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Bjarke Liboriussen, Andrew White, and Dan Wang



**University of
Nottingham**

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University of Nottingham Ningbo China, 199 Taikang East Road, Ningbo, 315100, Zhejiang, China.

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16 The Ban on Gaming Consoles in China

Protecting National Culture, Morals, and Industry within an International Regulatory Framework

Bjarke Liboriussen, Andrew White, and Dan Wang

From its ‘opening up’ policy in 1978¹ to the present day, China’s rapid economic growth has not only lifted hundreds of millions of its citizens out of poverty and made many extremely rich, but it has also been the catalyst for immense social transformation. In this chapter, we explore the tension between 1) Chinese policymakers’ desire for the wealth that access to global markets gives its citizens; and 2) the challenges to Chinese cultural and traditional ideas about morality that this social transformation brings in its wake. Our investigation focuses primarily on ~~the use of~~ one particular case that exemplifies this tension: the Chinese government’s 2000 to 2014 ban on the importation of foreign-made video game consoles. We first situate the ban within the context of China’s international commitments to ‘free trade’ and then consider the arguments made for exempting media content from such commitments. Here, the Chinese leadership’s ambiguous stance toward Western influence is an important policy-shaping factor. For the second half, we zoom in on the policy document installing the *de facto* ban on consoles. Here policymakers frame the ban as a way of curbing the negative influence of *wangbas*—Internet cafes—on China’s youth. We discuss whether such a move actually resonated with the public and to what extent public concerns were constructed rather than reflected by the media. Although a critical approach to video game policy should remain skeptical of the motivations underlying policy, it also needs to acknowledge the possibility that policy responds to actual public concerns, even in a one-party state.

The Ban on the ‘Importation of Electronic Game Equipment and Accessories’ and its Impact on China’s WTO Commitments

In 2000, as part of a general crackdown on “places for electronic game business,” the Chinese government launched a ban on the sale and importation of “electronic game equipment and accessories” (State Council Office 2000). Critics have read the ban as economic protectionism, while China

has argued that it is exerting its right to protect ‘public morals’—a right given under international trade agreements—which ties in with its broader ‘cultural defense’ argument.

The timing of the State Council Office’s announcement was unusual in the sense that it came toward the end of the country’s prolonged negotiations to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). Given the implications for global free trade, it would be expected that this particular measure would be mentioned in China’s accession documents. While the word ‘console’ does not appear in the documents, it can be assumed that it is part of sector 2D audiovisual Services: “videos, including entertainment software and (CPC 83202), distribution services; sound recording distribution services” (WTO 2001a, 21). Apart from a specific regulation relating to movies, there is one stated impediment to unrestricted trade in audiovisual services:

3. Upon accession, foreign services suppliers will be permitted to establish contractual joint ventures with Chinese partners to engage in the distribution of audiovisual products, excluding motion pictures, *without prejudice to China’s right to examine the content of audio and video products.*² (emphasis added; WTO 2001a, 21)

No mention exists of the blanket prohibition on the sale and importation of electronic game equipment (we can assume this includes foreign consoles, namely, Nintendo’s Wii, Microsoft’s Xbox and Sony’s PlayStation), even though China was required to reveal such measures under the terms of its accession (World Trade Organization 2001b, 74–77).

This disjuncture between Chinese domestic law and the restrictive practices that emanate from these legal provisions and China’s obligations to the accession documents it signed when it entered the WTO has led to a series of disputes with its trading partners. In some cases where there are contending interpretations of China’s obligations, the WTO itself has had to arbitrate. The WTO’s 2009 ruling on a U.S. complaint that China was placing unreasonable restrictions on the importation of audiovisual entertainment is particularly pertinent here. China explicitly invoked the defense of public morals as justification for these restrictions, emphasizing its above-mentioned right under its accession documents to vet the content of audiovisual products. In addition to this, it cited article XX(a) of the 1994 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATT), which allowed member states to take action in defending public morals.

The ruling was reported as constituting a rebuke of China’s restrictive practices regarding audiovisual services. However, a closer reading of the WTO’s ruling shows that it was not so partial against China but rather exemplified the vagueness of the organization’s provisions in relation to trade in this sector. Part of the reason for this is that a ‘public morals’ defense is clearly allowable under article XIV(a) of the GATT, the protocol that corresponds to article XX(a) of GATT (*ibid.*, 280). Ironically, the WTO panel

took its lead from a ruling in a case about gambling regulations wherein the U.S. was subject to a complaint triggered by Antigua and Barbuda (Ibid., 281). While the latter government questioned whether a country (the U.S.) where gambling was both legal and widespread could reasonably argue that its citizens' exposure to online gambling could corrupt public morals, the validity of the defense itself was upheld (World Trade Organization 2009, 281). The panel in that particular case ruled that member states themselves "should be given some scope to define and apply for themselves the concepts of 'public morals' ... in their respective territories, according to their own systems and scales of values."³ For this reason, it was not only the WTO that did not challenge China's right to restrict audiovisual content on the basis of defending public morality, but also the U.S. did not question China's right to prevent the importation of audiovisual products that contain content prohibited in that country (World Trade Organization 2009, 286). The U.S.'s core argument was that China's restrictive measures were not an effective means of preventing its citizens from being exposed to prohibited content; therefore, they were, in the legalese of the documentation, not "necessary" (Ibid., 33–34). Essentially, the charge against China was that it was using a public morals defense as a means of practicing economic protectionism. In the words of the U.S.'s oral statement, China's measures constituted a "disguised restriction on international trade" (Ibid., 33). While the WTO largely upheld the U.S.'s complaint by finding that China had not proved the "necessity" of their measures in defending its citizens' public morals, this ruling not only did not imperil the country's right to censor content but also did not question its policy of restricting the importation of foreign films to no more than 20 per year (Buckley 2009; World Trade Organization 2009, 466). Although China's stated focus was on the moral implications of loosening restrictions on imported audiovisual products, many of its arguments were culturally inflected. This is evidenced by the way in which morality and culture are almost conflated at times. For example, China includes a wide range of content, from violence or pornography to other important values, including the "*protection of the Chinese culture and traditional values*" (emphasis added; World Trade Organization 2009, 279). This attitude is also exemplified by Dick Wei of JP Morgan's response to the WTO ruling that foreign companies "really need to understand Chinese culture" (quoted in Buckley 2009).

Cultural Protectionism

Until its official 'opening-up' in 1978, China's interaction with foreign culture and with non-Chinese people was extremely limited. Therefore, while reform was launched as a means of enabling China to take advantage of foreign expertise and global markets, it was still a society ill-prepared for the influx of ideas and influences from other parts of the globe. Indeed, one of the main arguments against economic reform was that along with

the importation of positive ideas and economic goods would come more problematic influences from overseas; even the architect of the reforms Deng Xiaoping conceded that opening up would let in what he pejoratively referred to as ‘flies and insects’ (cited in Gelber 2007, 387). These concerns led to the 1983 ‘anti-spiritual pollution’ campaign, which targeted Western imports such as pornography, attempting to limit what Chinese authorities regarded as the more malignant incursions of foreign culture (Lovell 2011). Keane (2007) argues that this campaign was part of a more general program of “moral development” or, in the words of key reformers including Deng himself, “socialist spiritual civilization” (70). This phrase was useful in two respects: 1) it harkened back to pre-modern (more traditional) times in its link to popular campaigns against the ailing Qing dynasty at the beginning of the twentieth century (Anagnost 1997, 82); and 2) it provided a unifying ideology to counter anti-reformers’ arguments that the ‘open door’ policy constituted an existential threat to traditional Chinese culture.

Lest people should not get the message, the placing of a cordon sanitaire of barbed wire around the first four Special Economic Zones (SEZ) launched in 1979 to separate them physically from the rest of China (Gelber 2007, 386) enabled the zones to, in the words of economist Ji Chongwei, act as “filters between China’s socialist system and the capitalist world, allowing market mechanisms and the law of value to operate under the guidance of socialist planned economy, and taking in positive things and *sifting out negative aspects of Western culture*” (emphasis added; quoted in Gittings 2005, 219). Further, Deng was keen to signify that opening up to foreign trade would not be at the expense of China’s territorial ambitions, as testified by Deng’s uncompromising stance in the 1984 talks with U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, which eventually led to the return of Hong Kong to the mainland. This trend continued into the early 1990s. After the 1989 protests and subsequent crackdown, the discrediting of communism generally and the Chinese Communist Party’s loss of authority specifically meant that the latter sought to reclaim its legitimacy both through the promotion of nationalism (Gelber 2007, 400) and also through assertions that Chinese culture is more civilized than Western culture and thus worthy of the kind of protection that only the party can provide (Anagnost 1997, 85). This manifested itself in 1992 in the official adoption of Deng’s famous formulation “building socialism with Chinese characteristics” (cited in Gittings 2005, 253), signifying, as it does in other contexts, that even in relation to the adoption of universal theories, the Chinese situation is nonetheless unique.⁴ While the SEZs are no longer bounded by barbed wire, the idea that the exploitation of Western economic expertise should go hand in hand with filtering out Western influences that are viewed inimical to China’s cultural and moral development is still prevalent. The 2000 ban should be understood within this context.

It would be wrong, though, to take at face value the arguments that either China or its culture is unique. Even those who are critical of China tend to

use similar arguments to China's government's in the sense that they often assert that the country is unique in its obsession with protecting its own culture. However, many of China's arguments about the potential for unmediated flows of cultural content to harm its culture mirrors those of other countries taking part in global trade disputes in the 1990s.

The WTO's Treatment of Audiovisual Services

Concerns about cultural imperialism animated debates in the 1970s and 1980s about the most effective means of protecting indigenous media content, most notably in calls by developing nations for a new world information and communication order (NWICO) in the early years of the former decade and in UNESCO's 1980 report by the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (commonly known as the MacBride Report; McQuail 2010, 262). These global debates continued into the latter part of the 1980s and 1990s. During Bill Clinton's presidency from 1993 to 2001, the U.S. was keen to place international trade in audiovisual services under the aegis of global regulatory trade regimes; some argued that this was partly motivated by Hollywood's links with Democrats generally and Clinton's 1992 campaign in particular (Grant 1995, 1355). This move, though, was not popular with most other nations; Canada, for example, prefigured future wrangles in securing an opt-out for audiovisual services in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994 (Thompson 1997, 1). During the 1993 GATT negotiations, the French led a European Union fight to keep audiovisual services out of the trade body's jurisdiction. Despite Bill Clinton's earlier demand that audiovisual services must be part of GATT, the U.S. eventually backed down, although the precise legal status of the 'cultural exception' opt-out was unclear (Grant 1995; Tomlinson 1997, 128–29). This imprecision was highlighted in a 2006 WTO case ruling against Canada in relation to 'split-run' magazines (of U.S. origin but with Canadian versions). Canada was thus inspired to search for an international consensus on the protection of "cultural diversity" through UNESCO (Grant 2011, 344; Stewart 2010, 37).

These arguments eventually led to the Convention on the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which was ratified by UNESCO in 2005 (UNESCO 2005). Like the 1980 International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, it appears to give countries the freedom to develop their own national cultural policies, even if they undermine global free trade insofar as it relates to cultural goods. The most enthusiastic proponents argue that, while it does not affect existing treaty obligations, it will likely stop further liberalization of audiovisual services (Grant 2011, 348). Others have pointed out that the convention does not fundamentally change the existing legal position in relation to the global trade in audiovisual services and cannot override prior WTO obligations (Burri 2011; Hahn 2006).

Thus, while China did not make an explicitly cultural case in defending itself against the U.S.'s 2007 complaint to the WTO (relying instead on a 'public morals' defense), the logic of the argument was similar to Canada's cultural exception argument from the 'split-run' case. The upholding of significant parts of the U.S.'s 2007 complaint against China would therefore seem to support the contention that, even after the ratification of UNESCO's convention, the WTO continues to subordinate cultural exception assertions to global trade obligations. While it is true that China does not fully comply with the stipulation by the 2005 UNESCO convention that its measures can only work if freedom of expression is guaranteed (Grant 2011, 347–48), there are nonetheless some troubling aspects of the WTO's 2009 ruling against China. Indeed, China's concerns about the adverse effect of digital games on its nation's youth does appear to have some legitimacy.

Public Morals and the *Wangba*

The Chinese argument for exempting video games from international free trade liberalization hinged on 'protection of public morals' but without further explanation of that very broad notion. This section unpacks what was meant by the 'protection of public morals' in the document; installing the *de facto* ban on consoles, the State Council's Circulation of the Ministry of Culture and other Departments' Special Regulating Advice on Electronic Game Arcades of June 15, 2000 (hereafter, the 2000 Regulations) (State Council Office 2000). We will then be asking two closely related questions. First, did the concerns raised by the State Council resonate with actual concerns of the public whose morals the legislation aimed at protecting? Second, to what extent were any public concerns constructed rather than reflected by the media? It should be stressed from the outset that we are not suggesting that 'protection of public morals' is used as a mere pretext to ban consoles. Although we show that the console ban is an arbitrary extension of measures aimed at cleaning up Internet cafes, we also highlight that parts of the public did, and indeed do, see Internet cafes and gaming, including console gaming, as inescapably linked. The conceptual and legal intertwining of Internet cafes, gaming, and consoles is key to understanding the console ban.

The 2000 Regulations' preamble explains how the State Council—roughly synonymous with the Chinese government—feels "compelled" to act in the face of "public hatred" aimed at the "overflow" of "places for electronic game business," many of which are "illegal and irregular operations." The term we translate as "places for electronic game business" (电子游戏经营场所 written in Pinyin: *dianzi youxi jingying changsuo*) captures a broad range of establishments, from gaming arcades in malls to Internet cafes. But there can be no doubt that the main target of the legislation is the Internet cafes, or *wangbas* (网吧). The problem with these places is that they "jeopardize the healthy growth of teenagers and massively disturb the

social order.” Hence, the State Council proposes a list of “advice” organized in nine sections. Table 16.1 summarizes the most relevant of the regulations with the ban on consoles to be found under section six. (The main function of the omitted material is to specify the division of responsibilities between regulatory bodies and to link the 2000 Regulations to socialist ideology.)

Table 16.1 Summary of the 2000 Regulations

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- 1 Close “places” (read: *wangbas*) without legal licenses.
 - 2 Do not license new “places” (read: *wangbas*).
 - 3 Criminalize certain activities including
 - a operating “places” (read: *wangbas*) closer than 200 meters to primary or middle schools.
 - b admitting minors (national holidays exempt).
 - c providing “game content [that propagates] obscenity, pornography, superstition or violence [and/or can be] harmful to consumers’ mental and physical health, against public morals, or libelous.”
 - 5 “Opening time should not be earlier than 8am and later than 12am.”
 - 6 “All domestic industries involving electronic game equipment, accessories and sales are required to cease immediately.” It will be possible to apply for exemptions if “all manufactured products [are sent out of and] sold outside China.” “Customs should increase the intensity of inspection and decisively crack down on smuggling,” that is, if attempts are made at selling manufactured electronic game equipment in China.
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Source: ~~China~~ State Council Office 2000.

The fact that the 2000 Regulations ~~is~~ the legal underpinning of a *de facto* ban on gaming consoles poses challenges to common sense. The Chinese translated here “electronic game equipment” literally means “electronic equipment facilitating the playing of games.” The wording is just as suggestive of standard office PCs as it is of gaming consoles, yet the latter are targeted. Perhaps more importantly, the explicit purpose of the legislation is to tackle problems posed by activities in public places. As gaming consoles were ~~not~~ technologically capable of connecting to the Internet at the time of the ban, it would make little sense to install them in *wangbas*.

What sets the Chinese case apart from previous Asian attempts at regulating video games (see Donovan 2010, chapter 8 in particular) is that by the year 2000, gaming had become tied in with other kinds of media consumption. *Wangbas* spread rapidly across China during the latter half of the 1990s. A rough estimate suggests that as much as one third of Chinese Internet users relied on *wangbas* to get online in the year 2000 (Jenkins 2006, 222), a proportion that remained unchanged during the 2000s (Liu 2011, 123). *Wangbas* are places for both Internet use and gaming. The social and technological mix of various types of media consumption has only deepened as Internet connections have become faster and more stable. On entering a *wangba* in 2014, customers can be found watching movies

and TV series (virtually all recent films and TV series can be streamed in rather decent quality via Chinese websites), communicating via social media sites, instant messaging and e-mail, and playing online games, the latter probably being the most popular activity. Social reality is, in the eyes of both regulators and parts of the Chinese public, that gaming and *wangbas* are intertwined—a fact that goes some way toward explaining the policy put in place, although the ban on consoles remains rather arbitrary.

The 2000 Regulations were not the government's only effort toward slowing the spread of *wangbas* and cleaning up those allowed to operate. Chen and Ang (2011) mention regulatory measures taken in the years 1998, 2001, and 2002 (45f). The 2002 regulations actually repeated some of the measures already taken two years before (namely, those mentioned in Table 4, Sections 3a and 5). But even if the government could not come up with entirely new measures, it might have felt compelled to act and to appear determined to act. In June 2002, two boys had been kicked out of a Beijing *wangba* and responded by setting fire to the place. The arson left 24 or 25 people dead (reports differ), many of whom were teenage students. Parents who might already have been adverse to *wangbas* as places where their children would waste their time gaming and surfing the Internet rather than studying might now fear for their children's very lives—and China's one-child policy has only heightened the relative value of a child's life in a Confucian culture that values the continuation of family very highly. Based on 2007 fieldwork in China, Fenshu Liu offers the following characterization of Chinese parents' attitudes toward *wangbas*:

For many urban parents, the *wangba* appears like a dark shadow over their hearts or a lurking monster ready to spring upon their children. ... The image of a desperate and worn-out mother tracking down her teenage child (usually a boy) at the *wangba* and trying to take him back to school is a familiar and worrying one in China. One hears about such stories via the media and one runs into such instances in daily life.

(Liu 2011, 120)

In China, taking a teenage child 'back to school' is not just a question of avoiding immediate trouble with a displeased teacher. The child's long-term career might very well depend on the scores obtained during the National College Entrance Examinations (*Gaokao*). These scores determine to which higher education institutions the student may apply, and since a degree from a prestigious university can be of vital importance for getting a good job, *Gaokao* scores have a very real, long-term effect on a student's life. Liu's "image of a desperate and worn-out mother tracking down her teenage child" stands for real parents with real concerns.

Recent Tencent data suggests that the number of *wangbas* peaked in 2011 and that the number of *wangba*-goers peaked in 2010 (Game

Marketing & User Research Centre 2013). 3G coverage has been spreading at a rapid and steady pace, especially since 2006, and this is probably the main factor contributing to the current decline. Nevertheless, the conceptual link between *wangbas* and gaming will probably remain strong with the Chinese public for years to come. At the time of writing (June 2014), one of the contributors to this chapter is conducting a series of focused interviews for a project on online gaming cultures in China. The focus of the project is financial transactions in connection with online gaming, and interviewees are typically born in the early 1990s. *Wangbas* enter most of the interviews unprompted, but interviewees are quick to underscore that they do not frequent *wangbas* themselves. Instead, they play at home (that is, at their parents' or in student dormitories). *Wangbas* are mentioned as places where smoking, drinking, and even the taking of drugs occur. It is also mentioned that *wangbas* attract the unemployed and other 'bored' people who might be tempted to steal from you if given the chance. It is beyond the scope of this study to test how reliable these descriptions of *wangbas* actually are, but they do echo widespread assumptions, and the association of *wangbas* and gaming seems to remain strong.

“Electronic Heroin”: Video Games in the Chinese Media

Public concerns over the negative influence of *wangbas* in general and online gaming in particular are reflected by—or perhaps even constructed by—media coverage; the already mentioned Tencent market research concludes that negative press reports contributed to the decline of *wangbas* (Game Marketing & User Research Centre 2013). We would like to draw attention to Fei Xia's article, “Computer Games, ‘Electronic Heroin’ Targeting Youngsters: Investigations Motivated by a Mother's Complaint,” as a representative and influential example. The article was published on May 9, 2000 in *Guangming Daily*, about five weeks before the 2000 Regulations came into effect.

Xia's article is based on visits to both licensed and unlicensed *wangbas* in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province. *Wangbas* are presented as gaming establishments with no other uses of computers or the Internet mentioned. Xia estimates that there are 500 licensed gaming arcades and *wangbas* in Wuhan and over 3,000 unlicensed establishments. Unsupported as this claim is, it might of course still be close to the actual situation, reflecting a general sense of the murky and even dangerous nature of the *wangbas*. The openly operating places are bad enough with children smoking and gaming when they should be in school, but who knows what goes on in the unlicensed *wangbas*, outside of governmental and parental eyes?

Xia pays several visits to unlicensed *wangbas* and is alarmed to find conditions even worse here: children are even younger, even more obsessed with gaming, and there is no one to protect them against the *wangba* operators and owners. The article presents these individuals as beyond contempt. They

are reported to offer ‘packages’ to their young customers, consisting of food, a few hours’ sleep in bunk beds, and forged parents’ signatures to explain school absences—all to allow children to stay in the *wangbas* for days on end. Loyal customers can play on credit, and when their debt runs too high, some of it might be forgiven if new addicts (classmates) are lured into the *wangba*. A potential *wangba* investor interviewed by Xia wants to open shop in an area with “several schools nearby,” underscoring the ruthlessness of the adults preying on school children (the 2000 ban’s Article 3a criminalizes *wangbas* within 200 meters of schools, see Table 4). In short, Xia attempts to construct the *wangba* owners and operators as scapegoats for the social and moral disruptions associated with *wangbas*, a simplistic move that does not seem representative of all Chinese public discourse around *wangbas*.

Xia’s account of the unlicensed *wangbas* is not entirely believable. Factual claims are never supported, the key term ‘addiction’ is never explained, and in order to become friendly with the young *wangba*-goers, Xia claims rather incredibly that he mastered two complicated computer games, including *StarCraft* (Blizzard 1998), in just one night. Despite these shortcomings, Xia’s article helped popularize if not introduce the term ‘electronic heroin’ (电子海洛因, written in Pinyin: dianzi hailuoyin). The term has been used rather widely since 2000 to characterize games (Li 2002; the author acknowledges that some use the term but takes a much more sympathetic stance toward gaming). Usage of ‘electronic heroin’ has developed in parallel with technology so that in January 2013, *People’s Daily* used ‘electronic heroin’ to describe mobile phones, stating that 16.2% of teenagers were ‘addicted’ to the mobile Internet (Zhang 2013). In October 2013, *People’s Daily* used the term even more broadly to describe the Internet, discussing ‘addiction’ to the Internet in the context of a rapid increase in material living conditions (Jin 2013). Although the key term ‘addiction’ remains undefined in the journalistic writings just mentioned, games and gaming are not given sole responsibility for every perceived problem arising from the young generation’s new ways of using media. It bears repeating that although simplistic accounts such as Xia’s have contributed to the negative public perception of *wangbas*, such accounts do not stand alone or entirely unchallenged.

Conclusion

Given these popular concerns about gaming, why was the Chinese console ban lifted? A straightforward answer would be based on the assumption that the ban was ~~never~~ merely crude economic protectionism disguised as “cultural exemption” (as suggested by the U.S. government). Chinese legislators might have hoped that keeping American and Japanese consoles out of the (legal) Chinese market for 14 years would give its national games industry a chance to develop competing products. If that was indeed the strategy, the most visible result is Lenovo’s motion-sensor-based gaming console, the CT510. Developed by subsidiary company Eedoo and launched

in 2012, the CT510 has not exactly taken the world by storm. We have seen it in action and found it pretty disappointing compared to its most direct competitor, a Kinect-enhanced Xbox. Market statistics are scarce, but we have found no indication that the CT510 found a market of considerable size. If the console ban was indeed partly motivated by the desire to allow a domestic games console industry to flourish, 2014 seems like a perfectly rational time to take stock of the experiment—and to end it.

As this article has demonstrated, the ‘economic protectionism’ thesis must be supplemented by paying attention to other potential explanations. First, the ban did not work. The authors of the 2000 Regulations anticipated this by emphasizing the need for increasing the “intensity of inspection and decisively crack down on smuggling” (the 2000 Regulations; see table 4, section 6). As an anecdotal illustration, one of us found it very easy to walk into a shop in one of Ningbo’s nicer malls in the spring of 2012, find a PlayStation 3 (smuggled in from Hong Kong) displayed alongside iPhones and other high-end consumer electronics, and buy the console from English-speaking staff who offered excellent after-sales service. Similar experiences are reported by journalists and other academics. In other words, the console ban does not appear to have restricted the Chinese public’s access to [video games](#).

Second, the Chinese leadership might fear that it alienates an increasingly assertive middle class by restricting access to consumer goods. This concern might have outweighed the perceived negative effect on ‘morals.’ This accords with Wang’s (2001) argument that in the 1990s, the Chinese government set about creating a ‘leisure culture’ by giving middle class people more opportunities to enjoy their free time on cultural activities and more consumer goods to buy in order to reclaim some of the legitimacy that it had lost at the end of the previous decade. This was largely successful but over time created unreasonable expectations that the party-state ultimately finds difficult to satisfy. In this sense, and as previously illustrated, the growing middle class will want access not only to the best of Chinese culture but also to cultural products from other countries. The size and politico-economic power of the contemporary Chinese middle class means that the government is increasingly wary of limiting the choice of consumer goods and hence might be the reason why a blind eye is turned to the purchasing of consoles, making the policy functionally ineffectual.

A third reason might be that the concern over *wangbas* specifically and audiovisual content generally has been superseded by the greater sense of threat that the Internet affords to Chinese conceptions of morality. In 2000, the year that the console ban was brought in, China had only approximately 22.5 million Internet users—less than two percent of its population (CNNIC 2001, 2). In other words, insofar as Internet use constituted a threat to the moral order, it was minimal at the time. However, the number of Internet users has grown exponentially since then. A 2013 survey stated the numbers of users as 590.6 million or 44.1 percent of the total population (Pew Research Center 2013). This rise was accompanied by an

ever-greater number of restrictions on access (such as the blocking of foreign websites), suggesting that as far as the Chinese government is concerned, this platform now has the potential for greater harm to Chinese culture and public morals than consoles.

The fourth and last rationale we suggest seems superficially counter-intuitive. While it might be expected that Chinese commentators would emphasize their country's compliance with the WTO's rules, the sincerity of China's commitment has been underscored by others too. One writer goes as far as arguing that as the Bush administration fell back on bilateralism in trade negotiations in the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it was the Chinese who kept the flame of multilateralism alight (Arrighi 2007, 208). While there is no definitive proof that lifting the console ban was a direct result of the WTO's 2009 ruling against China, it could be read as consistent with its desire to be seen to be 'playing by the rules,' which it had done at accession in "agree[ing] to one of the fastest programs of import duty cuts and market opening ever accepted by a member ... [China] met the deadlines and passed the laws" (Winn 2005; quoted in Arrighi 2007, 277). This occurred despite other countries, including the U.S., imposing restrictions on its exports (Ibid., 277–78). Indeed, Toohey (2011) argues that there is an extent to which China's desire to project its soft power means that it is unwilling to be seen as too obstructionist and hence has largely met the obligations of its membership to the WTO (798). It might be that the lifting of the console ban could be viewed in that light: a largely symbolic but highly visible concession of a measure that long ago proved ineffectual in order to mask the ongoing control of what the government considers are more potent threats like the Internet.

Notes

1. This refers to China's long-term move away from its isolationist economic strategy.
2. The GATT was an earlier series of global trade negotiations, whose agreements were codified in the WTO when the latter was formed on January 1, 1995 (WTO 2014).
3. WTO 2005, para. 6.141; cited in WTO 2009, 280.
4. Indeed, the appending of the phrase "with Chinese characteristics" to a varied range of socio-political situations is employed uncritically not only by Chinese officials but also by many Chinese academics too.

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