *Ji Chengtian Si Ye You* (記承天寺夜遊 "Remembering the Night Tour in Chengtian Temple"), and *Man Ting Fang* (滿庭芳 "Courtyard Full of Blossoms"). While the first storyline is based on the lyric "Nian Nu Jiao," its plot is actually largely related to the contents of the two "Rhapsodies on Red Cliff." It can be observed that the four stories correspond to four distinct literary genres: *fu* (賦 "rhapsody"), *shi* (詩 "poetry"), *wen* (文 "prose"), and Song *ci* lyric (詞). This is a testament to Su Shi's exceptional skills in multiple literary genres. The Huangzhou period was undoubtedly a peak in Su Shi's creative career, and many of his most widely circulated works were composed during this time.

The period of Su Shi's life in Huangzhou, during which he suffered a demotion and was forced to live as a powerless low-ranking official, may be the one that most closely aligns with modern impressions of him. Despite living in poverty and boredom, he maintains an optimistic and open-minded attitude, using his literary talent to record experiences of beauty and leisure in life. Su Shi is often portrayed in contemporary times as a demoted but optimistic figure. This depiction makes sense of a canonical selection of Su Shi's works used in elementary and middle school levels of Chinese education.

However, Su Shi's life could not always be defined as in demotion, nor was he solely a literary figure known for his poems and lyrics. Su Shi held official positions in the imperial court, being in local government for a significant portion of his life. He made notable accomplishments in Confucian classics and historical studies. To Su Shi and those closest to him, literature was just a small part, a relatively insignificant part of his life, achievements, and legacy. In modern times, Su Shi represents a struggling and unsuccessful literary figure. This moment of struggle defines him today. Su Shi is especially beloved for his

self-deprecating spirit and optimistic attitude. Such optimism is a form of self-consolation. We see how narratives in *Mo Hun* are built within this modern-retro-context, how the game reconsiders and deconstructs popular images of Su Shi.

### First Source Tracing story

Su Shi's first Source Tracing story centers around the famous Battle of Red Cliff. The Red Cliff that Su Shi visited in Huangzhou was probably not the real Red Cliff where the battle took place back in the Three Kingdoms period (220-280), but this does not diminish the fact that Su Shi's series of works have become the most direct impression of Red Cliff for Chinese people. In the beginning of the story, Su Shi leads the player onto a boat named "Red Cliffs" and takes her on a tour to visit the heroes of the past. The player can choose to visit either the Battle of Red Cliff or the Battle of Black River. Regardless, in the end, neither can be reached as the boat capsizes after colliding with a person. This person was revealed to be Qu Yuan (屈原, c. 340 BC-278 BC). Qu Yuan was known for composing and chanting poetry by the riverside during his exile, but his death by drowning in the Miluo River 汨羅江 was unrelated to the Red Cliff, and it occurred in a totally different time period. However, in this virtual world, Qu Yuan appears in Su Shi's Yangtze River, or rather in the historical scene that Su Shi attempted to visit. The unexpected figure Qu Yuan questions Su Shi as to whether a person traveling in exile in such a simple boat could still hope to achieve great feats of heroism. Qu Yuan tells Su Shi that, regardless of whether his boat was simple or magnificent, he had no chance of seeing heroic historical figures, fated to meet only Qu Yuan. This implies that Su Shi and Qu Yuan share similarities, having a mutually strong loyalty to a monarch who slandered and exiled them. They are both renowned Chinese historical literary figures. Qu Yuan is recognized as China's earliest romantic poet, an exemplar of loyal ministers who resist collusion with corrupt politics.

Su Shi and Qu Yuan had a discussion about a widely-known dialogue between Qu Yuan and a fisherman regarding the clarity of river water, which is recorded in the famous Chinese historical book, *Shiji Records of the Grand Historian* (史記 "Records of the Grand Historian"). Qu Yuan asks Su Shi whether the river water is clear or murky; the subtext and cultural context of this question asks if society is under good governance or in chaos. Su Shi replied that he only saw the beauty of river

water and moon. This response refers to a main idea in Su Shi's masterpiece *Qian Chibi Fu* (前赤壁賦 "Former Rhapsody on Red Cliff") concerning how beauty of nature is free and essential. Qu Yuan advised Su Shi to give up pursuing this chaotic world, since everything was murky. He suggested that someone like him should just return to the river. Su Shi entered the river and asked Qu Yuan what he saw. Qu Yuan saw a peaceful resting place, while Su Shi saw a large fish, indicating his secular hedonistic attitude towards life's setbacks. This dramatic response deconstructs Qu Yuan's serious concern for the order of society and individual fates. Su Shi attempts to break away from a scholar's traditional norms of conduct, particularly in relationships between monarchs and officials. This thinking betrays a secular optimism. Subsequently, a fish jumps into Su Shi's hand, upon which Su Shi chops his boat into firewood to cook fish soup. This plot echoes Su Shi's image as a gourmet, which is one of the most influential aspects of his modern reputation. Su Shi concludes that if one may never be a hero, one can still find beauty and joy in simple things, such as appreciating the moon on the river. He suggests that by enjoying life's simple pleasures, one can be as fulfilled as a *Fengliu Renwu* (風流人物 "gallant men") of the past. Ironically, Su Shi's writings about the Red Cliff elevated him to legendary figure, placing him on a par with the likes of Cao Cao (曹操, 155-220) and Zhou Yu.

Red Cliff plays a crucial role in Su Shi's literary legacy, with his reinterpretation of the event resonating with modern readers. The Source Tracing story in *Mo Hun* emphasizes Su Shi's openness and transcendence, which differs from the conventional understanding of his transcendentalism. Rather than focusing on transcending the mundane secular world, Su Shi's transcendence in the game is rooted in his appreciation of daily life, such as nature, cuisine, and entertainment. This fits the living conditions of modern people, who find it difficult to transcend life and death, fortune and misfortune. Players appreciate the small pleasures in life, as does Su Shi (in *Mo Hun*). Qu Yuan represents a traditional noble image of poet/official refusing to go along with the crowd, compromising with the world. Su Shi has a rebellious nature, no longer accepting self-torture and exile in suffering as Qu Yuan did, in pursuit of spiritual perfection.

In another Source Tracing storyline based on Su Shi's poem "Rain on the Cold Food Festival," Su Shi took players back to his former residence in Huangzhou, conversing with the *Haitang* (海棠 Chinese Begonia) in the courtyard, which he personified as beauty. This is clearly inspired by another poem about the Begonia,

in which Su Shi laments that the flower originated in Sichuan, Su Shi's hometown, such that nobody in Huangzhou could recognize it. In this story, despite his poverty and illness, Su Shi still enjoys drinking with the flower tree, sending a servant boy to buy some pork, excitedly suggested they cook it. It reminds us of the lines Su Shi wrote in another poem, writing of pork in Huangzhou being cheap as dirt, while no one but him knew how to cook it. The boy reminded Su Shi it was Cold Food Festival, that they should eat cold pork. Su Shi proposed they try the specialty cold sliced pork from his hometown. Cold pork is often used in traditional Chinese contexts as a sacrificial offering enjoyed by sages. Thus, Su Shi subtly mocks the respectable status of sage, a noble pursuit for ancient Chinese literati. At the story's end, the boy's words reveal that Su Shi burnt poems he wrote in Huangzhou, too afraid to send them to friends, due to his involvement in the Crow Terrace Poetry Case. During his time in Huangzhou, Su Shi is portrayed as a solitary and impoverished figure trying to find joy in his circumstances. The concept of finding joy in poverty forms an impactful impression of traditional Chinese literati. Su Shi was adept at writing about his own poverty in the daily details of his life. His humorous tone made this period of life even more appealing to future readers.

### Third Source Tracing Story

“Remembering a Night Tour in Chengtian Temple” serves as material for our third Source Tracing story. It is one of Su Shi's most well-known works, included in widely-used textbooks for elementary school in China. The plot in this short prose is quite simple. Su Shi, idle in Huangzhou, went to visit Chengtian Temple at midnight with a friend. They planned to appreciate the moon. He exclaimed that the moon, bamboos, and cypress trees could be found everywhere, but only idle people like them were able to appreciate these. However, at the beginning of the story in the game, Su Shi and the player portraying Zhang Huaimin (張懷民, fl. 1083) were already in the Chengtian Temple. Different from the original story of Su Shi and his friend enjoying the quiet night in the temple, here Su Shi plans to leave Huangzhou with Zhang Huaimin. However, before they board the boat, Su Shi suddenly remembers that he had not yet tended to his land on *Dongpo* (東坡 “the East Slope”). Thus he decides not to leave. When they went to Su Shi's land on the East Slope, they met Su Shi's friend, Chaogu (巢谷, 1027-1099), a chivalrous man. He advises Su Shi to leave Huangzhou for his freedom, but Su

Shi believed that since he already bought land in Huangzhou, he could settle down at last. He started envisioning plans to establish a school to teach local children.

The adaptation of this story in the game breaks through an original meaning of “Remembering a Night Tour in Chengtian Temple,” which was about an idle person’s appreciation of nature and self-mockery. In the game story, Su Shi’s image was closer to that of an ideal scholar-official of the Chinese tradition, aiming to serve the emperor when in court, and benefit the people when local. Su Shi served as a local official several times in his life, making many contributions to improve people’s lives. None of this could happen in Huangzhou as he was considered a criminal there. Nevertheless, Su Shi is portrayed as living a dreamlike life in Huangzhou. He is no longer an idle and useless person, but a person cherishing his land and Huangzhou.

#### Fourth Source Tracing story

The final Source Tracing story is created from Su Shi’s lyric “*Man Ting Fang*,” not particularly famous among his works. It was written in the seventh year of Yuanfeng reign (元豐, 1078-1085), just before he left Huangzhou. This story also serves as a conclusion to the previous three. Su Shi’s friends were holding a farewell banquet for him, but Su Shi was nowhere to be found. Finally, they found him on a boat, ready to set off happily in the rain. At the end of the story, Su Shi asks the player if they had a good time in Huangzhou. Although in the game’s setting, these four Source Tracing stories are virtual, where no one could be harmed, memories of Huangzhou were not pleasant for poet Su Shi or ink spirit Su Shi. Nevertheless, game creators reinforce Su Shi’s image as an optimist, who sailed with ease through life in Huangzhou, without attachment to people or place. Su Shi remains eager for his future journey, and the player has already asked him whether his final destination would be his hometown or the capital city. In actual history, we know that neither of these places stood at the endpoint of Su Shi’s life. After leaving Huangzhou, he experienced many ups and downs, finally passing away on his way back from Hainan, without returning to his hometown or reaching the capital city. Nevertheless, Su Shi answers that neither of these places were his final destination. He wanted to go beyond the ordinary and see a vast world beyond.

From these Source Tracing stories, we find that the image of Su Shi depicted in the game *Mo Hun* seems to be incongruent with reality, rendering a Su Shi who is

extremely optimistic and a scholar-official embracing pleasures in life. Nevertheless, the game narrative also subtly challenges this popular image of Su Shi. It is important to note that the game character “Su Shi” in *Mo Hun* is not a historical figure but rather an ink spirit living from Su Shi’s time to the present day. Consequently, the depiction of Su Shi in the game embodies a way of appreciating everyday secular life amidst the fragmentation of society, all the while rebelling against traditional values and pursuits of literati and scholar-officials. The representation of Su Shi as a gastronome holds significant prominence in his modern reception. Similarly, the game frequently showcases Su Shi’s love for food. However, the intention is not to portray Su Shi as a gourmet enthusiast, but rather to employ food as a symbol representing fundamental aspects of material existence. Su Shi’s transcendence is exemplified in his engagement with the world, rather than disregarding the material hardships of ordinary life. This inclination resonates more closely with the contemporary state of being, as the pursuit of sublime ideals gives way to appreciation of simple joys found in worldly matters. It is noteworthy that the Source Tracing stories in *Mo Hun* are all derived from Su Shi’s literary works, and all characters in the game are poets. This further emphasizes the profound influence of Su Shi’s remarkable literary achievements and his widely-circulated works on the construction of his posthumous image. Indeed, Su Shi was not initially regarded as a literary figure, and it is also questionable whether literature was the most significant aspect of his accomplishment and legacy.

#### Literature and History: The Division between Reception

In Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), a new culture of literati emerged in Chinese history. During this period, the aristocratic system was broken down, social mobility increased, and numbers of commoners entering government service through imperial examinations grew, leading to a marked shift in the characteristics of Song literati compared to the Tang dynasty literati. They had a strong sense of responsibility towards country and society, noting the famous argument of Wen Yanbo (文彦博, 1006-1097), Northern Song emperor ruling the world with the literati.

In this era, prominent literati were often multifaceted. One was an official, a scholar, a politician, a thinker, and a writer at the same time, such as Su Shi, Wang Anshi (王安石, 1021-1086), and Sima Guang (司馬光, 1019-1086). At that time, the term *xue* (學 “learning”) was often used to refer to the intellectual

system specific literati, with a sense of unity and coherence. Su Shi's intellectual achievements were also referred to as the *Su Xue* (蘇學 “Learning of Su”). Song people did not compartmentalize Su Shi's achievements into different fields like literature, politics, and philosophy, as is done in contemporaneity.

After Su Shi's death, certain aspects of his character that resonate with us today form the image of Su Shi we widely recognized. While it is not uncommon for historical figures to acquire stereotypical traits in the eyes of later generations, Su Shi's case is different from that of emperors and heroes. Su Shi's dilemma was words, in being burdened with talent. Su Shi's exceptional literary ability set him apart from his contemporaries. This same talent overshadows his achievements in other fields as well as his learning as a coherent entity. Su Shi's example illustrates how literature can have a powerful influence in constructing the imaginations of history. Today, Su Shi is mainly recognized as a literary figure by modern people. In his writings, the repetitive theme is his struggle between being involved in and detached from the secular world, as well as his personal interests in daily life. In traditional Chinese culture, the term “rivers and lakes” (*jianghu*江湖) embodies a multifaceted and intricate meaning, commonly referring to the circumstances of literati who have removed themselves from the political hub. Notable predecessors of this tradition include Qu Yuan, who wandered and composed poetry alongside rivers and lakes, and the legendary figure Fan Li (范蠡, active in 6th-5th centuries BCE), who lived in seclusion boating on the lakes after helped king of Yue annex the Wu kingdom. When faced with career setbacks, literati often cultivate a yearning to withdraw from officialdom and return to a life of seclusion. This a recurring theme in Chinese literature. However, during the Song Dynasty, the distinguished scholar-official Fan Zhongyan (范仲淹, 989-1052) advocated a contrasting viewpoint. Asserting that a scholar-official should worry about the monarch when in a high position, and worry about the people when far away from the imperial court. Su Shi, despite being a prime exemplar of this idea, also articulated his writings his desire for a life of wandering and seclusion away from the mundane world. This narrative has perpetuated the Chinese literary tradition since Qu Yuan. In contemporary times, Su Shi's literary works have augmented this facet of his identity.

The incorporation of Su Shi's literary tradition of wandering and seclusion, as well as his concern for the well-being of both the monarch and the people, are primary themes of his depiction in the game *Mo Hun*. This representation resonates with

modern perspectives of Su Shi and caters to contemporary tastes. Literature that endures over time provides an effective means of understanding and connecting with traditional Chinese culture for contemporary audiences. *Mo Hun* capitalizes on this notion by constructing a fictional world that draws heavily from traditional Chinese literature and history, featuring prominent literary figures as its central characters. Literature has a transcendental and romantic quality, just like Su Shi's Red Cliff writings, which do not depict the actual Red Cliff, nor the actual Battle of Red Cliff, but the Red Cliff which meets his expectation and imagination. This is also reflected in the game narrative, where through a portrayal of Su Shi, it creates a fictional world diverging from reality yet fulfilling modern people's expectations and imagination.

In the game *Mo Hun*, creators intentionally emphasize that Su Shi was not detached from the world, expressing an interest in cooking delicious pork, personally tending to crops, and hoping to establish a school in Huangzhou, one of the most quintessential endeavors pursued by scholar officials in local. Nevertheless, Su Shi remains to be depicted as a romantic literatus. The reason for Su Shi's exile, his political stance, and local political activities do not appear to be focal point of the creators' attention or the readers' interest. While contemporary people do acknowledge Su Shi as a scholar-official, they do not seem to pay much attention to his specific intellectual ideas or to the reason why he was constantly throughout his lifetime embroiled in factional disputes. Su Shi's literary achievements have overshadowed other significant aspects of his persona. In contrast, in the eyes of Su Shi and his contemporaries, literature was never his most remarkable feat, but merely a secondary vocation. With regard to Su Shi's characteristics, his peers admired his loyalty and integrity as an official, while his optimism and humour in daily life were also adored.

The process of how Su Shi's image gradually became fixed as a literary figure remains to be explored. It's safe to say that, on the one hand, the immense influence of Su Shi's literary legacy played a significant role, while on the other hand, the rise of Neo-Confucianism after the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) suppressed Su Shi's identity as a scholar. The Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) strongly disagreed with Su Shi's views on classics and harshly criticized his ideas. These factors may have contributed to increasing influence of Su Shi's literary legacy. Turning our attention to the present day, we observe a striking convergence in the construction of Su Shi's image by modern media outlets.

The depiction of Su Shi through modern media in China encompasses three primary categories: television dramas, documentaries, and books. In television dramas, Su Shi is a prominent figure among literati, but the overall theme of ancient literati life is not prevalent in Chinese television dramas. Television dramas about Su Shi predominantly focus on themes of love and family life, often introducing fictional female characters related to Su Shi or emphasizing his romantic relationships with successive wives and a concubine. Another aspect of emphasis is Su Shi's official career, a subject frequently explored in historical dramas, with a focus on court politics, factional struggles, and intrigues. The 2012 television drama "Su Dongpo", directed by Wang Wenjie (王文傑, 1955-), may be the sole attempt to portray Su Shi's life in the form of serious historical drama. It invites scholars specializing in Su Shi studies as screenwriters to faithfully portray and restore historical facts. However, the drama encountered stringent restrictions placed on historical dramas in mainland China, resulting in difficulties with its broadcast. In an interview with the director, concerns were expressed by some television stations about the limited audience appeal of a drama centered around a literati figure, indicating that literati figures are not typically considered ideal subjects for television dramas.

There are two primary documentaries on Su Shi. In 2008, the program "Lectures by a Hundred Scholars" (*Baijia Jiangtan* 百家講壇) featured Kang Zhen (康震, 1970-) giving a lecture on Su Shi. "Lectures by a Hundred Scholars" is a highly influential educational television program. While Kang Zhen, a university professor, presented Su Shi's life in a relatively accessible and witty manner, which attracted great audiences. Another influential documentary is "Su Dongpo," released in 2017, receiving over 15,000 ratings on Douban 豆瓣, the mainstream film and television rating website in mainland China. It mainly focuses on Su Shi's exile in Huangzhou, offering multidimensional interpretations of his life and work, encompassing literature, art, cuisine, and emotions. Television programs and documentaries primarily highlight Su Shi's life experiences, selecting impactful episodes rather than providing a comprehensive account of his entire life and achievements.

Books, particularly biographies, remain the most prominent medium for portraying Su Shi. An influential English biography of Su Shi by Lin Yutang (林語堂, 1895-1976) was published in 1948, and numerous biographies have been rewritten and published, mostly in mainland China. Lin Yutang's English biography highly praises Su Shi, portraying him as a flawless individual (Lin 1948).

Most biographies on Su Shi emphasize two key aspects: his literary works and life experiences (Hong 2018; Li 2020). Recent works tend to highlight Su Shi's image as an ordinary person, highlighting his optimistic nature bringing joy and comfort to modern readers (Ji 2020; Fei 2022). They put stress on his love of food and appreciation of life, portraying Su Shi as someone who enjoys everyday life while discovering its pleasures (Chen 2020; Ji 2022). Additionally, there are many cultural essays on Su Shi, with food and travel being main themes. Some authors seek to retrace Su Shi's footsteps, visiting places he once visited to experience his spiritual world (Wang 2015; I 2020; Yu 2021). These works mostly highlight secular aspects of Su Shi and do not view him primarily as an elite scholar-official.

However, among all these media, modern reinterpretations and portrayals of Su Shi mainly revolve around his entire life. They usually follow a chronological order telling stories and attempting to present a holistic and comprehensive image of Su Shi, emphasizing his artistic achievements and optimistic character. These works attract readers interested in Su Shi, who regard him as a cultural idol to admire. *Mo Hun* differs significantly because of unique characteristics and limitations to a mobile game. It cannot present a comprehensive story about Su Shi's life. Instead, it emphasizes interactivity and a sense of equality in the narrative, allowing players to immerse themselves in the game's plots, engage in conversations and discussions with Su Shi, make the choices, and express their own attitudes.

The daily plots in *Mo Hun* depict Su Shi as a lively and humorous character. Among all of the ink spirits, Su Shi is the most capable of adapting to modern life, reflecting his curiosity and willingness to try new things. Having traveled extensively throughout China's north and south due to his exile, Su Shi has had a rich range of life experiences, in both wealth and poverty. When he first meets Lan Tai, the player in the game, Su Shi performs a trick that appears to be a spell based on Liu Yuxi's (劉禹錫, 772-842) poem. This serves as a metaphor for modern people believing spirits and masterpieces possess mystical power, deceived by modern magic tricks. Su Shi's character is lively, adventurous, and experimental, evidenced by his interest in researching new cuisines, albeit with strange flavors. In another instance, players learn that Su Shi is fond of singing, but often off-key, consistent with historical records indicating his lack of knowledge in music theory and a tendency to write lyrics that were out of tune.

Meanwhile, in historical archives, Su Shi is depicted as a scholar-official. Many documents record stories in ancient times. In the “Records of Spirit Condensation”, the author tells a touching story. In the late Northern Song Dynasty, a literati visited Huangzhou and saw someone worshipping the *Yuanyou Dangren Bei* (元祐黨人碑 “Yuan You Party Stele”) in the middle of the night. Upon asking, he learned the person was a stonemason commissioned by the government to carve the stele. As his ancestors had received Su Shi’s favor, who had been exiled to Huangzhou, he felt unable to inscribe Su Shi’s name on the stone. At this moment, a mysterious figure appeared, wearing a straw cloak and carrying a bamboo cane. He wrote Su Shi’s name on the stele and said, “This will be my monument.” It is clear that this mysterious figure was the ink spirit Su Shi. The author portrays Su Shi as someone loved by ordinary people, not moved by the stigma of being associated with the Yuan You Party. This also suggests that Su Shi cares about his reputation in terms of universal justice and immortality, rather than current evaluations. Other documents also mention that Su Shi made many friends. He did not want to be an *zhexianren* (謫仙人 “exiled immortal”), but wanted to live in the secular world. In his interactions with the player, he breaks stereotypes of the respectable Su Dongpo, as the poet becomes a living and intimate friend.

In constructing a new modern imagination of Su Shi, narratives in *Mo Hun* challenge existing images and imaginaries of Su Shi. Su Shi’s relatable persona distinguishes him from other ancient cultural figures. His poetry and prose capture everyday experiences and emotions in the life of Song Dynasty people, allowing future generations to truly understand Su Shi’s life, experience, emotion, and thought. Su Shi left behind a substantial body of work, contributing to a better understanding we have of the man, in contrast to our understanding of other poets such as Li Bai (李白, 701-762). Therefore, modern depictions of Su Shi seem to particularly emphasize his approachable side, especially his love of food. Su Shi the man undoubtedly did not see this as his own best quality. This quality, however, resonates with people today, making these humorous, down-to-earth aspects of the man an important component in the reconstruction of Su Shi’s image. Here, we see how the power of literature has overshadowed the truth of history. The re-rendering of a literary figure serves as a source of historical nostalgia for modern people by which to understand traditional Chinese culture. I will continue to discuss in our next section how game narrative, as a new type of literature,

constructs a mutual historical imagination through its interactivity and openness.

### Game Narrative: Interactivity, Intimacy and Shared Imagination

Games, particularly video games, have been the subject of ongoing discussion regarding the role of narrative in gaming. Indeed, there has been a growing recognition among researchers and players alike of the undeniable significance of narrative in games. On one hand, narrative endows games with cultural depth, elevating them beyond the status of mere entertainment (Bogost ix). On the other hand, game narratives provide fresh perspective for examining principles and impacts of traditional narrative media.

At the turn of the century, relationships between gaming and narrative garnered academic attention, sparking discussion. Aarseth for instance, argues that game narratives demonstrate ergodic text, distinguishing them from traditional literature (1). While Juul's thesis in 1999 proposed that while computer games and narratives share temporal characteristics, they are fundamentally different. Juul argued that interactivity in games undermines the sense of causality and inevitability that narratives rely on for significance (3). This argument has been challenged by other scholars advocating for alternative ways to understand game narratives. Jenkins suggests that more attention should be given to the process of narrative, rather than to the activity of storytelling. Jenkins also introduces "spatiality" as a crucial concept, proposing game designers as narrative architects rather than traditional storytellers (4). In recent years, scholars explore textual potentiality and narrative in digital gaming, highlighting interaction between narrative and game mechanics (Domsch 2013; Turley 2018; Cole & Barker 2021; Bostan 2022). Game narrative has also inspired studies in the field of literature (Ryan 2001, 2006). However, there is still a prevailing tendency to prioritize gameplay over storytelling in digital games (Kapell 1).

The fundamental distinction between games and traditional mediums, such as novels, lies in the interactive nature of games. Regardless of their genres, all games share the essential requirement of player involvement (Berger 12). Consequently, game narratives cannot be strictly linear or closed-off; they must be interactive, providing players with a sense of participation and immersion. Qin's study employed exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis to identify significant dimensions for evaluating game immersion, supporting the argument that game narrative should be understood and evaluated totally differently from

other mediums (Qin et al. 2009). Narrative is proved to be crucial in creating game immersion and the enjoyment of players (McQuiggan et al. 7). Different game genres vary in their emphasis on narrative, with computer role-playing games relying on narratives that align with character growth. It is also important to recognize that defining game narrative solely as a story can be misleading, as games offer interactive experiences extending beyond traditional fiction (Bateman 1).

*Mo Hun* does not conform in terms of interactivity to typical characteristics of digital games. According to Bateman, the core of game writing consists in introducing narrative elements exclusively in and through players' action (45). However, choices exist in Source Tracing parts in *Mo Hun* with different choices leading to similar endings. It is more akin to visual novels popular in Japan. A visual novel is a special genre in digital games, as Cavallaro argues. It challenges polarization between narratology and ludology, respectively focusing on experiences of readers as outside observers and experiences of players as internal agents (35). Visual novels feature very simplistic gameplay, as players are usually limited to making choices at narrative nodes which alter storylines and outcomes of the game. As a result, storytelling is the most crucial component of visual novels. Due to their low game skill requirements and emphasis on storytelling, visual novels are particularly favored by fans of anime and manga, including female players. Most visual novels focus on romantic relationships, and female-oriented games are heavily influenced by visual novels, which will be further discussed later. As a mobile game, narratives serve as a significant part of the worldview, as well as reward for completing tasks in *Mo Hun*. Players develop their characters, meet certain conditions, and are consequently granted the opportunity to read the whole story. As Bateman summarizes, narrative can feature as a significant part of a game through the use of three techniques. These are immersion, reward, and identification (6). *Mo Hun* is a good showcase of these narrative functions in a game.

As a mobile game, the narrative of *Mo Hun* is inherently limited in length due to the constraints of players' attention span on mobile devices. Finley points out that the technological limitations of smartphones and tablets can cause difficulty on facilitating immersion and player agency (5). That is true for *Mo Hun*. Therefore, the stories in *Mo Hun* are usually short, with their longest parts consisting in the Source Tracing stories, which take only three to five minutes to finish. Additionally, because stories usually cannot be gained all at once in the game, there cannot be strong

continuity between stories, as players may not necessarily remember the content of a previous story. As a result, stories in *Mo Hun* do not aim to depict characters' entire lives, but rather employ a fragmented narrative approach, selecting specific scenes and focusing on brief story content, while increasing emphasis on dialogue. Through this approach, players can immerse themselves in story, feeling as if they are entering the world alongside characters, engaging in conversations with them, all the while actively participating in the story through choices they make. Research has shown that the presence of branching narrative structure and decision points, regardless of their number, can improve players' enjoyment in the game (Moser & Fang 156). Consequently, the character development in *Mo Hun* differs from traditional medias' portrayal of Su Shi as a cultural idol. The game places greater emphasis on individualized interaction between game character and players in terms of emotional expression. Furthermore, *Mo Hun* is categorized as a female-oriented game (*Nüxing Xiang Youxi* 女性向遊戲). This categorization exerts unique influence upon historical imaginaries constructed within the game and player community.

Female-oriented games as a category are likely adopted from Japan. In China, female-oriented games are distinct from *Yinü youxi* (乙女遊戲 “otome games”), which focus on romantic relationships between male and female. Female-oriented games may or may not include explicit romantic elements, as relationships in female-oriented games can include various sexual orientations. It is difficult to define the precise scope of female-oriented games, but in general, they target primarily female players, with relatively less emphasis on fight and gameplay strategy, featuring a greater focus on storyline and character building. The protagonist is usually female while other characters in the game are mostly male.

Initially, *Mo Hun* seemed to be positioned as an otome game, but later emphasized its identity as a female-oriented game. At first glance, the game's contents do not appear closely related to the female-oriented category, apart from the fact that most of its players are female and the protagonist in the game is female. The game includes a majority of male characters primarily as ancient Chinese cultural figures were predominantly male. Moreover, the game has no romantic contents between characters, with very little focus on love. However, through this game, we can still observe contemporary young female players' comprehension and romantic imagination of Chinese history and culture.

The players of *Mo Hun* are primarily young women with a strong interest in traditional Chinese culture, particularly its literature. Although game characters in *Mo Hun* are not actual historical figures, they are named after famous poets, and their character has some connection to these literati experiences and memories. As a result, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary between the ink spirits and the poets themselves, both in and out of the game. A very interesting phenomenon can be observed in a controversy about the characterization of the game's figures, especially during its open testing phase. Players accused the game characters of being "out of character" (often abbreviated as "OOC" in China), meaning that they did not conform to the personalities that their historical counterparts should be characterized by. For game players, these game characters have an inviolable image. Despite not being professional researchers or literature students, these gamers are more interested and well-read than the average person, often even conducting their own research. These players refer to themselves as *lishi Tongren Nü* (歷史同人女 "historical fan fiction girls"). Many are angered by the distortion of historical figures, which they view as a lack of respect for history. For example, there are criticisms of Su Shi's character design, as he is portrayed as too modern and frivolous, including his self-proclaimed title of *Dongpo Gege* (東坡哥哥 "Brother Dongpo"), seen as inappropriate by some players. The Chinese historical fan fiction girls tend to refuse the casual rewriting of history. This contrasts with Japan's situation, where popular mobile games like *Fate/Grand Order* and mangas like *Bungo Stray Dogs* usually significantly revise historical figures, even swapping gender, yet their popularity remains unaffected.

Historical fan fiction girls are motivated to defend historical accuracy as quickly as they would defend Chinese cultural orthodoxy and dignity. In their minds, there exists a utopian conception of Chinese traditional culture, characterized by elegance and refinement. On the one hand, they oppose the unserious infiltration of popular culture, while on the other hand, they hope to see the promotion of Chinese traditions within popular culture. However, traditional Chinese culture presents a challenge for modern women in so far as females are relatively invisible historically, often relegated to secondary roles. Moreover, traditional Chinese culture exhibits elements of male dominance and female subservience suppressing the roles of women. Within the historical utopia constructed by young women in their writings, discussions and conceptions, however, we find that literature appeals to common human emotions. The focus of these women is on relationships and

emotional interaction between historical figures, regardless of whether or not they are related to romantic love. To a certain extent, this approach transcends historical contexts. Tian Xiaofei has discussed fan fiction written by Chinese women about Three Kingdoms figures, especially the erotic love relationship between two men (352-357). Her observations also apply to fan culture of *Mo Hun*, seeing a similar trend towards a mandate for historical accuracy amongst fans.

Female players tend to have a more critical view of the portrayal of sentiments in games, usually projecting themselves into the player they control. While female players expect to have closer contact with these figures and enjoy living with them in the game, they tend to shy away from developing personal or sentimental connection, viewing historical figures as distant and unapproachable beings. This distance maintains the purity of historical figures as well as the utopian imaginaries that they are unattainable. The game *Mo Hun* intends to portray the player's role as a bystander of history and story, as a witness to the struggles and experiences of these poets, rather than as a direct participant. This approach aligns with attitudes of female players towards history and cultural traditions, emphasizing a romantic fantasy about history while accepting the distance between themselves and historical figures. They do not mind the distance between themselves and these figures. On the contrary, they want to maintain a romantic fantasy about history. When creating historical fan fiction themselves, they emphasize their right to create freely, but at the same time, many insist that their creations should match the image of historical figures. In general, emotions can be freely created, with respectful homage given to the personalities and experiences of the figures.

*Mo Hun* therefore showcases a unique game player community and culture, within which we can observe a new perspective on modern historical imaginaries. The player community of a mobile game plays a vital role in survival and development of the game. While players have limited time to invest in the game itself, they may spend even more time engaging with the game's surrounding culture. This is particularly relevant for games like *Mo Hun*, which resemble visual novels. The game mechanics of *Mo Hun* are not well-executed, offering limited player interactions. Basic daily tasks take less than ten minutes. However, outside of the game, players engage in discussion and exchanges on social media about the game's storyline and characters. They create or consume fan works related to the game, purchase merchandise, even in some cases creating cosplay accounts imitating the personalities and speech styles

of game characters in interactions with other players. These activities significantly contribute to the player's attachment to the game. What sets *Mo Hun* apart is its focus on Chinese classical literary culture as a game theme, attracting players to explore and share their understanding and learning process of traditional culture. Although the game characters are not real historical figures, discussions among players revolve around real historical figures. However, their discussions are based on the platform provided by the game, forming a shared foundation for historical imagination.

As a popular medium, games play a pivotal role in modern popular culture. Mobile games, in particular, are a unique form of the popular medium that provides entertainment for contemporary people. Although mobile games are often criticized for being shallow in content and focusing solely on inducing players to recharge and emphasize game mechanics, more and more mobile games are starting to feature story and narrative. These games provide stories that are shorter and more fragmented, but still offer a certain degree of openness. In the fragments of text, they focus more on capturing emotions and constructing imagination, doing this by conveying critical content while also allowing players space for imagination. The worldviews, plots, and character images of many mobile games are largely completed by players in the fan community. This has become an important feature of contemporary mobile game culture. In this context, the construction of a historical utopia is no longer a world constructed by a single author, but a process of romanticisation jointly constructed by a group of players. Therefore, this process of imagination is centered on characters, different from the construction of worldviews as well as from the depiction of social systems emphasized in traditional utopian literature. This is also the narrative style exhibited by *Mo Hun* in its game ecosystem. In the romantic imagination centered on characters, players pay more attention to spiritual resonance than they do to social environments and political factors. In Su Shi's example, we see his personal charm and extraordinary literary talent are primary aspects of the literati's character that modern people accept. Other essential elements of Su Shi valued by his contemporaries are at time disregarded. Compared to the portrayal of history and society, games show greater potential when used as a literary genre. The mobile game serves as an entry point, as well, for players to interact with texts beyond the game itself. The most exciting parts of the game narratives are selected by players and fans as material for further dissemination. Based on their understanding of the game, players showcase creative talents by producing fan works

to supplement the game's plot. This allows them to demonstrate their understanding of the lives and personalities of historical figures, aligning with players' expectations.

In conclusion, through the example of *Mo Hun*, we can observe how game literature, as a newly emerging medium, provides an alternative mode of reconstructing the image of Su Shi. The game narrative emphasizes interactivity and openness, therefore diverging from traditional mediums' focus on depicting Su Shi's entire life and his status as a cultural idol. The portrayal of Su Shi in *Mo Hun* is accessible to players, depicting his love for secular life through a modern perspective. As a female-oriented game, the majority of players are young Chinese women, expressing a fondness for historical nostalgia in game narrative and player communities. Young women tend to place greater emphasis on emotional connections with historical figures. They, therefore, create romanticized reconstructions of traditional Chinese literature and culture, focusing on subjectivity, sentiment, and nobility of spirit. Lastly, based on the nature of mobile games, *Mo Hun* establishes a player community beyond the game itself. Based on the game's contents, players share and discuss their understanding of game narrative and Chinese traditional culture, forming a utopian historical imagination. This represents a unique contemporary interpretive context brought about by game narrative, revealing both romantic perceptions and inherent complexities and nuance as Chinese youth regard traditional historical culture.

## Conclusion

This article investigates how the mobile game *Mo Hun* shapes a utopian imagination of Chinese traditional culture through its narrative and also through the community it creates. Despite being a new medium, the literary aspects of games are often been disregarded, especially in mobile games, thought to be low in narrative capability. However, mobile games have a distinct potential for storytelling through emotive and catchy game texts. These tend to be fragmented yet this open narrative system contributes to the construction of popular culture and the establishment of a player. Traditional Chinese culture is gaining increasing attention in popular culture, and *Mo Hun* is the first mobile game to feature Chinese traditional literature and culture as its main theme. The game narratives provide a modern alternative for understanding historical figures in a romantic and intimate way, fostering a shared cultural imagination among players. From Su Shi's case, we see that

literary talent and personal charm are key components in modern understanding and acceptance of historical figures. Historical inaccuracy this reflects a historical nostalgia for modern people towards traditional Chinese culture. Su Shi's personal charm and literary aura contribute to a cultural concept centered on individual subjectivity, as well as poetic beauty, emphasizing spiritual resonance beyond time and space, as well as a devotion to secular life interests as expressed in life today.

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