

Immersive Communist Propaganda in Murder Mystery Games

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“Murder mystery game” or “mysteries of murder” (referred to as “MMG” thereafter) is a variety of Live-action Role Playing Games (LRPG) that originated in the West. The game can be played online or offline, in which each player plays a role through studying the script, searching for evidence, and discussing with others to solve the puzzle in the context. The games can be played with many different contents and in various ways. Due to the popularity of TV variety shows such as Hunan Satellite TV’s “Star Detectives” and iQIYI’s “Mystery Game Sharks” in recent years, the CCP’s aggressive crackdown on online games and its strict restrictions on Chinese citizens’ outbound travel under the pandemic, offline MMG has become one of

the most popular activities among China’s Generation Z (Gen Z). However, it has also attracted attention from the authorities.

On April 1, 2022, five Chinese government agencies, including the ministries for culture, tourism and public security, issued an announcement to regulate immersive interactive games such as MMG and room escape games and planned to draft the “Notice on Regulating Business Activities of Script Entertainment (Soliciting Comments),” which intends to regulate the relevant industries by focusing on aspects such as case management, content management and banning minors from playing on weekdays.¹ The notice is the first nationwide management system for MMG

1. “The Ministry of Culture and Tourism on the ‘Notice of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the Ministry of Emergency Management, and the General Administration of Market Regulation on the Regulation of Script Entertainment Business Activities (Draft Request for Comments),’ ” *Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China*, April 1, 2022, https://zwgk.mct.gov.cn/zfxxgkml/scgl/202204/t20220401_932252.html.

and room escape games in China, showing that the immersive game industry has entered a period from “free development” to a “strict control”.

On the other hand, Chinese officials have also taken advantage of the youthful and story-based characteristics of MMG to launch “anti-fraud MMG” and “red MMG.” For example, on April 27, 2022, the Beijing Haidian District Anti-Fraud Center and Haidian Police Station announced the launch of an anti-telecom fraud MMG in cooperation with Renmin University of China and Tianhuo Tongren, which was distributed to 97 colleges and universities in Beijing.² This article discusses the rapid growth and current status of MMG in China and looks at the changing attitudes and actions of the Beijing authorities towards MMG.

Explosive growth of MMG prompts regulatory noose

According to a forecast by China’s Insight & Info Consulting, the market size

of MMG in China will exceed RMB20 billion in 2022,³ with most of the MMG stores concentrated in China’s first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan. A report from the Chinese enterprise credit agency QCC.com shows that there were 5,957 newly registered MMG enterprises in China in 2021, an 85% increase over the same period in 2020. In the meantime, MMG has also become a powerful tool for cities to promote cultural tourism with products using Augmented Reality (AR) technology to provide visitors with an immersive experience.

The explosive development of the MMG industry has attracted the attention of Chinese officials. Initially, official Chinese media praised MMG as a way to foster patriotism among young people. Still, in September 2021, the Xinhua News Agency changed its attitude and posted a commentary saying that “MMG operators promote violence and superstition as a commercial gimmick

2. “Police-led Anti-fraud MMG Launched in Beijing for Players to Enjoy ‘Immersive’ Experience of Six Fraudulent Schemes,” *People’s Daily Online*, April 27, 2022, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0427/c1004-32410217.html>.

3. “Chinese MMG Market Development In-depth Study and Investment Trend Forecast Report (2022-2029),” *Selected Research Reports*, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/460393169>.

to attract young people, causing public worries.”⁴ In 2022, Shanghai officially promulgated the “Shanghai Temporary Regulations on the Management of Room Escape and MMG Content,” becoming the first city in China to include the two genres in its management. Later, Liaoning Province, Tianjin City, and Fujian Province also released similar local regulations. Most such regulations strictly forbid the promotion of violence and pornography, and the authorities require operators to self-examine the script so as not to violate the “Protection of Minors Law of the People’s Republic of China” and “Entertainment Venue Management Ordinance” and other relevant laws and regulations. The change in the attitude of official media and the regional content regulations show that Beijing authorities still strictly control the contents and accept only the values approved by the CCP; they are concerned that such activities would encourage young people to think, imagine, and even question.

CCP officials use MMG for “red propaganda”

Although Beijing authorities appear to be tightly controlling the development of MMG, since the immersive experience of the games appeals to young Chinese people, the officials can edit the scripts and stories to incorporate content that meets the interests and values of the CCP. In recent years, more and more official units or organizations, such as the Communist Youth League, have introduced MMG for red propaganda. There are the aforementioned Haidian Police Station “anti-fraud MMG” and the thematic red MMG “Red Plum in Flames.” The latter was produced by the Youth Work Committee of Zigong City Central Court in Sichuan Province at the “Red Education Base of Sister Jiang’s Hometown,” which commemorates Jiang Zhuyun, a female martyr of the CCP, for example. Many student groups also use MMG to produce “red propaganda.” As reported in Zhejiang News on May 11, 2022, Li Changzhou, the founder of the “Red Lecture Team” of Ningbo Finance and Economics College in his 20’s, used the MMG form to deliver an immersive experience of the revolutionary history of

4. “Xinhua News Agency: MMGs that Promote Violence, Superstition, and Bad Taste Caused Concern,” *Xinhua News Agency*, September 22, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3NcTmCC>.

the CCP to the audience.⁵ The *People's Daily* also published an article praising the “red MMG,” saying that it could bring better results to the education of CCP history and patriotism.⁶

On May 10, 2022, “Deer World,” the MMG creation and distribution platform from Chengdu City’s Rui Lian Technology, announced that it had received over RMB10 million in seed round financing. The investment will be used mainly for new product development and the application of script games in addition to public security and communist education.⁷ Although the company has not disclosed any specific investor, it is not difficult to imagine that it could be connected to the Chinese government. On May 20, the English versions of the melodramatic plays “Pioneer,” “Dumpling,” and “Rise” produced by Beijing Thirty-Three Days Culture Technology Company appeared on Amazon.com. The phenomenon shows that Beijing is not officially

opposed to MMG activities but that, as with any online and offline activity in China, they must be firmly controlled by the government and conform to so-called “positive values”. It is conceivable that in the future, “red MMG,” with the combination of official funding and commercial scripts, will become a useful tool for the CCP to promote patriotic education and the communist theme. It may even become a new genre for China’s cultural export to foreign countries.

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5. “Telling the Red Story and Carrying on the Red Gene, Young People Joined Zhejiang’s ‘Red Lecture Team’ ,” *Zhejiang News*, May 11, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3PsGES7>.
 6. “Immersive Patriotic Educative ‘Red MMG’ Welcomed,” *People's Daily*, May 6, 2022, <http://yn.people.com.cn/n2/2022/0506/c399415-35255213.html>.
 7. “MMG brand ‘Deer World Script Factory’ Received Nearly 10 million RMB Seed Investment,” *Sina Technology*, May 10, 2022, <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2022-05-10/doc-imcwipii9088678.shtml>.