

# **Genshin Impact: Cultural Hybridisation, Localisation and Contra-flow of Cultural Production in China's Open-World Role-Playing Game**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates how Genshin Impact, China's most successful global game export, employs cultural hybridisation and localisation to challenge the longstanding US – Japanese dominance of the global games industry. Drawing on a multi-method qualitative framework—including participant observation, textual analysis, and thematic analysis of game reviews and social media discourse—the study examines both the pre-localisation cultural hybridity embedded in the Chinese version and the post-localisation reception of the English-language release. Findings show that miHoYo strategically fuses Chinese cultural motifs with Japanese anime aesthetics, global mythologies, and hybrid monetisation models to support a cultural and economic contra-flow. However, localisation controversies related to race, cultural representation, and translation reveal tensions between commercial ambition and cultural sensitivity. The paper contributes to DiGRA scholarship by offering an empirically grounded account of how transnational game development practices, and their contested receptions, shape emerging digital cultural flows from the Global South.

## **Keywords**

Cultural Hybridisation, Game Localisation, Cultural Contra-flow, Genshin Impact

## **INTRODUCTION**

Genshin Impact (GI) is a Chinese-produced open-world adventure game that has captivated a global audience. First released in 2017 by developer miHoYo, GI has established itself as China's most successful game export, generating a staggering \$3 billion in monthly global mobile revenues, 70% of which comes from markets outside China (Chapple, 2022). The game has also received numerous accolades, including Best Mobile Game of the Year at both the 2020 Apple Store and the 2021 TGA (The Game Awards). The game's international commercial success and its extensive incorporation of

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traditional Chinese cultural elements, ranging from character designs and costumes to cultural practices, landscapes, and architecture, have led scholars to suggest it is a projection of Chinese soft power (Urueva & Uchaev, 2023, p. 356).

However, miHoYo has also been criticised for imitating the Japanese anime *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (BOTW)* (Bankhurst, 2019) and having used inappropriate and inauthentic forms of cultural hybridisation. This dissertation will systematically examine the cultural hybridisation and localisation of GI to better understand how miHoYo has sought to use this strategy to succeed in the Japanese and US dominated global games industry.

This analysis is timely because electronic games are not simply forms of entertainment. They shape our understanding of different cultures, our relationship with other players across transnational borders, and even influence our perceptions of social and political issues. They also serve as a platform for cross-cultural communication, fostering a sense of global community among players. From the social dynamics of multiplayer online platforms to the economic muscle of a billion-dollar industry, video games have become deeply ingrained in contemporary culture. Consequently, cultural studies researchers have extended their analytical gaze to this field, opening a new frontier for academic inquiry beyond the joystick and screen to delve into the broader social, economic, and political implications of game development and game play.

However, while electronic games serve as increasingly pivotal platforms for cultural exchange and influence, there exists a significant research gap in understanding their role in transnational cultural flows, particularly regarding non-Western countries as producers rather than mere consumers of digital culture.

The research aims to delineate how this hybridity serves not just as an aesthetic choice but also as a commercial strategy aimed at global market penetration. Alongside this, the study intends to scrutinise the role of localisation in shaping both critical and player reception, thereby gauging the extent to which the game's localisation decisions align with or diverge from its broader commercial and cultural objectives.

The central research question is: How has miHoYo undertaken cultural hybridisation and localisation of GI to promote its transnational marketing ambitions?

The principal aim of this dissertation is to unpack the intricate fabric of cultural hybridity in game development. The study will scrutinise how the cultural elements in GI are selectively borrowed, adapted, and recontextualised, both pre-and post-localisation to make the game resonate with players from different cultures.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Video Games and Communication of Digital Cultures**

In his book *Digital Culture*, Charlie Gere (2002, p. 10) argues digital cultural products like video games and the internet now permeate every aspect of people's lives "to produce a seamless digital mediascape" in which new cultural forms and practices emerge. Similarly, games scholars Chess and Consalvo (2022, p. 163) argue that the "convergence of media content, media platforms and technologies, and media audiences" in video games is a key element to understanding the evolution of culture.

In this context, numerous studies have focused on the impact of video games on culture, encompassing aspects such as the influence of games on social concepts, values, and artistic forms (Nguyen, 2017; Kultima & Sandovar, 2016; Mayra, 2012; Shaw, 2010; Raessens & Goldstein, 2005). The interactivity and immersion of gaming can have a significant impact on user perceptions of and emotions about cultural experiences (Chen, 2018). They may perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes (Begue et al., 2017; Mou & Peng, 2009), while also fostering cross-cultural literacy and understanding (Shliakhovchuk & Munoz Garcia, 2020).

Recent games studies by GI consider it as a medium for cross-cultural digital communication, exploring its adaptation to global markets through strategies such as language translation, cultural adaptation, cross-platform strategies, and community engagement, which foster a distinct form of cultural hybridity (Adams, 2022; Inwood, 2014) while retaining its authentic Chinese cultural essence, its "Chineseness" (Li & Li 2023). Furthermore, GI's success on a global scale mirrors a broader narrative of continuous cultural mobility, transcending fixed territorial and national structures in its transnational mediation (Bernal-Merino, 2020). This study will, following Li & Li (2023) propose that rather than being a sign of inauthenticity, GI's hybrid nature is an attempt to challenge the cultural dominance of Japan and the US over the global gaming industry, in line with Chinese economic and political ambitions.

In the 2020s, with the national bases for games production diversifying to the point where all products are globalised (Consalvo, 2016) and with Chinese games having a growing sales impact in the global games market (Kim & Kang, 2019), there is a growing interest in studies of China's cultural impact on the games industry and the historic cultural hegemony of Japanese and North American games companies.

Fron et al suggest that the US and Japanese gaming cultures have established a "Hegemony of Play" (Fron et al., 2007), impacting the design styles, game genres, and even the cultural values represented in games worldwide. Such hegemony may lead to the marginalisation and homogenisation of gaming cultures from other nations (Chakraborti et al., 2015). Chakraborti et al. argue that the dominance of the games industry by the US and Japan has significantly impacted the genres and games in the global games market. The most famous American game genre is the militarised shooter, characterised by its imperialistic nature and 'disturbingly violent' content (Patterson, 2020, p. 8), while Japanese game companies excel in role-playing, action-adventure, romance-simulation, visual novel, and music-rhythm genres (Hutchinson, 2019; Grau, 2019).

### **Cultural contra-flow, Glocalisation and Hybridisation**

Since the 1990s, media researchers have debated whether cultural flows are necessarily unidirectional (Turner & Ritzer, 1994; Appadurai, 1996, 1990; Hannerz, 1992), which implies linearity and one-way relationships of causality between dominant cultural producer (West) and receiver (the rest) (Thussu, 2006, p. 30). However, as Appadurai (1996) suggests globalisation is a dual process involving both homogenisation and heterogenization. With the advance of globalisation, cultural exchanges and interactions between countries have become more frequent, resulting in cultural influences no longer being limited to a single direction (Thussu, 2006):

*In the era of globalisation, the one-way vertical flow has given way to multiple and horizontal flows, as subaltern media content providers have emerged to service an ever growing geo-cultural market (Thussu, 2006, p. 18).*

In these transnational media flows, cultures from different countries and regions influence and borrow from each other, creating a complex cultural tapestry in any one globalised product, like a video game (Consalvo 2016). This process of cultural interplay is often described as 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995) or 'hybridisation' (Pieterse, 1994, pp. 66-67).

Robertson (1995, pp. 32-37) argues that glocalisation refers to the refocusing and strengthening of local cultures and identities in globalisation. It embodies an interactive relationship between the global and the local that allows local identities and global trends to interact and shape together (Robertson, 2012).

Liberal theorists argued two decades ago that globalization would inevitably "drift towards a sort of global cultural homogeneity" (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 27). For instance, the cultural hegemony exerted by the United States in sectors such as the gaming industry and Hollywood culture (Fron et al., 2007; Shin & Namkung, 2008) epitomizes a discourse of cultural homogenization with hegemonic characteristics, seen for example in the widespread adoption of the Japanese anime aesthetic. Such a phenomenon is depicted as a "consequence of globalisation", suggesting the emergence of a "uniform and ubiquitous" global culture (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 6).

However, this dissertation is more interested in exploring discourse on cultural heterogenisation and hybridity, which encompasses notions of cultural complexity and "transculturalism", (Kuhn, 2009, p. 53) the movement of ideas, beliefs and values across cultural boundaries (Hermans & Kempen, 1998). Pieterse (1994) contends that Western modernity equates globalisation with Westernisation, whereas 'hybridity' refers to the opening of closed or fixed cultural concepts to the creation of new transcultural forms of difference.

Ramirez-Moreno (2019, p. 53), when seeking a method for analysing cultural representations in electronic games, posited that the results were relatively sparse. While some of this research is now emerging, there is still a gap in analysis of electronic games as cultural phenomena, particularly non-Western perspectives.

This challenge to Western cultural dominance from glocalisation and cultural hybridity is exemplified in what Daya Thussu (2006) calls "cultural contra-flows". This phenomenon is perceived as a process of anti-hegemony, in which the "subaltern currents" originating from non-Western countries gradually exert influence on the "mainstream currents" led by the United States and other Western nations (2006, p. 21). Such contra-flows are not unidirectional but rather diverse and multi-directional. They can help balance the global cultural market, promote cultural diversity and support the spread of non-Western cultures (Thussu, 2006).

## **Game Internationalisation and Localisation**

Academic studies on the export of Chinese culture through Chinese online games are limited, but a growing field of interest (Li & Li, 2023; Cai et al., 2023; Ho & Fung, 2016; Fung, 2014). Following the core concept of cultural hybridisation theory, which posits that different cultures constantly change, develop, and recombine through communication and interaction (Canclini, 1995, p. 29).

Localisation, a pivotal facet of the GILT framework of critical terms for the international expansion of the language sector — encompassing globalisation, internationalisation, localisation, and translation (Mejias-Climent, 2022) — is generally perceived as a top-down process. This process entails tailoring a product or service from one market or

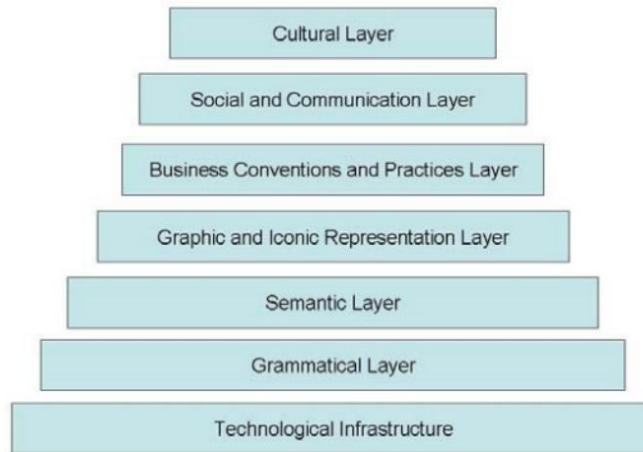
region to another to align with local market demands and to adapt to the target market's cultural, linguistic, and regulatory requisites (LISA, 2003, p. 13). According to the Localisation Industry Standards Association (LISA), localisation is the second phase in market entry, preceded by internationalisation, which is "the process of enabling a product at a technical level for localisation" (LISA, 2007, p. 17).

Dunning (1988) defines transnationalisation as expanding organisations beyond their domestic borders in the globalised environment. To achieve global reach, companies must address variances in language, cultural norms, and values (Yoon & Cheon, 2013). Research suggests that transnational strategy contributes to the globalisation of the gaming industry (Jin, 2018, pp. 117-118), emphasising a continuous cultural mobility that can "escape and/or circumvent fixed territories and national structures" (Athique, 2013, p. 5). As game development companies explore cross-border business, game developers and publishers increasingly consider the specific needs and preferences of players from different cultural backgrounds (Bernal-Merino, 2020, p. 307).

The second focus of this dissertation will be the scope and effects of its GI's English language localisation. Game localisation, initially a sub-field within translation studies, gained prominence in the late 1990s (Mangiron, 2017; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013; Chandler & Deming, 2012; Bernal-Merino, 2006). Early localisation research primarily focused on linguistic translation, largely overlooking cultural nuances and player experience (Smith & Deitsch, 2007; Costales, 2012). As the gaming industry grew, the importance of cultural difference began to be more seriously considered in academic and industry circles (Berger, 2017; Ash & Gallacher, 2011; Carlson & Corliss, 2011). The scope of localisation started to broaden, incorporating different cultural contexts and other game elements such as paratexts and design styles (Švelch, 2020; Gresse et al., 2017; Pettini, 2015). Recent research by Mejias-Climent (2022) suggests that localisation now also covers technology, legal aspects, and aesthetics, with scholars considering both the preservation of the game's original design and its adaptation to various cultural contexts (Mangiron, 2017; Bernal-Merino, 2016).

Nevertheless, the process of game localisation is fraught with complexities and contentious issues (Pym, 2004). Games often carry the cultural characteristics or "cultural odor" of their country of origin (Iwabuchi, 2002, p.27). This odour can be diluted to avoid alienating specific audiences or emphasised as a selling point (Consalvo, 2016). Academics debate which elements—audiovisual effects, in-game texts, or other features—best represent these cultural characteristics within games (Penix-Tadsen, 2019; Consalvo, 2016; Iwabuchi, 2002).

As video game localisation involves complex processes ranging from basic translation to intricate cultural adaptation, this study adopts Chroust's (2007) seven-layer model to shape its localisation analysis (Figure 1). This approach was used to identify and explain the differences between the Chinese and English versions, tracing their impact on the game's appeal to the global market.



**Figure 1:** Layers of Localisation (Chroust, 2007, p.4). <https://journals.issn.org/index.php/proceedings51st/article/view/569/275>.

Using this model, the study will explore components including textual interpretations, visual symbology, cultural implications, business marketing, societal factors, and the technical dimensions of localisation.

Chronologically, the history of Chinese RPG localisation originates in the late 1990s, primarily focusing on translating foreign games into Chinese (Chew, 2016). However, as the domestic industry developed in the early 2000s, developers acknowledged the significance of cultural differences to rich gaming experiences (Kshetri, 2009) and began incorporating Chinese cultural elements into games (Keane & Liu, 2013; Chan, 2006). In the 2010s, Chinese RPG developers also shifted towards community engagement, using player feedback for content adaptation (Chew, 2016). In the early 2020s, the game localisation process evolved to encompass language translation, cultural adaptation, cross-platform strategies, and community engagement (Adams, 2022; Inwood, 2014). The game's deeply engaged player base provides an important resource for researchers interested in how localisation is perceived.

Vanderhoef (2021, p. 163) argues that gaming as a global phenomenon crosses national and cultural boundaries to form a transnational virtual community, what Pierson Browne (2015) calls the "imagined indie community." Moreover, players within this community not only interact with each other in games but also share experiences and make connections in the real world through fan accounts and are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content runs and social media content (Ndalianis et al., 2017, p. i). Henry Jenkins (2006, p. 290) labels this a "participatory culture" and emphasizes its power in shaping cultural products. For this reason, this study will explore the acute perceptions of GI's cultural hybridisation from both critics, who tend to be avid game players, and everyday gamers in fan forums.

## METHODOLOGY

This section of the paper outlines the methodology employed to examine the cultural hybridisation of the Chinese video game *GI* and critical reactions to its English language localisation, to understand how Chinese developers have sought success in international market and how their efforts have been received.

In the current study, a qualitative methodological framework is employed to explore the GI case study. A pre-localisation analysis of the game's cultural hybridisation is performed using textual analysis and digital ethnographic content analysis of relevant English and Chinese language game reviews and gamer comments from social media and fan forums.

### **Gameplay: participant observation and textual analysis**

This inquiry employs participant observation as a central method informing textual analysis of the game, predicated on its capability to provide comprehensive, immersive insights into the manifold Chinese cultural and localised elements. Actively playing the game's English and Chinese versions facilitates a firsthand critique of hybridisation and localisation strategies and highlights localisation's impact on user experiences, such as potential inconsistencies and translation quality (Berger, 2017, p. 105).

I established separate accounts for the Chinese and English versions to strengthen the study's comparative accuracy. Meanwhile, Chroust's (2007) seven-layer analytical framework informs my exploration of cultural, communicative, business, iconographic, semantic, grammatical and technological aspects of GI.

### **Content capture and analysis: game media reviews and social media posts**

Following digital ethnographic content analysis of game localisation (Davies & Li, 2019), I observed the controversies caused by the game publishing company's cultural hybridisation and localisation strategies, by capturing and analysing professional reviews in news media and gamer publications, and comments on associated cultural topics and localisation in gamer discussions on social media and game forums, from both Chinese and English language sources. The data was collected from Baidu and Google for media article reviews, and Weibo, Reddit, and Miyoushe for gamer feedback, offering a broad view of the game's reception across different cultural and linguistic landscapes.

I then conducted a thematic content analysis of these two datasets to isolate key debates. In section 4 this analysis and the reception texts are used to explore how Chinese culture is melded with other influences, and the implications for transcultural understanding. In section 5, a qualitative content analysis is employed to delve into how the English-language localisation has been perceived by its primary audiences: professional game critics' and everyday gamers.

### **Game review capture - English and Mandarin Articles**

To examine critical reception and key acceptance of localisation, online reviews were collected from both English and Chinese sources. Google search terms included "Genshin Impact" paired with either "culture" or "localisation." Similarly, a Baidu search used the terms 原神 (Genshin Impact) along with 文化 (culture) or 本地化 (localisation).

I obtained 153 English results from Google Search and 153 Mandarin results from Baidu Search from different gaming magazines and news sources. The top 10 search results pages were also retrieved using a Python script, yielding 85 English articles on culture, 68 articles on localisation, 92 Chinese articles on Genshin Impact culture, and 62 pieces on localisation (dated before August 1, 2024). The information for these articles came from websites, game reviews, magazines, and news sources.

The Baidu entries, covering various aspects such as the page number, keywords, title, URL, summary, and the web page URL where the content was originally published. The Google dataset comprises 85 entries, including the publication date, title, link, and the new content. A cursory glance at the sources reveals that the entries in the Baidu dataset predominantly originate from platforms like "bbs.mihoyo.com," "wenku.baidu.com," and "jfdaily.com," which suggests a mix of fan forums, academic repositories, and news outlets. On the other hand, the Google dataset features content from diverse platforms such as "cultureofgaming.com," "c3sindia.org," and "youtube.com," indicating a blend of gaming culture websites, think tanks, and video-sharing platforms.

## **Social Media Comment capture**

The game review data collected for this study included the textual content of *GI* player posts, user and account information, and the date and time of posting. The web crawls were conducted only for research reasons, and the data gathered for this study is in the public domain. Due to the removal of IDs from our dataset and results aggregate, this study did not reveal any personally identifying information. Because I used publicly accessible data without identifying information or confidential information between users and because there was no need for interaction between social platform users and researchers, this study did not need human ethics approval.

### *Reddit*

To collect this data for thematic analysis, I collected data from Reddit using a custom Python script that uses the PRAW (Python Reddit API Wrapper) library. The keywords "localisation", "localisational" and "culture", "cultural" were selected and the deadline was set to search before August 1, 2024 to ensure the relevance of exploring cultural adaptation in video games. The search category "Relevance" was also selected to achieve the desired content coverage. After removing duplicates, a total of 232 relevant posts were collected.

The data was then analysed thematically to identify patterns related to cultural significance in the gaming community. I was interested in collecting data on the number of likes and comments posts attracted to establish which posts were most popular and which topics might have significance.

### *Chinese Social Media Platforms*

I also collected posts from Sina Weibo, Chinese Twitter and one of China's largest social media platforms. Sina Weibo was selected as a data source due to its widespread usage in China and ability to reflect more general discussions and public sentiment (Fan et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2013).

I also searched Miyoushe (the game developer's web forum). Miyoushe, an official forum targeted explicitly at dedicated gamers and having direct ties to the game developer miHoYo, was a main platform for understanding specialised opinions on *Genshin Impact's* localisation and cultural adaptations. It allowed for a deep dive into the perspectives of those intimately engaged with the game, offering a contrasting view to the more general discourse on Weibo.

In collecting these comments, I sought examples of commentary from dedicated gamers (on Miyoushe) and more general discussions (on Weibo). A total of 248 posts from Weibo (222 for "culture" and 26 for "localisation") and 256 posts from Miyoushe (165

for "culture" and 91 for "localisation") were collected, representing a balanced sample that allowed for a comparative analysis between general and specialised discussions.

## **Thematic Content Analysis**

The data were prepared for thematic analysis using a thorough process of data cleaning and parsing detailed, which allowed initial categorisation into three meta-themes: "Cultural Hybridization," "Localization Strategies", and "Audience Cultural Reception."

Thematic analysis (TA) is considered one of the most straightforward methods for inferring patterns of meaning from qualitative data (Herzog et al., 2019, p. 385). TA is analysed by structuring (a) codes, (b) themes in qualitative verbal expressions, and (c) patterns of recurrence, evaluation, or associations within these themes. Herzog (2019) argues that TA is well suited for analysing experience, perception and understanding (p. 385). Overall thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) in data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79).

At the core of TA is the process of coding themes, which is the step-by-step process of forming theme labels and applying them to potentially relevant pieces of data (Herzog et al.) According to Braun and Clarke (2014):

*This categorization can be done inductively, aiming to generate new theory emerging from the data analysed (bottom-up), or deductively, testing theory (top-down) (p. 1948).*

In this case, the analysis was inductive, searching for common themes and sub-themes in the articles and the comment corpora, particularly regarding points of content. The analysis was guided by DeSantis and Ugarriza's (2000) definition of a theme as 'an abstract entity' (p. 362) pertinent to understanding how Chinese game features are localized. I looked for references to culture, localisation strategies, player reception, and the broader implications of cultural adaptations. The breakdown of the thematic analysis is provided in Appendix 1.

## **PRE-LOCALISATION**

### **Pre-localisation: GI as a Constant Cultural Hybrid**

The amalgamation of distinct Japanese and North American cultural elements in GI has ignited a debate on what constitutes authentic "Chineseness" in game production (Li & Li, 2023). With its developmental roots in China, GI certainly melds the aesthetic allure of Japanese anime with the hallmark game mechanics of American open-world adventures, even before its localisation for the English-speaking market. In these respects, GI is positioned in this study as a "constant cultural hybrid", an amalgam of successful cultural elements, game styles, and mechanics which have helped previous game products attract an audience.

We can also see that its game developers have used indigenous Chinese cultural signs and symbols throughout the game in two senses: first as a form of cultural nationalism and the expression of traditional Chinese culture; and second, as an effective pre-localisation strategy to appeal to a global audience. This dual function showcases the game as a model for cultural hybridisation—simultaneously upholding and reimagining Chinese cultural elements while incorporating hybrid game mechanics such as the

combination of the Japanese "gacha" system and the American "freemium" business model.

In considering the extent to which GI represents authentic Chinese culture (Li & Li 2023), it is useful to draw upon Iwabuchi's (2002) notion of "cultural odour." This concept underscores the endurance of specific cultural markers such as traditional folk stories or symbolic cultural elements that resist complete assimilation or erasure during the development process. These enduring elements linger as an "odour" that symbolizes the product's cultural roots or inspirations. As Consalvo (2016, p. 4) highlights, such indelible cultural imprints etch the lineage and underpin the intricate confluence of cultural influences that manifest in such products.

In the case of GI, the cultural odour is manifested in elements such as character design influenced by Chinese folklore, special in-game events rooted in Chinese traditions, and regional designs inspired by Chinese mythological landscapes. These features act as both exotic features for an international audience, in the Orientalist tradition, and enduring markers that indicate the game's Chinese origins, even after its localisation for international markets.

### *Game Character Design*

Game development company miHoYo places a strong emphasis on what it calls Chinese "cultural embellishments" as the cornerstone of character conceptualisation and persona crafting (miHoYo, 2021). For instance, the official development blog describes characters such as the adepti, inspired by Daoist "immortals" (仙人 XianRen), the young warrior Xiao (ibid.), who embodies a tapestry of cultural symbolism interwoven with elements of cultural fusion. According to Developer Insight #4, miHoYo wants this character to possess "the power, aesthetic value, and maturity to become a true cultural icon", for international as well as Chinese players.

In an interview, miHoYo's founder Liu Wei emphasized that the company aims "to integrate the industrial and cultural values of games" (Tencent News, 2022). This commitment manifests as a narrative structure that contrasts sharply with traditional Western heroic archetypes. Zhongli, the leader of Liyue, is a governor, and legislator in the collectivist Confucian tradition. He is a figure aligned with the Warring States period of Chinese history (Pines, 2009)—a period characterized by intellectual diversity and the rise of various schools of philosophical thought. Zhongli synthesizes a rich tapestry of philosophical doctrines including Confucianism, Mohism and Daoism. He assumes the role of Geo Archon, embodying a "paternal ruler" archetype that resonates with age-old Confucian principles, succinctly encapsulated in the dictum. "Confucianism exterior covering the Legalism core (外儒内法)," which have guided China's societal structures for millennia (Zhou, 2011, p. 626).

Zhongli's character design conceptualizes him as a wise and benevolent ruler who also captures the essence of a patriarchal clan chieftain. Phrases from the game, such as "Although I have no desire to hunt, I know the sorrows of the people" (此世群魔诸神并起, 我虽无意逐鹿, 却知道苍生苦楚) and "I wish only to protect a corner of this fleeting world" (只愿荡涤四方, 护得浮世一隅), succinctly encapsulate Confucian "benevolence" (Guo & Cui, 2012, p.21) and Mohist "pacifism" (Hui, 2020, p.208). His eventual withdrawal from governance—once convinced of the game territory Liyue's self-sufficiency—exemplifies the traits of caring but reserved elders, as he relinquishes official duties while continuing his unspoken vigilance.

The character design philosophy emphasizes the developers' intention to infuse Zhongli with principles that are firmly anchored in Confucian values, underpinning a cultural narrative that foregrounds collectivist values, social harmony, and justice. Zhongli thus emerges as a compelling illustration of the fusion of traditional Chinese philosophical principles with a modern game artifact. The narrative consistency in Zhongli's character across both the Chinese and English versions of the game highlights the developers' commitment to a unified cultural narrative.

However, it is essential to employ a dialectical critique when approaching such cultural expressions. While these themes might facilitate a cultural bridge, making these Chinese character traits and aspects of Confucianism accessible and resonant to players of diverse backgrounds, they could inadvertently perpetuate essentialist or reductive notions of Confucian philosophy. By distilling complex, culturally bound ideas into thematic categories, there is the risk of simplifying or commodifying these nuanced concepts for mass consumption.

When we look at Zhongli's costume design, however, there is a deliberate attempt at contemporary anime-style sartorial hybridisation, synthesising Western tailcoat-inspired attire with ancient Chinese warrior garb elements to create a visually compelling "Eastern ancient war deity" (Figure 2). In one sense, this mirrors Japanese game designers' use of Western formal clothing, e.g. in Studio Ghibli productions and the puzzle game *100 Sleeping Princes and the Kingdom of Dreams* (GCrest, 2015). Details such as buttons fashioned in the traditional Magua style and trousers adorned with elaborate golden dragon motifs, together with the traditional Chinese geometric patterns like square spirals and meander motifs in his attire, which echo Ming and Qing dynasty clothing (Jiu, 2021), demonstrate the use of historical elements of Chinese clothing to convey both cultural authenticity and a marketable exoticism. As Li & Li (2023, p. 3) argue, "For Non-Western producers and service providers, the presentation of ethnic authenticity becomes the key to success in the competitive marketplace."



**Figure 2:** Zhong Li character design display. Copyright from "Genshin Impact Wiki - Fandom" (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Zhongli>.

## *Festival and Ritual Practices in GI*

Another way in which the GI developers have incorporated Chinese traditional elements into the gameplay, is through Chinese festivals and rituals. Events such as "the Moonchase Festival" and "the Lantern Rite Festival" within the Liyue region, are not merely aesthetic appendices; they are integral to the game's narrative and serve a dual role of educating the player about traditional Chinese culture while retaining the fantasy, Orientalist elements of the game world.

For example, within the Liyue region of the game, inspired by ancient China, there are activities centered around a "Mid-Autumn Festival" analogue, the "Moonchase Festival" (Version 2.1, September 2021), and a "Spring Festival" or "Lantern Festival" analogue, the "Lantern Rite Festival" (Version 1.0, February 2021). During these events, the game's landscape transforms to reflect the specific festival; Moonchase features "Cantonese mooncakes" in street-side stalls, while Lantern Rite showcases fireworks and sky lanterns. The sky lanterns in Lantern Rite are inspired by the traditional Chinese craft of "Kongming lanterns", which are traditionally released with written wishes and blessings. In GI, these lanterns also serve the additional function of honoring deceased heroes and guiding souls.

Notably, the festivals are neither static nor simplistic portrayals. Moonchase evolves to feature various celebratory activities, and both festivals change annually with themes that reflect specific cultural expressions. This dynamic representation adheres to what Hong (2015, p. 35) describes as a negated, virtual engagement that still captures a "sufficient reality." Such complexity aligns with the observations of Xu et al. (2018) that traditional Chinese festivals encapsulate the lifestyle of an agrarian society, going beyond agricultural elements to reflect broader societal modes (p. 229). For example, Lantern Rite incorporates the concept of "passing the torch" and memorializing heroes, adding layers of cultural expression that enrich the narrative and offer perspectives on Chinese traditions.

However, this strategy of adapting cultural representation brings its own set of complexities, raising questions about potential appropriation or commodification. As Hong (2015, p. 36) notes, the festivals within the game are crafted to meet specific technical, economic, and cultural criteria. The game does not explain the reasons for the festival and its rich social meaning. This reconstitution of cultural elements aligns with the game's broader objectives for transnational marketing, which risks diluting or altering Chinese cultural authenticity. Such portrayals then serve a dual function: they familiarize global players with Chinese cultural norms but also risk perpetuating stereotypes about Chinese traditions in the service of game world realization.

## **Ethical Complexities in GIs' Cultural Hybridisation**

### *Ethical Dilemmas Induced by 'Monster' Image Design in the Game*

The portrayal of Hilichurls in GI as "primitive humanoid monsters" (miHoYo 2021) has ignited a contentious debate about race representation, stereotyping and racism, in game reviews and gamer forums. Game critics like Lunning (2021), Messner (2021), and Morris (2021) alongside numerous players have highlighted, in the characterisation of Hilichurls, a perceived derogatory representation of Indigenous groups.

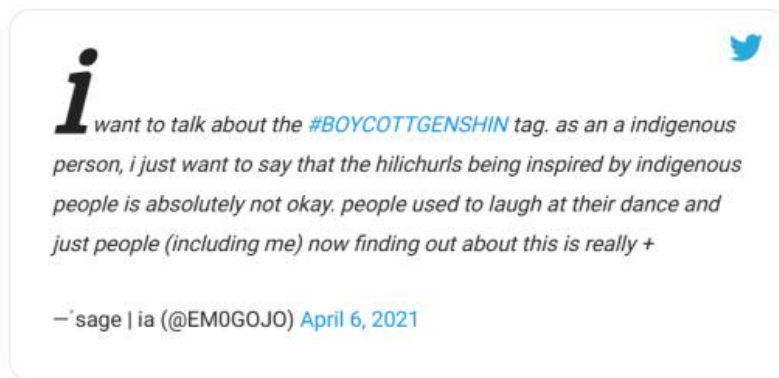
The crux of the contention is the visual and cultural resemblances between Hilichurls and real-world Indigenous populations, indicated by their tribal attire and dances. The combat against these characters, as voiced by players like Milo and Key, is seen as a

harmful narrative, with Lunning (2021) referring to them as a "racist caricature" and a "barbaric species." Messner (2021) amplifies this critique by spotlighting a video snippet from miHoYo's office, where an artist used images of dancing indigenous Americans as a reference for Hilichurls, fuelling the debate on harmful racial representations in fantasy settings.

The dance movements of Hilichurls, as perceived by players like *@HijikataX* (2021) and *@availableusernamepls* (2021) in Reddit, appear to have been inspired by "indigenous people from South America" or "indigenous Americans", causing some to probe into the ethical dimensions of such representation. As *@HijikataX* points out, this resonance sparks curiosity regarding the underlying narrative purpose and the historical or cultural ramifications entangled therein.

In addressing the representation issues within the game GI, the reaction among Chinese players, as observed by Chinese media critics, seems to diverge significantly from the concerns expressed by the international community. While international players-initiated boycotts with hashtags like "#boycottgenshinimpact" and "#boycottmihoyo," focusing on issues of race, skin color, gender, and pedophilia (Asarch, 2021), Chinese players typically base their disapproval on instances of perceived plagiarism or challenging game content crafted by the developers. The media pundits from Zhihu (2021) speculate that the adherence to political correctness in the West, now nearly mainstream, could likely be fueling the boycott.

Twitter user *@EMOGOJO* voiced concerns over miHoYo's cultural appropriation, stating, "It makes us feel like we are being mocked for something that means so much to us. Our culture is not something for you to take and just use miHoYo" (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Twitter users protesting monster design. Adapted from an article screenshot by Seren Morris, copyright by Newsweek. Retrieved from <https://www.newsweek.com/genshin-impact-critics-call-boycott-racism-pedophilia-claims-1581235>.

On the other hand, *@fenestrane00* (2021) and *@Snipexra* (2021) argue that the in-game representations are fictional, and the inspirations drawn from real-world cultures are part of the creative process, not directly equating Hilichurls to indigenous people. *@fenestrane00* challenges the notion of direct equivalence between the game's fictional entities and real-world cultures, emphasizing that the game doesn't explicitly mention such a correlation. *@Snipexra* narrows down to the Hilichurls' dance, seeing it as merely a "movement replication" and criticizes the disproportionate focus on alleged racism while overlooking other forms of discrimination.

The aspiration of cultural hybridisation, underscored by Pieterse (2020), is to engender global inclusivity; however, the trajectory embarked upon by GI appears to veer towards a contentious realm of cultural appropriation. This tarnishes the game's credibility and perpetuates detrimental stereotypes, undermining the ethos of inclusivity it endeavours to espouse. The dissonance between the game's portrayals and its motive for cultural hybridisation amplifies the ethical quandaries confronting game developers in the dynamic interplay of global inclusivity and cultural sensitivity.

### *Character Design Controversy: Community Feedback and Ethical Considerations*

Despite not being originally conceived as a conduit for counter-cultural dialogues, GI has inadvertently morphed into one, propelled by the debates surrounding its cultural amalgamation and localization initiatives, the latter which are discussed in more details in the next section. The player scrutiny intensified particularly around the characterisation of Xinyan and Kaeya, the game's sole dark-skinned characters (Figure 4), described as "intimidating" and "exotic" in various media reviews (Asarch, 2021; Diaz, 2021). Such depictions have catalysed a counter-narrative challenging the cultural representations within the game, spotlighting the precarious venture of integrating 'exotic' elements for representative inclusivity. These missteps, albeit unintended, had substantial social ramifications, notably in perpetuating racial and ethnic stereotypes.



**Figure 4.** Comparison of skin tones between Xinyan and Kaeya. Adapted from m Twitter user MIHOYO/@D\_XJINN. Retrieved from [https://twitter.com/d\\_xjinn/status/1379508140585144323?s=20](https://twitter.com/d_xjinn/status/1379508140585144323?s=20).

The 3.0 game update featuring the introduction of the Sumeru region, adds a new layer of complexity to ongoing debates about the game's approach to cultural hybridisation. The Sumeru region, a tapestry of South Asian and North African influences, showcases a variety of landscapes such as rainforests and deserts, along with Arabic-inspired architecture and nomadic desert tribes represented as NPCs. The region's culturally rich pastiche has not been universally well-received. Rui Zhong (2022) of Polygon criticizes the developers for their unbalanced portrayal of real-world cultures and locations, pointing specifically to an over-reliance on stereotypes and the inappropriate use of

historical elements. Further, Paul Tassi of Forbes (2022) has highlighted issues related to the skin tones of characters in this region, leading to accusations of racial bias.

For example, miHoYo's design of the deity "Nahida" in the Sumeru region employed a light-skinned, child-like character (Figure 5). Although the outfit and accessories honor the Indian cultural background of the Sumeru region, choosing a light-skinned character as the deity is considered a deviation from and a lack of respect for the cultural context of that region. Collectively, the unveiling of the Sumeru region lays bare the challenges and pitfalls in miHoYo's attempts at cultural hybridisation, emphasizing the need for more thoughtful and sensitive portrayals to mitigate racial and ethnic inaccuracies.



**Figure 5.** Comparison between the character Nahida and her associated culture. Adapted from a screenshot of the video "How Arab and Persian Culture shaped Sumeru: GI Lore / Cultural Video Essay" by Lore Explorer: History in Gaming. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFgimo7zfM0>.

User @NearXS on the official HoYoLab forum: "It doesn't feel like I'm being represented; it feels like my culture is being stolen from me" (Figure 6). This remark crystallises the ethical quagmire embroiling the game's design decisions, and the peril these choices harbor in potentially estranging a diverse player base. Such feedback from the player community accentuates the need for a more sensitive and informed approach in melding diverse cultural elements within the game's narrative and character design, ensuring an inclusive and respectful representation that resonates positively with its global audience.



**Figure 6.** User comments on the representation issue of Sumeru and Middle Eastern cultures, from an open discussion. Adapted from "HoYoLab" (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.hoyolab.com/article/5124461>.

Recent fan discussion has shifted from boycotts to a call for the developer to be more sensitive, seen in player adoption of the hashtag "#DoBetterMihoyo" which signals a desire to hold the company accountable without fully committing to a boycott (Diaz, 2021).

This shift in the fanbase's discourse, encapsulated by the hashtag "#DoBetterMihoyo," signals a commitment to nuanced feedback rather than outright condemnation. The community discourse delves into the nuances of cultural representation, advocating for a deeper understanding and respect for cultural diversity (@zzzacth, 2021; @fenestrane00, 2021). Gamers articulate this perspective by suggesting ways in which game developers could avoid stereotypes and instead authentically represent diverse traditions, turning potential criticisms into opportunities for cultural education and sensitivity within the gaming industry.

GI's attempt at cultural hybridization has sparked diverse responses, highlighting the intricate dance between cultural appreciation and appropriation. While some praise its cosmopolitan localisation for blending various cultures with a Sino-centric lens, others critique its stereotypical portrayals and occasional cultural insensitivity. This underscores the nuanced challenges of digital localisation and the essential balance required to honor global cultural complexity in gaming narratives.

## **POST-LOCALISATION**

This section explores the English-language localisation of *Genshin Impact* and how this process serves both commercial and nationalistic agendas. It examines how the localisation has been operationalised along two critical axes: linguistic translation and voice-over localisation. The section aims to illuminate the debates surrounding these aspects of localisation and how they contribute to or detract from miHoYo's objective of global commercial success.

This section provides a nuanced exploration into the complexities of game localisation, particularly the emotional resonance conveyed through translation, voice-overs, and character depiction. By employing a mixed-method approach that encompasses textual analysis and the critical appraisal of both game reviewer critiques and gamer feedback, the study delves into the dynamics of transcultural communication within game development. The critique underscores the sensitivity of fan communities to the subtle cultural variances manifested in the localisation of *GI*, suggesting that the game's ability to achieve transcultural appeal may be constrained by the degree to which players are prepared to overlook localisation inconsistencies and cultural discrepancies.

### **Text analysis of game subtitles**

In localisation text translation serves dual functions: it is both a linguistic transformation to aid comprehension, so seeking fidelity of meaning, and a vector for the dissemination of cultural elements (Liu, 2023). The aim is for the original Chinese expression and meaning to become accessible and interpretable by a heterogeneous audience, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries (Frasca, 2001).

A first example is Zhongli's exchange with the Traveler, where he asks that character for an opinion about the Moonchase Festival name. The Traveler's response in simplified Chinese "意境甚美，时节又佳" encapsulates an aestheticism deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese cultural celebrations, signifying both the ambience and its situational

appropriateness. This expression is steeped in cultural specificity, suggesting a celebration of both the festival's ambiance and its timely occurrence. In stark contrast, the English translation to 'Evocative and seasonal' is noticeably succinct (Figure 7). While this brevity may capture the intended meaning in broad strokes, it arguably strips the phrase of its cultural richness and depth, potentially leading to a diminution of the original's aesthetic and temporal connotations. This translation raises questions about the extent to which cultural nuances are preserved or altered and the impact this has on the non-native audience's perception of the source culture.



**Figure 7.** Comparison of Chinese and English dialogue between deities and players in the Moonchase Festival. Adapted from a screenshot by Bilibili user @Ucean. Retrieved from <https://www.bilibili.com/read/cv13412482/>.

Furthermore, analysing the translation of the "culture-loaded term" (Cai, 2022). The term "逐月" (Moonchase), a culture-laden ideograph, embodies complex layers of meaning that extend beyond a simple lexical equivalence. In the Chinese context, "逐" evokes a sense of "aspiration" or "affiliation," nuances deeply rooted in the traditional cultural connotations of the Mid-Autumn Festival. Such associations are almost instinctively understood by Chinese players, informed by a rich tapestry of cultural narratives (Feng & Lu, 2022). However, the translation to "Moonchase" for an English-speaking audience, while literal, may inadvertently obscure these cultural intricacies. The attempt to convey the same sentiment through the phrase "the heart is wont to follow" remains a commendable effort to sidestep potential cultural misinterpretations. Nonetheless, one must question whether such a translation, albeit well-intentioned, truly encapsulates the original term's emotional depth and cultural significance. Without the underpinning context of Chinese festival culture, non-Chinese players are likely to apprehend "Moonchase" with a reduced sense of its cultural resonance, thus experiencing a diluted interpretation of the festival's spirit.

In these examples, the translation of the Chinese language aims to foster deeper cultural understanding of the "逐月" (Moonchase) festival and its rituals. At its best, the translation achieves a form of cultural transference by intricately weaving Chinese aesthetic elements and emotional meaning into the gameplay, even where the connotations and mythic elements are not easily translatable. In this GI, the serves as a

conduit for cultural storytelling and crafting a 'sufficient reality' that encapsulates the essence of its source culture.

*Genshin Impact's* localisation extends beyond mere linguistic translation to encompass other dimensions tailored to resonate with a global audience. Among them, the fidelity of character representation has triggered debate about emotional differences in characterization through voice-over and expressive traits.

## The Contested Terrain of "Genshin Impact's" English Localisation

### *Fidelity of Character Representation*

#### 1) Game Reviews

The global English localisation of *GI* has elicited a range of critiques from English-speaking media outlets. These reviews underscore the multifaceted challenges in adapting the game, covering areas from artistic expression and sound engineering to linguistic nuance. Notable critics such as Sisi Jiang (2021) and Nathan Grayson (2021) from Kotaku, Abhishek Mallick (2021) from Sportskeeda and James Davenport (2020) from PC Gamer have each delved into these issues.

Jiang (2021) zeroes in on the issue of character portrayal, noting that the English voice-over in version 2.1 transforms familiar characters into "unrelatable strangers" who sound like "amine tropes" to the extent that she can't enjoy the English language pack (Figure 8). For example, she argues the English adaptation of characters Baal and Sara dilutes their nurturing traits, rendering them as mere "girlboss" authority figures. This observation brings to light the gap where the English localisation misses the emotional nuances and intricate relationships embedded in the original Chinese version.

By **Sisi Jiang** Published September 7, 2021 | Comments (81)



Illustration: miHoYo

Whenever I download *Genshin Impact* onto a new device, the first thing I do immediately is download the Chinese voice pack. I'm not a snob about dubs versus subs. The problem is that the English voice over turns my favorite characters into **unrelatable strangers** that I barely recognize.

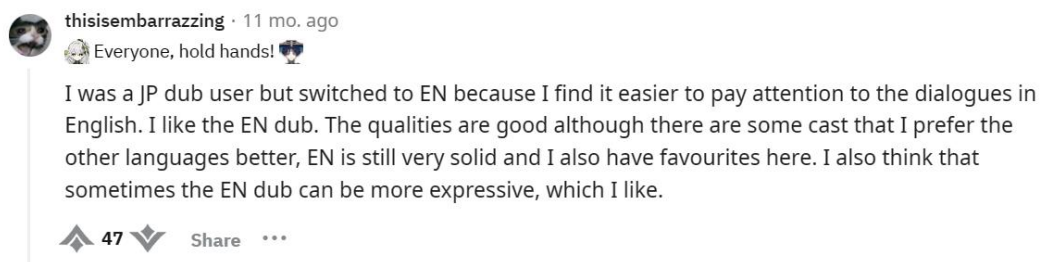
**Figure 8.** Criticism of Genshin Impact's English voice acting by critic Sisi Jiang. Adapted from an article on Kotaku. Retrieved from <https://kotaku.com/i-still-cant-listen-to-genshin-impacts-inaccurate-engli-1847630830>.

James Davenport (2020) from PC Gamer also finds the player guide Paimon's English voice-over to be grating, describing it as a "shrill toddler fairy" that hampers the immersive experience. Similarly, Nathan Grayson (2021) from Kotaku uncovers community unrest over a subtle shift in Barbara's voice-over, even though it was created by the same voice actor. Though a minor change, it led to significant player backlash in gaming forums, underlining the crucial role voice-overs play in shaping the personality of characters and the gaming experience as a whole.

Such review critiques highlight the characterisation challenges posed by the English localisation of *GI*. However, these expert opinions form just one layer in a multifaceted dialogue about the complexities and implications of character localisation. Feedback from gamers on social media platforms and game forums provides a grassroots perspective that complements the professional critiques, shedding light on how the English localisation of *GI* resonates with its primary audience.

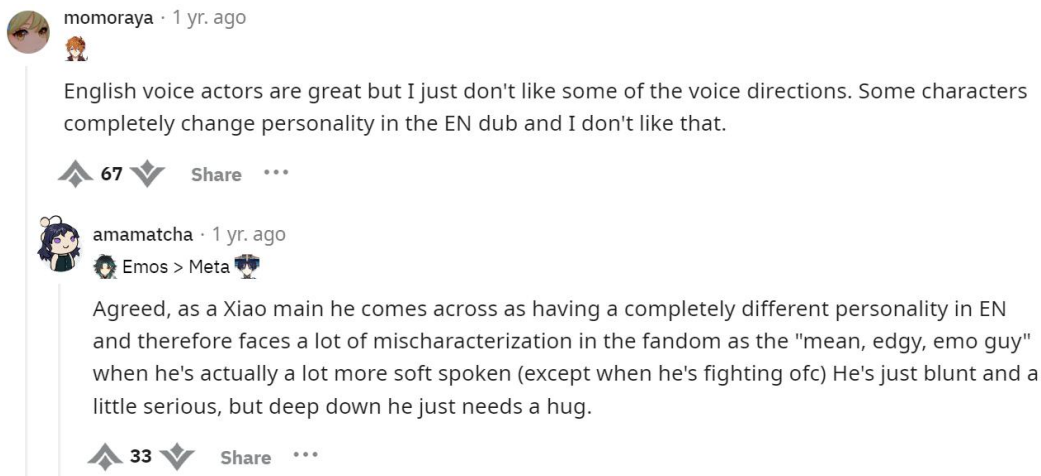
## 2) Gamer commentary

Some players appreciate the expressiveness and quality of the English dub. For instance, *@thisisembarrassing* mentions (Figure 9), "I like the EN dub. The qualities are good although there are some casts that I prefer the other languages better, EN is still very solid and I also have favourites here," and *@Gradorade* affirms, "...it's pretty good overall, most of the characters' voices I really like." These statements indicate a level of satisfaction which contributes to these players' engagement and understanding of the dialogue and can be perceived as a partial validation of the game developers' commercial aspirations to reach a global audience.



**Figure 9.** Critical opinions on the English voice-over in the game, from users on the Reddit platform. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin\\_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what\\_you\\_guys\\_think\\_about\\_english\\_voice\\_over/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what_you_guys_think_about_english_voice_over/).

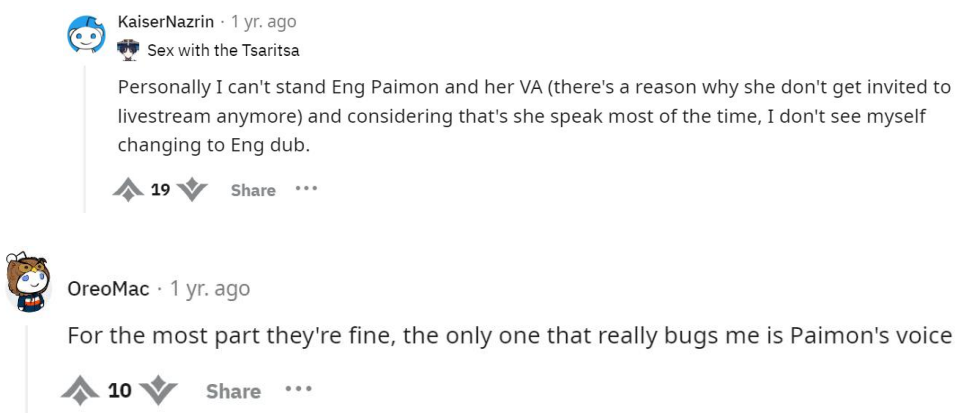
However, in games forums there's a noticeable discontent concerning misrepresentation of characters' personalities and the incongruity in translation, as can be seen in comments by *@momoraya* and *@amamatcha* (Figure 10). "Some characters completely change personality in the EN dub and I don't like that," and "..... comes across as having a completely different personality in EN,". While expressing personal opinion, these critiques underline the risks of misinterpretation that miHoYo incurs when adapting a culturally rich game for a different linguistic and cultural audience.



**Figure 10.** Critical opinions on the English voice-over in the game, from users on the Reddit platform. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin\\_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what\\_you\\_guys\\_think\\_about\\_english\\_voice\\_over/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what_you_guys_think_about_english_voice_over/).

The reception of Paimon, the player's initial guide and NPC, has important implications for the player's engagement with the game. While many English voice actors in the game receive positive feedback, as noted earlier, Paimon's English voiceover emerges as an exception, with multiple players noting its detrimental impact on their game experience. User *@KaiserNazrin* succinctly sums this up, stating, "Personally I can't stand Eng Paimon and her VA" (Figure 11). This sentiment is echoed by *@OreoMac*, who finds Paimon's voice to be "the only one that really bugs me" (Figure 12), and *@hinasora* also mentions that "Paimon is annoying in all languages except CN."

The criticism around Paimon's English voice-over illustrates how even minor elements can have a pronounced impact on player reception and, consequently, engagement and satisfaction (see Figure 11), with one gamer *@KaiserNazrin* noting they will not be playing the English language version. This highlights a tension between the aspiration for global appeal and transcultural dialogue, and the maintenance of cultural fidelity in characterisation. The adverse reactions to Paimon's voice-over could be interpreted as a failure in the developers' broader objective to offer a game that resonates on both transcultural and commercial levels.



**Figure 11 & 12.** Critical opinions on the English voice-over in the game, from users on the Reddit platform. Retrieved from [https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin\\_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what\\_you\\_guys\\_think\\_about\\_english\\_voice\\_over/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Genshin_Impact/comments/ysajg1/what_you_guys_think_about_english_voice_over/).

The player reception to the English localisation of *GI* reveals a complex landscape of cultural interpretation that is far from monolithic. While some elements of the localisation effort appear to be in line with the game developer's commercial ambitions, the breadth of criticism suggests areas where these objectives are not being fully met. It implies that the challenge of localizing a culturally hybrid game is fraught with complexities, ranging from the preservation of cultural nuance in expression to the fidelity of character voice and personality traits.

## CONCLUSION

By dissecting the layers of cultural hybridity and localisation in *Genshin Impact*, this dissertation shows that these strategies are far from mere translational exercises, serving instead as complex interplays between commerce, cultural norms, and nationalism. As a Chinese cultural export, *GI* embodies a dual aspiration: on one hand, the developer miHoYo reflects an underlying aim to promote Chinese cultural history, concepts, ideals and values, as is particularly evident in its domestic edition. On the other hand, it seeks global appeal through incorporating in the game design and mechanics elements from Japanese and North American gaming products, as well as cultural representations from Indigenous cultural groups and ethnic groups in Africa and the Middle East, even where these result in audience backlash.

The dynamics of cultural hegemony and contraflows are palpable in the controversies surrounding the game's design, which is marked by instances of cultural pastiche and appropriation. For example, the amalgamation of disparate cultural motifs without context or the superficial treatment of cultural symbols has drawn gamer criticism for insensitivity. Such design choices have been perceived as disrespectful by some game reviewers and players, leading to calls for boycotts. The debate centres on the fine line between cultural homage and appropriation, and whether the game's melding of cultures serves as a celebration of diversity or an exploitative mishmash for commercial gain. However, the emergence of the *#DoBetterMiHoYo* discussion could suggest game fans want the developers to succeed in its transnational cultural project, a possibility that requires further study.

This dissertation has also addressed a sometimes-overlooked dimension of game localisation, the emotional nuances conveyed by translation, voice over and characterisation, to examine how transcultural communication is a complicated terrain in game development. The analysis of professional game reviews and player reception suggests that fan communities are alert to subtle cultural differences in the localisation of *GI* and so the game's transcultural commercial appeal is limited by players' willingness to accept or ignore dissonance and deficit in localisation.

As a case study, *Genshin Impact* illuminates the multifaceted challenges and dilemmas faced by developers like miHoYo in tailoring content for divergent sociocultural and legislative landscapes. By examining these elements of transnational cultural production, the research provides not just a microscopic insight into the cultural debates that surround the evolution of *Genshin Impact* as a global commodity, but a macroscopic view into the evolving paradigms of cultural representation and commercial strategy in the realm of global video gaming.

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