

Deciphering the Journey: Translating Cultural Metaphors in Black Myth: Wukong for Cross-Cultural Communication

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Abstract

Black Myth: Wukong (BMW), China's pioneering AAA game targeting global audiences, faces the significant challenge of translating culturally embedded metaphors rooted in the classic Journey to the West for English-speaking players. This research analyzes the strategies and effectiveness of BMW's English translations in conveying uniquely Chinese cultural elements, particularly focusing on the concept and nomenclature of yaoguai (妖怪). The study reveals that Game Science effectively employs foreignization by transliterating "yaoguai," preserving its cultural specificity and distinguishing it from inadequate Western equivalents like "monster" or "genie," thereby reconstructing a distinct Chinese cultural discourse. However, the analysis identifies critical shortcomings: a homogenizing tendency to label all adversaries as "Guai" overlooks the nuanced distinction between Guai (怪) and Jing (精), and the translation of culturally specific official titles attached to yaoguai (e.g., "Rat Governor" for Shu Sikong) often fails to accurately reflect their historical context and hierarchical connotations within Chinese feudal bureaucracy. While BMW's translation successfully introduces the unique concept of yaoguai, oversimplification in handling subcategories and historical titles risks diluting cultural depth. This study argues that meticulous attention to these subtle distinctions and contextually accurate adaptation of culturally loaded terms are crucial for Chinese AAA games to fulfill their potential as effective vehicles for global cultural dissemination.

Keywords

Black Myth: Wukong; Cultural Translation; Cultural Metaphors; Cross-Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

On August 3, 2024, the State Council of the PRC (SCPRC) released the Opinions on Promoting High-Quality Development of Service Consumption, with its fourth point emphasizing the need to "enhance the quality of online literature, online perfor-

mances, online games, radio, television, and online audiovisual content... and encourage the development of new formats such as immersive experiences, scripted entertainment, digital art, and online broadcasting” (SCPRC. 2024. (23):21-24). Endored by national policies, Black Myth: Wukong (BMW) attracted widespread attention from gamers across China even before its release. Following its launch, it garnered praise from official media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency and People's Daily. With its default language set to Simplified Chinese, the game won the favor of a broad domestic audience.

As the first independently developed AAA game from China aimed at a global audience (AAA denotes significant investments of money, resources, and time), the English translations of BMW have drawn substantial attention. Rooted in the classic Chinese literary masterpiece Journey to the West, the game must navigate the challenge of respecting the original work and preserving the essence of Chinese culture while producing language and content suitable for English-speaking audiences. Achieving this balance is critical to ensuring that English players can enjoy an experience as profoundly and aesthetically rich as their Chinese counterparts, thereby influencing the game's reception abroad.

This research reveals that BMW incorporates a vast array of uniquely Chinese cultural elements, such as personal names, place names, and anecdotes, all of which carry metaphorical meanings deeply embedded in the Chinese cultural context. These metaphors often exhibit strong exclusivity, posing challenges in translation. The translation strategies employed for these elements must carefully consider the English-speaking cultural context and draw from Western mythology to ensure high-quality output. However, the translation of certain names and terms must also respect the cultural characteristics of the original journey to the West and the historical period depicted in the game. Analyzing these metaphors offers insight into the creative decisions made during the game's production, shedding light on the cultural core that BMW seeks to convey in its global outreach.

2. Literature Review about Black Myth: Wukong

Black Myth: Wukong, as the first independently developed AAA title from China to capture global attention, sparked extensive discussions in both academic and industry circles even before its release. Within specific research domains, studies on the game have focused predominantly on its role as a digital medium for cultural heritage, its strategies for cross-cultural communication, and its cultural adaptability and commercialization in the global gaming market.

In terms of cultural heritage and promotion, Shen (2024) identified three cultural paradoxes evident in BMW during its journey of cultural inheritance and globalization: the simplification and alienation of cultural symbols, homogenization risks in cultural adaptability, and the dilution of cultural connotations through commercialization. These issues highlight potential cultural risks faced by Chinese entertain-

ment products in the global market. Li (2024) chooses BMW as a case to illustrate how the integration of culture and digital technology drives transformation in the cultural industry, positioning video games as a vital medium for showcasing the influence of Chinese culture. Liang et al. (2024) emphasized the game's success in leveraging local cultural resources to have a significant impact on the global market, highlighting the potential of Chinese cultural products within the "culture+" strategy. Xu (2024) reported that the default use of simplified Chinese and the inclusion of pinyin annotations for culturally specific terms reflect the confidence of Chinese developers in presenting local culture on the global stage. This approach not only piqued international players' interest in Chinese culture but also positioned the game as a powerful tool for enhancing China's cultural soft power.

With respect to cross-cultural communication, Mao (2024) noted that one of the factors contributing to the success of a game's trailers lies in its localized translation strategies. However, Mao's research focused solely on trailers, and it should be noted that many original translations were altered in the released version of the game—a topic that warrants further exploration. Liang et al. (2024) discuss the game's use of traditional Chinese folk music in its soundtrack, highlighting its flexible application to provide international players with a direct sensory experience of Chinese culture. This sensory-driven cultural communication not only enhances player immersion but also significantly increases the game's effectiveness in cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, Shen (2024) delves into the cultural adaptability of BMW in the global market. To cater to the preferences of players in different regions, the game employs regionalized designs, presenting differentiated cultural content across various markets. This strategy not only mitigates the crisis of cultural homogenization but also preserves the uniqueness of Chinese culture within a diverse global context.

In summary, existing studies have provided multifaceted analyses of BMW in areas such as cultural heritage, cross-cultural communication, and cultural adaptability and commercialization in the global gaming market. However, current research predominantly focuses on games' promotional materials, with limited exploration of cross-cultural communication in the context of different in-game translations. This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing some English translations of BMW, focusing on the transplantation and transmission effects of cultural metaphors embedded in the original text. This study seeks to fill a critical void in the literature on the game's cross-cultural dissemination.

3. Chinese Political Symbolism and Immortal Cultural Connotations: An Analysis of Yaoguai Name Translations

Black Myth: Wukong is a comprehensive digital game where elements such as artistic scenes, character dialogs, background music, and monster design intertwine to create an integrated gaming experience. This paper analyzes the cross-cultural

transmission effects of English translations, incorporating other modalities that contribute to the metaphorical construction of the Chinese cultural context and offering a holistic perspective on the game's global impact.

As an essential part of the gameplay experience, the protagonist, "The Destined One," must battle a variety of yaoguai during the quest to recover Monkey King's "Six Relics". The term yaoguai is a uniquely Chinese concept deeply rooted in the nation's cultural and historical traditions. Ancient texts provide early documentation of yaoguai, which, from a phenomenological perspective, often refer to abnormal or supernatural occurrences. When low levels of productivity limit human understanding, inexplicable phenomena are collectively termed yaoguai. For instance, the *Book of Han* (Ban, 2012, p. 2437) records the following: "Over time, yaoguai appeared frequently in the palace. The king consulted Sui, who interpreted them as signs of grave misfortune, foretelling the palace's desolation."

From a symbolic perspective, yaoguai are often portrayed as spiritual beings—plants or animals transformed into sentient forms through cultivation. Essentially, they are anthropomorphic representations of anomalies. In search of the Sacred, Gan (2022) described yaoguai as manifestations of vital essence attached to objects. When the inner energy is disrupted, external transformations occur, reflecting the interrelation of form, spirit, energy, and matter.

Moreover, the transformative process through which yaoguai attains form closely aligns with Taoist principles. Taoism asserts that the Dao can be realized through cultivation and that attaining the Dao enables one to ascend to immortality. In this context, yaoguai represents an intermediate stage in the path to immortality or failed attempts at achieving this state, embodying the core ideals and practices of Taoist philosophy.

As BMW draws inspiration from *Journey to the West*, the game inherently reflects a fusion of Buddhist and Taoist elements. The source material includes deities from both traditions, as well as yaoguai, which often serve as celestial pets or mounts punished and cast to Earth, such as the Yellow Wind Guai or the Azure Ox Spirit.

Given this rich cultural and religious significance, the translation of yaoguai must emphasize its unique Chinese characteristics. Game Science, the development team behind BMW, opted to transliterate the term YAOGUAI, effectively preserving its cultural identity and highlighting its inherent untranslatability. The term yaoguai cannot be equated to Western concepts such as "monster" or "genie."

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, a "monster" is defined as "an imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening," whereas a "genie" is described as "a magical spirit, originally in Arab traditional stories, who does or provides whatever the person who controls it asks." These definitions fail to capture the nuances of yaoguai:

1. Yaoguai are not necessarily grotesque or menacing. For instance, the game's Yaoguai King "Kang-Jin Star" is depicted as indistinguishable in appearance from a

human woman.

2. Yaoguai are autonomous entities rather than subservient entities. In the game, yaoguai are either linked to celestial beings or are self-cultivated; they are far from controllable and may even prey on humans.

Thus, neither “monster” nor “genie” adequately encapsulates the characteristics of yaoguai. By adopting a strategy of foreignization through transliteration, the translation preserves the term's cultural uniqueness, offering international audiences a deeper understanding of its distinct Chinese context.

In *BMW*, battling various yaoguai forms an essential part of the gameplay experience. However, the translation of specific yaoguai names sometimes falls short of fully reflecting their cultural nuances. One notable issue is the “one-size-fits-all” approach, where all enemies are uniformly labeled Guai. In the game, not all adversaries are yaoguai; some are Jing, or Spirit—for instance, the Spider Spirit (Zhizhu Jing) or Ginseng Spirit (Renshen Jing). There are nuanced differences between guai and jing: while both undergo cultivation to transform, jing refers to guai, which has attained enlightenment through the natural forces of heaven and earth, often taking on a humanoid form. This distinction is visually reflected in the game: the ginseng spirit and Lingzhi (*Ganoderma lucidum*'s pronunciation in Chinese) spirit appear as humanoid figures with ginseng or lingzhi atop their heads, whereas enemies such as wolf scouts or wolf fighters align more closely with traditional yaoguai, resembling beasts imitating human behaviors. In the *Journey to the West* translation by Anthony C. Yu (2012), the White Bone Spirit (Bai Gu Jing) is rendered “monster-spirit,” effectively distinguishing jing from generic yaoguai. Applying a similar approach, translating Guai as “Yaoguai” and Jing as “Yaoguai-spirit” would better capture their respective characteristics.

Furthermore, the game features yaoguai with official titles, reflecting feudal cultural elements, such as Shu Jinwei (Rat Imperial Guard), Shu Sikong (Rat Governor), and Shu Duwei (Rat Captain), are presented in the third chapter. These titles might appear as self-styled designations for amusement, but the game reveals that these characters were originally officials and soldiers of the fictional Sahali Kingdom who were transformed into mice through dark magic. Translating these official titles requires careful consideration of their authenticity and corresponding terms in the target language.

The translations provided by Game Science—“Rat Imperial Guard,” “Rat Governor,” and “Rat Captain”—vary in accuracy. The first title, “Rat Imperial Guard,” works well, as feudal imperial guards also exist in Western cultures. However, “Rat Governor” is less appropriate. The historical context of *Journey to the West* corresponds to the Tang Dynasty, during which the Sikong title was a ceremonial, nonfunctional position, highlighting the tension between imperial and ministerial authority in Chinese feudal politics. The term “governor” in English typically denotes a role with actual administrative power. According to the narrative,

the rat was originally a scholar at the Royal Academy who received the honorary title of Sikong during a reshuffle of court positions, aligning with the Tang Dynasty's use of Sikong as a symbolic title. To reflect this, "Rat Governor Emeritus" is proposed as a more accurate translation. The term "emeritus" conveys an honorary title retained after retirement, fitting Mouse Sicang's background as a powerless official.

The translation of the "Rat Captain" involves a different issue. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "captain" can denote a military rank, such as an army captain in the UK or the U.S. However, the game also features a character named "You Shilang", translated as "Weasel Captain." While this works for Shilang, who self-styled the title and leads a small group, it obscures the background of Shu Duwei, who was appointed by the king of the Sahali Kingdom. After the Tang Dynasty Duwei position was compared with equivalent military ranks in Western feudal systems, "Rat Lieutenant Colonel" was recommended as a more fitting translation. This choice aligns with the historical role of Duwei as a mid-level military officer that commands troops, providing international players with a clearer understanding of the Tang military structure.

In summary, BMW draws heavily from *Journey to the West*, incorporating Chinese philosophical and religious elements that distinguish its yaoguai from Western concepts such as "monsters" or "genies." Adopting a foreignization strategy that retains the term yaoguai in Chinese pinyin successfully differentiates Chinese yaoguai and emphasizes their Buddhist-Taoist hybridity and untranslatability, contributing to the reconstruction of Chinese yaoguai discourse. However, in handling specific categories such as Jing versus Guai and yaoguai with official titles, the current translation approach often applies oversimplified, uniform solutions. To establish a discourse on Chinese yaoguai, highlighting these subtle distinctions and carefully adapting historically grounded official titles to achieve accurate and culturally resonant translation are essential.

4. Conclusion

The release of *Black Myth: Wukong* not only heralds a new era for Chinese video games but also serves as a significant breakthrough in China's international communication strategy. For overseas audiences, whether Chinese AAA games can effectively convey nuanced, and at times untranslatable, metaphors rooted in Chinese culture to target-language players—while respecting the pragmatic norms of the target language—through translation strategies such as adaptation, borrowing, and paraphrasing, determines the extent to which these games fulfill their function of global cultural dissemination. It also defines whether the cultural depth of the games matches their content quality.

Although *Black Myth: Wukong* has achieved remarkable milestones for both the Chinese and the global game industries, many aspects of its English translations

warrant further scrutiny and improvement. In particular, many words contain cultural metaphors and cultural exclusivity. If traditional cross-cultural communication thinking is adhered to for localization, the cultural essence of the content will be greatly lost. Therefore, sometimes, choosing cultural annotations or no localization might be a better option.

This paper uses English translations in *Black Myth, Wukong*, as a case study and conducts a comprehensive analysis of the translation of *Yaoguai* and its impact on cultural dissemination. Through this analysis, the paper explores how language translation can preserve and enhance the essence of traditional culture in cross-cultural transmission, providing both practical insights and theoretical guidance for the global dissemination of Chinese AAA games.

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