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Article

Layered Adaptation Strategies for the Overseas Marketing of Chinese Games: A Case Study of Black Myth: Wukong

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Abstract: This study examines how Black Myth: Wukong adapted its overseas marketing while preserving a distinctive Chinese cultural identity. Using a qualitative single-case study, it draws on industry reports, publicly available developer materials, platform and market information, overseas player feedback, and theoretical literature. The analysis develops a three-layer adaptation framework. The core cultural layer preserves Chinese mythology, character identity, classical aesthetics, and traditional symbols. The narrative experience layer adjusts translation, terminology explanation, voice acting, subtitles, and information presentation to improve accessibility without replacing the cultural system. The operational layer allows regional variation in promotional channels, influencer cooperation, campaign timing, community communication, and offline activities. The findings suggest that cultural difference creates not only comprehension costs but also scarcity value through novelty, visual differentiation, exploration, discussion, and brand recognition. Narrative accessibility and localized market execution condition whether this distinctiveness can support overseas reception. The case therefore qualifies rather than rejects cultural discount theory by showing that cultural specificity may generate both costs and benefits. The framework is most applicable to high-quality products with integrated cultural content, professional localization, and regional marketing capacity in culturally distant target markets. As a bounded single case, it supports descriptive interpretation rather than causal or universal conclusions.

Keywords: Chinese games; overseas marketing; layered adaptation; cultural discount; cultural scarcity

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1. Introduction

1.1. Industry Background

The overseas expansion of China's game industry has accelerated alongside the internationalization of digital cultural products. Games have become an important vehicle for both commercial distribution and cultural communication because they combine visual design, narrative, music, interaction, and community participation [1,2]. The continued growth of overseas revenue indicates that Chinese game companies have established a substantial presence in the global market. However, this expansion has not fully resolved the structural weaknesses of the industry.

A considerable share of overseas revenue still comes from light and mid-core mobile games with relatively limited cultural specificity. Some companies continue to rely on a traffic-driven expansion model characterized by reskinned content, superficial localization, intensive traffic acquisition, and short-term user conversion. Under this

approach, Chinese mythology, traditional aesthetics, and locally embedded narratives are often reduced or replaced to accommodate supposedly universal market preferences [3].

Although such adjustments may lower the initial comprehension threshold, excessive cultural dilution can make Chinese products resemble existing fantasy or science-fiction games. It may weaken brand distinctiveness and push developers into price- and traffic-based competition. This problem is especially important in mature markets for high-budget action and role-playing games, where technical quality alone may be insufficient to establish a recognizable cultural identity.

1.2. Research Problem

This tension can be understood through the cultural discount perspective. Cultural discount theory suggests that a cultural product may lose part of its appeal and commercial value when it enters a market whose audiences are unfamiliar with its original symbols, narratives, and value systems [4]. In game localization, this perspective has often been simplified into the assumption that greater cultural specificity necessarily creates higher comprehension costs and stronger audience resistance.

Black Myth: Wukong challenges this simplified logic. The game retained its Chinese mythological foundation, classical aesthetics, traditional monster imagery, and character identity rather than redesigning them according to Western fantasy conventions. Nevertheless, it achieved strong overseas market attention and favorable player responses [5]. This contrast raises two research questions:

RQ1: How did Black Myth: Wukong adapt its overseas marketing without substantially weakening its Chinese cultural identity?

RQ2: What does this case imply for the cultural discount framework and the overseas marketing of culturally distinctive Chinese games?

1.3. Research Contribution

This study makes two contributions. First, it develops a three-layer adaptation framework consisting of core cultural preservation, flexible adaptation of narrative experience, and localized market operation. The framework distinguishes cultural elements that should remain stable from narrative and operational elements that can be adjusted across linguistic and regional contexts.

Second, the study argues that cultural difference can generate both comprehension costs and scarcity value. Unfamiliar cultural symbols may increase the effort required for overseas audiences to understand a game, but they may also create novelty, differentiation, and exploratory interest when comparable cultural products are scarce [6]. The case therefore does not reject cultural discount theory. Rather, it qualifies and extends the conventional cultural discount perspective by showing that cultural distinctiveness may become a market resource when supported by accessible narrative presentation and localized execution.

2. Theoretical Background and Analytical Approach

2.1. Cultural Discount in Cross-Cultural Media Markets

Cultural discount describes the reduction in audience acceptance, attractiveness, and commercial value that may occur when cultural products enter markets with different cultural backgrounds. When audiences are unfamiliar with the original cultural context, symbolic meanings, and value systems embedded in a product, they may experience difficulties in interpretation and emotional connection. This concept has been widely applied to explain the international circulation of cultural products [7].

In the context of game globalization, cultural discount has often influenced localization strategies [8,9]. To reduce potential barriers, developers may weaken culturally specific elements, replace local myths and traditions with globally familiar fantasy or science-fiction settings, modify character identities, and simplify world-building structures [10]. Such approaches attempt to reduce cultural distance by increasing familiarity with overseas audiences.

For Chinese games, this logic has traditionally encouraged developers to minimize distinctive cultural features during international expansion [11]. Chinese mythology, historical references, and traditional aesthetics are sometimes regarded as potential obstacles rather than competitive resources. As a result, localization may focus more on cultural adaptation through reduction or replacement instead of improving accessibility while maintaining cultural identity.

2.2. Limitations of the Conventional Localization Logic

Although cultural discount provides a useful explanation for cross-cultural communication barriers, its conventional application may overlook several important conditions. First, overseas markets may not always have sufficient substitutes for culturally distinctive products. When audiences encounter cultural elements that are rarely represented in existing global game markets, unfamiliarity may create curiosity rather than rejection [9,12].

Second, cultural difference does not necessarily function only as a barrier. Distinctive cultural symbols, visual styles, and narrative traditions may provide differentiation advantages by offering experiences unavailable from mainstream international products. Therefore, cultural difference can generate two simultaneous effects [13].

The first is cultural comprehension cost, referring to the additional effort required for overseas audiences to understand unfamiliar cultural references, narratives, and symbolic systems. The second is cultural scarcity value, referring to the potential attraction created by unique cultural content that provides novelty, exploration opportunities, and brand differentiation.

From this perspective, the key issue for overseas marketing is not simply whether cultural elements should be removed or preserved. Instead, it concerns how cultural identity can be maintained while reducing unnecessary barriers to understanding.

2.3. Case Study and Analytical Dimensions

This study adopts a qualitative single-case study approach focusing on Black Myth: Wukong [14]. The case was selected because it represents a culturally distinctive Chinese game that retained substantial Chinese mythological and aesthetic elements while attracting considerable overseas attention. Unlike conventional localization practices based on cultural reduction, the case provides an opportunity to examine how cultural identity and overseas accessibility can be balanced.

The study draws on available survey results and market data. As summarized in Table 1, the analytical materials include game industry reports, publicly available materials from Game Science, platform and market performance information, overseas player feedback, industry monitoring data, and theoretical literature. These materials are used to establish the industry context, identify adaptation practices, describe market outcomes, interpret audience responses, and construct the conceptual foundation of the study [15].

Table 1. Sources and Analytical Dimensions Used in the Case Study

Source category	Evidence used in this study	Analytical purpose
Industry reports	Overseas market scale and structural problems	Establish the industry context
Game developer materials	Localization and cultural design information	Identify adaptation practices
Platform and market information	Sales ranking, ratings, and overseas reception	Describe market outcomes
Survey and player feedback	Purchase motivation and narrative comprehension	Interpret audience responses
Theoretical literature	Cultural discount	Build the conceptual foundation

The analysis follows three dimensions developed from the case evidence. First, cultural content examines how the game preserves Chinese mythology, character identity, visual aesthetics, and traditional cultural symbols. Second, narrative experience analyzes how translation, explanations of cultural terms, voice acting, and storytelling adjustments improve overseas accessibility without changing the cultural core. Third, local market operation investigates how promotional strategies, regional communication approaches, and market execution are adjusted according to different audience contexts.

Figure 1 presents the overall analytical framework of the study. The analysis begins with the industry context and the localization dilemma facing Chinese games. It then introduces the conventional cultural discount logic before examining Black Myth: Wukong through the three parallel dimensions of core cultural preservation, narrative experience adaptation, and localized market operation. The results of these three dimensions are interpreted through the simultaneous effects of cultural comprehension cost and cultural scarcity value. The final stage develops the theoretical and managerial implications of the case.

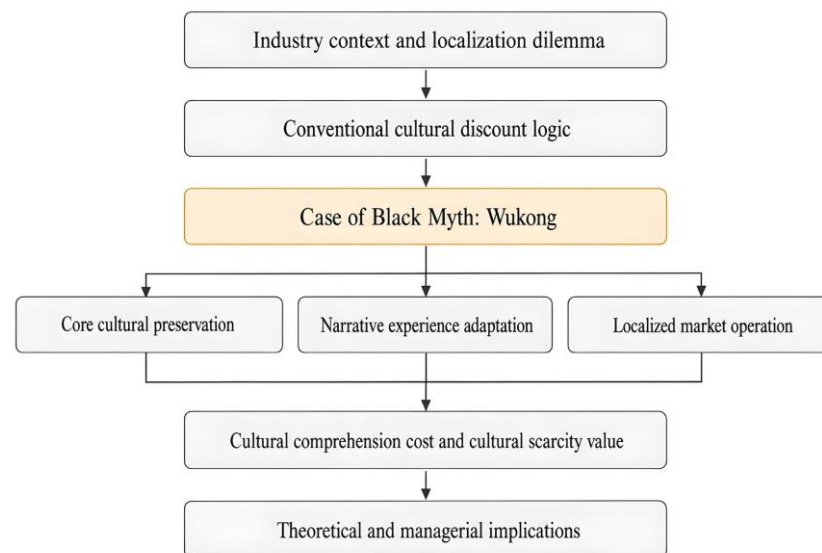


Figure 1. Analytical Framework for Examining the Overseas Marketing Adaptation of Black Myth: Wukong

3. The Layered Adaptation Strategy of Black Myth: Wukong

3.1. Core Cultural Layer: Preservation Rather Than Substitution

The core cultural layer contains the elements defining the game's identity and therefore receives the least adaptation. Black Myth: Wukong did not replace its Chinese mythological foundation with a culturally neutral fantasy setting. Instead, it presents an action role-playing world rooted in Chinese mythology and closely connected to Journey to the West, making mythology the basis of the product rather than decorative material. This principle is reflected in its preservation of Chinese architecture, religious imagery, sculpture, costumes, landscapes, traditional creatures, and heritage-related materials. Temples, statues, and carvings are digitally reproduced rather than redesigned according to generic Western medieval conventions. The game also retains the mythological logic of Journey to the West, classical aesthetics, traditional monster imagery, and Wukong's symbolic identity instead of reconstructing its characters as conventional Western fantasy heroes.

Such preservation creates a recognizable identity distinct from dominant international fantasy settings. Overseas players may not understand every religious reference or mythological relationship, but they encounter a cultural world rarely represented in mainstream action role-playing games. Cultural unfamiliarity may

therefore generate both comprehension barriers and novelty. Commercial performance cannot be attributed to cultural preservation alone, because gameplay quality, visual presentation, platform visibility, and promotional investment also shaped reception. Nevertheless, selling 20 million copies worldwide in the first month indicates that extensive Chinese cultural content did not prevent substantial global visibility, although the figure does not distinguish domestic from overseas sales. Adaptation was therefore minimized at this layer because cultural distinctiveness formed the game's primary identity and differentiation resource.

3.2. Narrative Experience Layer: Flexible and Explanatory Adaptation

Cultural preservation does not require identical linguistic presentation across markets. The narrative experience layer includes translation, terminology explanation, voice acting, narrative rhythm, and information presentation, with the purpose of reducing comprehension barriers without changing the underlying cultural system. Case materials indicate that culturally specific terms received lightweight explanations, sentence structures and narrative rhythms were adjusted to different language habits, and localized voice performances made dialogue more natural. However, the central plot, character relationships, and mythological framework remained unchanged. Because the available materials do not include complete localization files, translation guidelines, questionnaire items, or detailed player-response data, these practices should be treated as reported case evidence rather than independently measured effects.

Steam lists interfaces and subtitles in 15 languages, with full audio support in English and Simplified Chinese, indicating that accessibility was incorporated into the overseas release without replacing Chinese mythological content. This layer therefore distinguishes translation from cultural replacement. Literal translation may preserve words while producing unnatural dialogue or obscuring cultural relationships, whereas excessive domestication may improve fluency but remove cultural specificity. Layered adaptation takes a middle position: proper names, mythological identities, and culturally meaningful concepts remain recognizable, while syntax, subtitles, voice delivery, and supporting information are adjusted for readability. As of August 5, 2026, 93% of approximately 69,600 English-language Steam reviews were positive. Although this figure cannot isolate localization effects from gameplay, visual design, technical quality, or promotion, it indicates broadly favorable reception among a substantial English-speaking audience. The narrative layer therefore improves cultural accessibility rather than replacing cultural content.

3.3. Operational Layer: Localized Market Execution

The outer layer concerns how the game is presented and promoted across markets. Unlike mythology, character identity, and visual aesthetics, operational decisions allow greater regional variation. Promotional channels, campaign timing, KOL selection, community communication, and offline activities can be adjusted without altering the game's cultural identity. Available evidence suggests that regional teams had greater discretion over promotional timing, influencer cooperation, and local events. European and North American promotion reportedly emphasized action role-playing and combat through creators familiar with hardcore games, while some Southeast Asian activities were connected with local Chinese cultural communities and events.

However, complete campaign records, regional budgets, influencer lists, exposure data, and market-specific conversion rates are unavailable. These examples should therefore be treated as reported practices rather than verified explanations of sales performance, and claims that regional localization directly increased market penetration by a specific percentage cannot be supported. The underlying principle is that cultural content may remain globally consistent while audience access varies by region. Action-game players may be reached through combat demonstrations and specialist creators, whereas audiences interested in Chinese culture may respond more strongly to materials explaining the game's literary, architectural, and mythological background. Operational

localization therefore concerns audience access and communication rather than cultural substitution.

3.4. Interaction among the Three Layers

The three layers form an integrated system. The core cultural layer determines what should remain unchanged, the narrative experience layer identifies what must become understandable, and the operational layer addresses how the product reaches relevant audiences. As shown in Figure 2, mythology, character identity, classical aesthetics, and traditional symbols occupy the inner layer and receive minimal adaptation. Translation, terminology explanation, voice acting, narrative rhythm, and information presentation form the middle layer, where flexible adjustment improves accessibility. KOL selection, promotional channels, campaign timing, community operation, and offline events form the outer layer, where localization is most extensive.

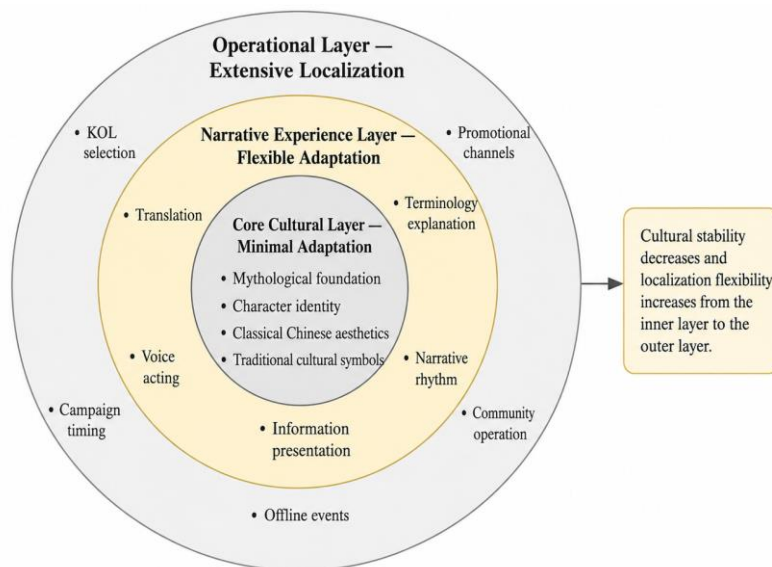


Figure 2. Three-Layer Adaptation Model for the Overseas Marketing of Black Myth: Wukong

Figure 2 illustrates the framework's central principle: cultural stability decreases and localization flexibility increases from the inner to the outer layer. The closer an element is to cultural identity, the less it should be adapted; the closer it is to market execution, the greater the permitted flexibility. This structure avoids both cultural standardization, which may weaken differentiation, and cultural export without sufficient linguistic or operational support, which may leave comprehension barriers unresolved. Black Myth: Wukong instead combines a stable cultural core, an adaptable narrative interface, and flexible market execution, assigning preservation and localization to the layers where each is most appropriate.

4. Mechanisms and Theoretical Implications

4.1. Cultural Scarcity as a Source of Differentiation

The case of Black Myth: Wukong suggests that cultural difference is more than a communication barrier. When high-quality Chinese mythological games remain scarce overseas, unfamiliar content may create differentiation value. Its architecture, religious imagery, costumes, landscapes, and mythological characters differ from settings common in international games, supporting novelty, exploration, discussion, and brand recognition.

Cultural scarcity refers to the limited supply of high-quality products presenting a coherent Chinese cultural system. Under such conditions, unfamiliarity may become part of a product's appeal and partly offset comprehension costs. However, scarcity alone does not ensure favorable reception. Curiosity must be supported by gameplay quality,

technical presentation, narrative clarity, and effective localization. Cultural scarcity is therefore a potential differentiation resource rather than an automatic commercial advantage. Table 2 compares layered adaptation with de-culturalized localization.

Table 2. Comparison between Conventional De-Culturalized Localization and Layered Adaptation

Dimension	Conventional de-culturalized localization	Layered adaptation
Cultural core	Reduced or replaced	Largely preserved
Character and world setting	Adjusted toward familiar global genres	Maintained as a source of identity
Translation	Primarily linguistic conversion	Explanatory and experience-oriented adaptation
Marketing execution	Relatively standardized	Regionally differentiated
Main objective	Reduce cultural distance	Balance distinctiveness and accessibility
Main advantage	Lower initial comprehension cost	Stronger cultural identity and differentiation
Main risk	Homogenization and weak brand recognition	Remaining comprehension barriers
Suitable context	Products with weak cultural dependence	High-quality products with distinctive cultural content

As shown in Table 2, layered adaptation changes the object and degree of localization rather than rejecting it: the cultural core remains stable, whereas narrative presentation and market execution allow greater flexibility.

4.2. The Conditional Role of Narrative Accessibility

Cultural scarcity does not automatically become market value. The case indicates a conditional relationship in which cultural preservation supports differentiation, narrative adaptation reduces avoidable barriers, and localized operation connects the product with relevant audiences. Excessive modification may weaken the identity creating scarcity value, whereas insufficient explanation may make unfamiliar terms and relationships difficult to follow. Strong content may also have limited reach when promotion misses relevant communities.

Narrative accessibility therefore conditions the relationship between cultural distinctiveness and overseas reception. Translation, terminology explanation, voice acting, subtitles, and supporting information can enable engagement without extensive prior knowledge of Chinese mythology. The objective is not to remove all unfamiliarity, which may stimulate curiosity, but to reduce barriers caused by unclear language or inaccessible information while preserving distinctive cultural elements.

4.3. Revising Rather Than Rejecting Cultural Discount

The case does not eliminate cultural discount. Overseas players may still struggle with mythological references, symbolic relationships, and culturally embedded expressions. However, cultural difference may also generate a scarcity premium when content is distinctive, visually coherent, and supported by accessible presentation and effective market execution.

Cultural discount should therefore not be treated as a fixed loss determined only by the amount of local cultural content. Its effect may vary with product quality, cultural scarcity, narrative accessibility, and promotional reach. The case logic can be summarized as follows: Overseas reception = cultural distinctiveness + adaptation support – comprehension barriers. This expression is not a statistically tested model. It summarizes the proposition that distinctiveness contributes novelty and identity, adaptation improves accessibility, and remaining barriers constrain engagement. The theoretical contribution is thus a qualification rather than a rejection of cultural discount: cultural specificity may

create both costs and benefits depending on how differentiation is preserved and avoidable barriers are reduced.

4.4. Scope Conditions

The layered strategy should not be generalized to all Chinese games or digital cultural products. It is most applicable when cultural identity is integrated with narrative, visual design, and gameplay; production quality sustains initial interest; professional localization supports translation, terminology management, voice production, and explanatory design; regional teams or partners can adapt promotion and community engagement; and comparable cultural content remains scarce in the target market.

Superficial cultural decoration is unlikely to create meaningful differentiation, while cultural distinctiveness cannot compensate for weak gameplay or unstable performance. Layered adaptation is therefore more suitable for high-quality products with substantial cultural dependence than for light mobile games, low-budget projects, or products whose cultural elements are peripheral. *Black Myth: Wukong* provides a bounded analytical case rather than a universal formula for digital cultural export.

5. Managerial Implications and Limitations

5.1. Managerial Implications

The case of *Black Myth: Wukong* offers three implications for Chinese game developers. First, developers should preserve the cultural core by treating mythological foundations, character identities, visual aesthetics, and symbolic systems as strategic assets rather than barriers to internationalization. Teams should identify these elements before localization, because excessive modification may reduce cultural distance while weakening differentiation and brand recognition. As illustrated in Figure 2, elements closest to the game's cultural identity should receive the least adaptation. Second, localization should adapt access rather than identity. Its purpose is not to remove unfamiliar content but to make it understandable through accurate translation, terminology explanation, natural voice acting, readable subtitles, and clear information presentation. These measures can reduce comprehension barriers while preserving mythological and narrative relationships. Localization should therefore involve translators, writers, cultural consultants, and game designers throughout development.

Third, market execution should allow greater regional discretion rather than require complete decentralization. A consistent global product does not require identical regional promotion. KOL selection, communication channels, campaign timing, community management, and offline activities may be adjusted according to local genre preferences and cultural familiarity when regional teams or partners possess sufficient market knowledge. Such flexibility changes how audiences encounter the game without altering its cultural content. Together, these implications support the layered approach summarized in Table 2.

5.2. Limitations

This study has five main limitations. First, it examines only *Black Myth: Wukong*, restricting wider applicability. Second, the game benefited from substantial production investment, high visual quality, and extensive market attention, making it unrepresentative of many smaller projects. Third, several survey and market indicators lack complete information on sampling, questionnaire design, and statistical procedures; they support descriptive interpretation but not causal conclusions. Fourth, the influence of cultural distinctiveness cannot be separated from gameplay quality, technical performance, platform visibility, IP awareness, or promotional investment. Finally, the study does not systematically compare this case with other Chinese AAA games, mobile games, or products using different localization strategies. The framework is therefore a bounded analytical model rather than a universal strategy.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how Black Myth: Wukong balanced overseas marketing adaptation with Chinese cultural identity. In response to RQ1, the case indicates a layered strategy rather than extensive cultural removal. Chinese mythology, character identity, classical aesthetics, and traditional symbols remained central, while translation, terminology explanation, voice acting, and information presentation were adjusted to improve accessibility. Promotional channels, KOL cooperation, campaign timing, and community activities also varied across regional contexts. These practices form three layers: core cultural preservation, flexible narrative adaptation, and regionally differentiated market execution.

In response to RQ2, the case qualifies rather than rejects cultural discount theory. Cultural difference may increase comprehension costs, yet it may also generate scarcity value through novelty, visual differentiation, exploration, discussion, and brand recognition. Overseas reception therefore depends on cultural distinctiveness, adaptation support, comprehension barriers, and broader product conditions. Such games need not rely on comprehensive de-culturalization. A more appropriate strategy may combine a stable cultural core, accessible narrative presentation, and flexible regional execution. This approach can reduce the risks of cultural homogenization and unsupported cultural export, but its applicability remains conditional on product quality, localization capacity, regional marketing resources, and the scarcity of comparable cultural content in target markets.

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