Comparative Study of Early Home Computers/Game Consoles

For the afternoon project, I propose to work on a comparative study of educational computers/game consoles of the 1980s. It started with my interest in the history of home computers in Mainaland China. The first real home computers that entered into the lives of Chinese families in the 1980s, it turns out, was not computers proper but the so-called Educational Computers or Learning Machines (□□□). They were not computers proper but clones of various models of contemporary home computers in Japan and the U.S., such as the Nintendo NES systems, the Microsoft MSX home computers, and Apple-II series. This, however, does not mean they were derivatives either. Rather, they were redesigned in ways significantly different from the original models in order to accommodate special needs, like being able to use Chinese language on the platform, of that time.

The project involves both the cultural history of these educational computers as well as a reading of the machines themselves. The first part points to a number of local and global histories and intellectual movements that deserve a separate discussion, a topic I may bring up in our presentations. The second part, however, will be the focus of the afternoon working project. For a comparative study of the machines, especially in terms of the hardware, software, and the interface, I will take advantage of the Depot to look at comparable models of the educational computers, mainly those developed in the late 1970s and 1980s using the MOS 6502 microprocessor. The initial research questions for me would be about the design and technical specificities of these computers, both as individual models and as a group (e.g. whether we can meaningfully talk about "the 6502 computers").

-Why were they designed that way rather than other ways?

-What were the main functionalities of these machines and how were they achieved?

-Why were they so popular, who was the targeted users, and why were they eventually replaced?

-What are the ways to "read" and what does it mean to "read" a machine like an early computer/game console?

-Finally, in relation to media archaeology, what are the ways this approach can answer and give rise to theoretical, cultural, and historical questions around the early Chinese home computers/consoles?