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# Multimodal Aesthetics and Cultural Discount: Reconstructing Traditional Culture in *Black Myth: Wukong*

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## Abstract

Video games have emerged as powerful transnational media for cultural dissemination in the digital age. *Black Myth: Wukong*, a Chinese action role-playing game, exemplifies this shift by embedding Chinese mythology, aesthetics, and philosophy within a technologically advanced gaming environment. Drawing on reviews from non-Chinese players on Steam, this study investigates the cultural discount that occurs when traditional Chinese visual and auditory elements are decoded outside their native context. Using a multimodal framework, it analyzes how material and immaterial cultural symbols, diegetic and non-diegetic soundscapes, are received and potentially misinterpreted by global audiences. Findings suggest that despite the technical excellence and cross-cultural gameplay appeal, many culturally embedded signs are flattened or misunderstood by non-Chinese players due to differing semiotic repertoires and limited interpretive readiness. The study concludes that technological fidelity alone is insufficient for effective cultural transmission; instead, meaningful cross-cultural engagement requires scaffolding mechanisms to bridge gaps in symbolic accessibility. These insights contribute to broader debates on cultural translation in digital media and the globalization of Chinese cultural products.

## Keywords

*Black Myth: Wukong*; cultural discount; multimodality; Chinese culture

## 1. Introduction

Video games have evolved beyond their entertainment function to become "hypertextual media" that embody and transmit national cultural identities. Newzoo predicts that the global gaming market will reach $213.3 billion in 2027, with action role-playing games (ARPGs) occupying a dominant position (Newzoo, 2024). A notable example is *Black Myth: Wukong* (hereafter *BMW*), an ARPG developed by the Chinese studio Game Science. On its launch day, the game reached a peak of 2.2 million concurrent players on Steam, setting a new record for the global dissemination of Chinese AAA games (Wu, 2024). Drawing inspiration from the Chinese literary classic *Journey to the West* (hereafter *JTW*), *BMW* reimagines the story of Sun Wukong after the pilgrimage has ended. In the retelling, Wukong renounces his Buddhahood, becomes a fugitive of the celestial court, and is ultimately dismembered into six parts. Players take on the role of a "Destined One," retracing the pilgrimage route, battling demon kings, recovering Wukong's six bodily components, and uncovering hidden truths within a divine cosmos. Leveraging the capabilities of Unreal Engine 5, the game delivers a visually striking experience that blends traditional Chinese opera costumes with

elements of Eastern fantasy aesthetics, alongside an immersive soundscape rooted in Chinese sonic traditions. *BMW* not only marks a significant technological breakthrough for China's gaming industry but also exemplifies a broader shift in how traditional Chinese culture is being mediated and reinterpreted in the digital age.

Scholars have acknowledged *BMW*'s cultural potential: Yuan Wenjie (2024) highlights *BMW*'s potential to reconstruct Chinese cultural identity; Luo Ying and Han Chang-Wan (2024) examine the interplay between traditional aesthetics and digital narrative structures in *BMW*; Yuan Shaoyu (2024) views *BMW* as a cultural diplomacy tool, promoting China's national identity and historical narratives globally. Nonetheless, challenges in cross-cultural communication remain: metaphors that are readily understood by Chinese players (hereafter CPs) often appear obscure or perplexing to non-Chinese players (hereafter NCPs). This study draws on reviews from NCPs on the Steam to examine the cultural discount when decoding visual and auditory elements in *BMW*. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the limitations inherent in reconstructing traditional culture through digital media.

## 2. Data and Analytical Approach

### 2.1 Data: Reviews of *BMW* on Steam

The data for this study is drawn from Steam, a major third-party platform that compiles regional statistics, pricing history, and user reviews for games. As of May 22, 2025, *BMW* has received a total of 1,148,131 user reviews, of which 4.83% (55,521) were submitted by NCPs. The NCPs' reviews form the primary data source of this study, which aims to investigate how effectively the game's embedded Chinese cultural elements are received, interpreted, or potentially misinterpreted in cross-cultural contexts.

### 2.2 Analytical Approach: A Multimodal Framework for Cultural Communication

This study adopts a multimodal theoretical framework to examine the cultural encoding strategies embedded in the game's visual and auditory dimensions (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The visual dimension includes the representation of both material (tangible) and immaterial (intangible) cultural symbols, such as character design, traditional costumes, architecture, iconography, and ritual motifs, that reflect Chinese aesthetic and philosophical traditions (Zhao & Jiang, 2025). The auditory dimension is approached through the lens of soundscape, a concept bridging environmental acoustics and media studies, which encompasses all sonic elements within a space and their perceptual effects. In gaming contexts, soundscapes shape immersion through the spatial, temporal, and cultural qualities of both diegetic (in-world) and non-diegetic (external) sounds (Zizza, 2024). Ultimately, both visual and auditory elements are treated as cultural signs whose meanings may become obscured in cross-cultural communication, leading to potential gaps between the signifier (form) and the signified (content).

**Table 1. Multimodal framework for cultural communication**

| Modality | Type of Cultural Element | Example from Game | Function in Cultural Translation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Visual | Material symbol | Traditional opera-inspired costumes, architecture, characters, etc. | Visually represent Chinese heritage and aesthetics |
| | Immaterial symbol | Buddhist symbolism, mythological motifs, etc. | Encode spiritual/philosophical values through visual metaphors |
| Auditory | Diegetic soundscape | Dialogue, ambient background sounds, object collision sounds, etc. | Drive the plot and evoke emotion through culturally rich cues |
| | Non-diegetic soundscape | Background music, voice-over narration, level cue etc. | Enhance immersion and evoke cultural atmosphere |

## 3. Findings

### 3.1 Review Demographics in Steam

The data reveal a pronounced imbalance in the distribution of user reviews between CPs and NCPs: the former contribute the overwhelming majority of reviews, accounting for 95.17% (N=1,092,610) of the total, while the latter

represent only 4.83% (N=55,521). This dominance can be attributed to two primary factors: first, CPs have an inherent cognitive familiarity and emotional resonance with the game's source material, *JTW*; second, the game's global release remains in its early stages, and NCP engagement has yet to reach full scale. Despite the 19.7-fold disparity in review volume, NCPs still recorded a high approval rate of 96.26%, closely mirroring the 96.68% approval from CPs. This suggests that the game's core mechanics—particularly its combat system and visual presentation—exhibit strong cross-cultural commensurability. Nevertheless, the slightly higher negative review rate among NCPs (3.74% vs. 3.32%) may point to cultural or narrative comprehension challenges.

**Table 2. Review demographics in Steam for *BMW***

| Player type | Review count | Review share | Positive rate | Negative rate |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| CPs | 1,092,610 | 95.17% | 96.68% | 3.32% |
| NCPs | 55,521 | 4.83% | 96.26% | 3.74% |

## 3.2 Material Cultural Symbols

Material symbols convey cultural meaning through tangible, perceptible objects such as architectural settings, character designs, and weaponry. *BMW* utilizes Unreal Engine 5's Lumen lighting and Nanite geometry to digitally recreate 36 historic sites, including the Yungang Grottoes and the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda. Notably, the Dazu Rock Carvings model exceeds one billion polygons, meticulously capturing ancient craftsmanship and animating the stone reliefs with dynamic "breathing" effects through real-time lighting. This fusion of technological fidelity and interactivity transforms static heritage into immersive, explorable spaces. However, high technical accuracy does not fully prevent cultural discount. For instance, the digital replication of Shanxi's Yu Huang Temple celestial deities often appears to NCPs as mere fantasy-style decorations (Review 1), rather than as carriers of ancient astronomy and spiritual beliefs. Similarly, the ritual symbolism of harmony embedded in Liao Dynasty timber architecture is frequently reduced to a visual spectacle (Review 2).

In character design, *BMW* reinterprets traditional symbols within a contemporary framework. The "Yellow Wind Monster" preserves its *JTW* beastly traits while transforming into a sandstorm through particle effects. Its disintegration into Dunhuang mural-style flowing sand evokes classical motifs and modern battle aesthetics. This "form-spirit separation" revitalizes cultural symbols digitally but risks semantic dilution, as the striking sandstorm effect draws players' attention to combat mechanics, overshadowing the embedded Buddhist cosmology (Review 3).

Weapon effects integrate traditional Chinese ink animation aesthetics into gameplay. The "Huntian Ribbon" employs fluid dynamics to simulate silk movement, rendering brushwork from *The Scroll of Eighty-Seven Immortals* into real-time, physics-based animation. Its ink-diffusion edge effects evoke classical Chinese painting's poetic sensibility. Yet NCPs often perceive these as stylized "magic effects," detached from their cultural significance (Review 4); some even compare them to rune effects in *The Witcher 3*, stripping away the original cultural context (Review 5).

## 3.3 Intangible Cultural Symbols

Intangible cultural symbols refer to signs that convey meaning without a physical form and cannot be directly perceived. In *BMW*, both narrative and levels are deeply informed by traditional Chinese philosophical thought. However, due to differences in cultural cognition, NCPs often struggle to decode the metaphorical signs embedded in the game. This results not only in the misinterpretation of symbolic content but also in a disconnect from the underlying cultural values being communicated.

"Yellow Wind Ridge" level features a visual montage of torn prayer flags and damaged Buddha statues. Players are required to reassemble Sanskrit fragments to unlock hidden storylines—an interactive design inspired by the fragmented manuscripts of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves. This approach encourages active cultural interpretation rather than passive consumption. However, many NCPs, lacking background knowledge, rarely engage with these hidden elements, exposing a cultural gap in narrative comprehension (Review 6).

Similarly, "Delight in Sight" level uses high-saturation neon colors to symbolize the temptations of desire. Upon defeating the boss, the scene transitions into monochrome ink-wash color, metaphorically representing the Buddhist notion of "cutting off the six senses" as a path toward spiritual purification. Yet interpretive divergences arise: most NCPs interpret the color transition merely as a visual marker of level completion, overlooking its symbolic reference to spiritual transcendence (Review 7).

### 3.4 Diegetic Soundscape

Diegetic soundscape refers to auditory elements that exist within the fictional world and are perceptible to characters, such as dialogue and sound effects. These sounds typically have identifiable physical sources, follow the internal logic of the narrative world, and can trigger character responses.

A "dialectal soundscape library" is constructed in *BMW* to digitally recreate the linguistic diversity of *JTW*. Dialects—such as the sharp cadence of Sichuan-Chongqing speech or the somber tone of Shaanxi—shape character regional identities. For instance, the Bashu mountain deity's speech (120-250 Hz) contrasts sharply with the Central Plains monk's steady tone (90-150 Hz). While NCPs may detect tonal variation, they often struggle to interpret the embedded cultural meaning. The Shaanxi dialect used by the Earth God, intended to evoke the stoicism of the Loess Plateau, is dismissed as a "strange accent" by NCPs (Review 8).

Misinterpretation is more pronounced in the reception of sound effects. The Golden Cudgel's acoustic design—modeled on the timbre of tempered steel—uses high-frequency harmonics (6-8 kHz) and low-frequency resonance (80-120 Hz) to evoke the majesty of temple bells. Yet, many NCPs reduce it to a mere "magical effect". The tightening headband spell (8 kHz) produces a persistent ringing that, for CPs, evokes "authoritarian constraint"; however, NCPs frequently misread it as a "psychic attack" or "mental damage," missing its allegorical significance entirely (Review 9).

### 3.5 Non-diegetic Soundscape

Non-diegetic sound encompasses audio elements external to the game world, intended solely for the player, such as background music and level cues. These sounds lack physical sources within the game and do not affect character behavior.

Background music in *BMW* frequently employs traditional Chinese instruments—guqin, suona, pipa—to evoke Daoist aesthetics of clarity and transcendence. However, in the absence of corresponding frameworks within Western musical traditions, such sounds are often reduced to mere ambient sound rather than carriers of cultural meaning (Review 10). A more revealing case is the fusion of Shaanxi folk narration with female vocals from the Hexi Corridor. While many NCPs appreciate the mystical tone, few grasp the intended metaphor of "Yellow Earth and Heaven" (Review 11).

Level cues similarly struggle to convey cultural meaning across cultural boundaries. When the "Seventy-Two Transformations" achievement is unlocked, the game plays the electronic motif from the 1986 TV adaptation of *JTW*, sparking nostalgic recognition among CPs but is typically interpreted by NCPs as merely a reward sound (Review 12). Likewise, the health restoration cue—sampled from the distinct chime of Song dynasty qingbai porcelain—is designed to evoke the symbolism of "celestial elixirs". While NCPs may correctly identify the sound's functional purpose, they frequently fail to associate it with the intended cultural imagery linking porcelain and traditional Chinese alchemical practices (Review 13).

## 4. Discussion

This study highlights a paradox in digital cultural transmission: technological fidelity does not guarantee cultural intelligibility. Despite *BMW*'s hyper-realistic representations of material heritage, many culturally embedded signs are misread or flattened by NCPs. This disconnect is intensified when visual cues, though authentic, are decoded through external interpretive frameworks shaped by players' prior media experiences.

Sound design further reveals asymmetrical decoding patterns. While CPs draw on shared cultural memory to recognize embedded meanings in both diegetic and non-diegetic audio, NCPs frequently interpret these cues through surface-level or genre-based conventions. Hall's encoding/decoding model illustrates how receivers lacking relevant cultural schemas default to dominant or negotiated readings based on their own media repertoires. This evidences a gap not in production quality, but in symbolic accessibility.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the lens of multimodality, the analysis demonstrates that fidelity in form does not ensure fidelity in meaning. High-resolution visuals, immersive soundscapes, and sophisticated mechanics may attract global audiences, but without a shared cultural background, these elements risk semantic drift or erasure. The case of *BMW* thus underscores a

critical threshold in digital globalization: meaningful cross-cultural engagement requires not only access and interactivity, but also interpretive readiness. Future research might explore strategies for scaffolding cultural literacy within gameplay or examine how co-creation models and community discourse could mediate these gaps. As Chinese digital media increasingly enters global markets, understanding the limits and possibilities of cultural translation in game design becomes ever more essential.

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## Appendix

Review 1: The glowing statues in that temple level are so cool! They remind me of fantasy RPGs like Skyrim, but way more detailed.
Review 2: The wooden pagoda's rotating beams during the boss fight blew my mind! It's like a giant puzzle come alive.
Review 3: The sandstorm boss phase was EPIC! The way it disintegrates into golden particles feels next-gen. Though I wish the sand didn't obscure the UI so much – had to spam healing pots blindly lol.
Review 4: That red ribbon weapon's trail effect is pure eye candy! Looks like magic blood splatters mixed with ink.
Review 5: The glowing symbols on weapons are dope, but kinda generic? Like Geralt's runes in TW3.
Review 6: Weak narrative - very fragmented and boring story that barely tie in together.
Review 7: I was confused why everything went monochrome – maybe a glitch?
Review 8: The old guy in the yellow robe sounds like he's gargling rocks lol. Cool voice acting, but why does he talk so weird? Maybe the mic was broken during recording?
Review 9: That high-pitched ringing when the headband tightens is SO ANNOYING! Feels like a cheap psychic attack mechanic.
Review 10: The soundtrack's vibe is so mystical! Those weird flutes and zithers make perfect study music. Though sometimes it gets repetitive – wish they added more orchestral tracks like God of War.
Review 11: The female vocals in desert levels are haunting! Gives me Horizon Forbidden West vibes but more ethereal. Still not sure why they sing in some alien language though…
Review 12: The achievement sound when unlocking transformations is so retro! Reminds me of 80s arcade games. Kinda out of place in a AAA title but cool nostalgia bait.
Review 13: The healing sound effect is so satisfying – like tapping crystal glasses.