

From *Journey to the West* to the West: Evaluating *Black Myth: Wukong*'s Exhibition on Ancient Chinese Culture for Cross- Cultural Communication

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines how Commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) videogames can function as sites for exhibiting cultural heritage in global digital environments. Using the Chinese-developed Action role-playing game (ARPG) *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024)¹ as the example, the paper investigates how traditional Chinese cultural knowledge is mediated through English localisation for international audiences. Although the game has received extensive global attention for its visual design and mythological setting inspired by the classical novel *Journey to the West* (*JTTW*), questions remain regarding how effectively its cultural meanings are interpreted outside the Chinese cultural context.

Existing scholarship frequently frames *Black Myth: Wukong* as a successful example of the international dissemination of traditional Chinese culture². Such claims are often supported by indicators such as sales figures, player counts, and viewership statistics on streaming platforms. However, these metrics demonstrate global visibility rather than cultural comprehension. Player feedback³ suggests that many non-Chinese audiences appreciate the game's aesthetics and gameplay while experiencing difficulty interpreting the cultural references embedded in narrative texts and character backstories. This disparity between cultural presence and cultural intelligibility raises questions about how localisation mediates culturally specific knowledge within globally distributed games.

To address this issue, this study examines the English localisation of in-game texts through a qualitative comparative analysis of the Chinese source text and the English translation. The analysis focuses on the character *Lingxuzi*, whose backstory appears in the first chapter of the in-game *Journal*⁴ and contains a dense concentration of references to Taoist concepts, mythological classifications, and narrative motifs derived from *JTTW*. By analysing how these culturally embedded elements are transformed during localisation, the study explores how translation choices affect the interpretability of traditional Chinese culture for non-Chinese players.

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The research adopts an interdisciplinary methodological framework combining hermeneutics, cultural semiotics, textual analysis, and comparative analysis. Hermeneutics is used to interpret culturally specific concepts embedded in the source text, particularly those related to Taoist philosophy and mythological traditions. Cultural semiotics provides a framework for identifying cultural signifiers and examining whether they retain their meaning when transferred across linguistic and cultural contexts. Textual and comparative analysis allow the Chinese and English versions of the text to be examined side by side in order to evaluate how cultural information is preserved, altered, or diminished in the localisation process.

The analysis identifies three major issues in the English localisation of *Lingxuzi*'s backstory. First, a cultural signifier loss occurs in the transliteration of the character's name "*Lingxuzi*". While the localisation preserves the phonetic form of the name, it omits the cultural meaning of the suffix *zi*, a Taoist honorific commonly used by practitioners⁵. Without contextual explanation, this religious identity becomes opaque to non-Chinese audiences.

Second, the localisation introduces a cultural representation error by misclassifying the character's religious affiliation. In the translated epigraph, *Lingxuzi* is described as "feigning Buddhist ways⁶," despite the Chinese text explicitly identifying him as a Taoist figure. This misidentification distorts the philosophical framework underlying the character's actions and obscures the Taoist traditions referenced in the narrative.

Third, the localisation flattens the traditional Chinese taxonomy of mythological beings by collapsing the terms *Yao*, *Jing*, and *Guai* into a single category. In Chinese mythological systems, these categories denote distinct forms of supernatural beings associated with different origins, levels of cultivation, and narrative roles⁷. By conflating these terms, the localisation removes the classificatory logic that structures character hierarchies and transformations within the narrative.

These findings suggest that localisation functions not merely as a linguistic process but as a form of cultural mediation that shapes how traditional cultural knowledge is interpreted in digital environments. Drawing on an analogy with museum curation, the paper argues that in-game texts operate as interpretive labels that guide players' understanding of cultural artefacts embedded within the game world. When localisation omits contextual explanation or introduces classification errors, the game's ability to function as a digital exhibition of cultural heritage is significantly limited.

By reframing localisation as a curatorial practice comparable to museum interpretation, this study highlights the potential of COTS videogames to serve as platforms for digital cultural heritage transmission. When culturally sensitive localisation strategies are applied, videogames can contribute not only to entertainment but also to intercultural learning and the development of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). At the same time, the case of *Black Myth: Wukong* demonstrates how the absence of interpretive mediation can constrain this potential, revealing the importance of culturally informed localisation in the global circulation of digital cultural products.

BIO

Zhaoyin Zhang holds a Doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Limerick with a Master's degree in TESOL Studies from the University of Leeds. His research focuses on narrative, cultural meaning, and intercultural communication in COTS video games, with particular attention to RPGs and Soulslike titles. Using autoethnography, hermeneutics, and textual analysis, his work examines how games

convey culturally situated values, cognitive patterns, and problem-solving logics across different cultural contexts.

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ENDNOTES

1 *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024), often described as China's first AAA single-player ARPG, received major international awards including *The Game Awards* and *Golden Joystick*.

2 Existing studies, primarily from Chinese scholars, tend to emphasise the game's cultural transmission through symbolic and multimodal design (Cao, Shi & He, 2024; Dang, 2024; Ding, Zhuang & Chu, 2024; Fan, Sun & He, 2024; Jia & Wang, 2024; Li & Gao, 2024; Li & Zhou, 2024; Lin & Li, 2024; Liu, 2024; Ren, 2024; Shen, 2024; Wang, 2024; Xu & Li, 2024; Yu, Wan & Cui, 2024).

3 Platform data (e.g., Steam reviews) indicate that English-language engagement constitutes only a small proportion of total player feedback. As of 16:00 on December 24, 2024 (UTC+0), *Black Myth: Wukong* had received a total of 1.068 million reviews on Steam alone, of which 1.0319 million were positive. Among the reviews mentioned in Endnote 6, there are 68,900 player reviews with the label 'English', of which 56,900 are reviews of games purchased on Steam, and another 12,000 reviews are from players who activated the game with a third-party license key. The number of player reviews labeled 'English' accounts for 6.4% of the total number of player reviews, while player reviews labeled 'Simplified-Chinese' accounts for 88.9% of the total number (SteamScout, 2024).

Mentions of cultural unfamiliarity or localisation issues appeared only in a small proportion of reviews.

4 *Lingxuzi* is selected as a representative case due to its dense use of Taoist terminology and mythological references.

5 The suffix *zi* is a Taoist honorific indicating religious identity (Hu, 1995; Jin, 2011; Song, 2018).

6 This misclassification obscures the Taoist philosophical framework (Zhan, 2012) underlying the character.

7 In Chinese mythology, *Yao*, *Jing*, and *Guai* denote distinct categories of beings with different origins and levels of cultivation. (Hu, 1995; Liu, 1991; Liu, 1997; Ge, 2002; Xu, 2009; Zhan, 2012).

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