

How YouTube Reaction Videos and Audiences Shape the Negotiation of Chinese Cultural Characteristics through Black Myth: Wukong (BMW)

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Abstract:

Amid China's growing cultural influence and the global proliferation of digital media, video games have emerged as significant platforms for cross-cultural communication. Black Myth: Wukong (BMW), China's first AAA video game, exemplifies this trend by fusing Journey to the West mythology with advanced game technologies. While the game showcases China's capacity for cultural innovation, its international reception also underscores interpretive tensions. This study investigates how international YouTube reaction videos operate as participatory spaces in which "Chineseness" is negotiated, reinterpreted, and emotionally engaged with. This research addresses three questions: (1) What Chinese cultural elements are encoded in BMW? (2) How do YouTubers and viewers interpret and interact with these elements? (3) How is Chineseness constructed through the global dissemination of video games? Integrating Hall's EDM with cultural adaptation theory, emotional consumption, and identification, this study develops a multidimensional framework for analyzing gamified cultural communication. The dataset comprises 33 YouTube reaction videos and 1,809 viewer comments, coded using MAXQDA. Through CDA, three audience decoding positions are identified: dominant-hegemonic (e.g., Southeast Asian viewers embracing Chineseness through cultural proximity), negotiated (e.g., Japanese viewers associating Wukong with Goku), and oppositional (e.g., Western audiences interpreting yaoguai through Eurocentric lenses). The findings demonstrate that BMW conveys Chineseness through its visual design, auditory aesthetics, and narrative structure. Audience responses are shaped by emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and ideological positioning. Nostalgia enhances identification, whereas cultural distance often leads to exoticization or rejection. This study proposes a tripartite model of gamified cultural communication and discusses the challenges and strategies of global game localization. It argues that balancing cultural authenticity with accessibility—such as clarifying culturally specific concepts and countering orientalist interpretations—can enhance cross-cultural understanding. YouTube reaction videos thus function as dynamic arenas for transcultural exchange, although asymmetries in global media power may perpetuate cultural discount.

Keywords:

Chineseness, Gamification, Sun Wukong

1. Introduction

Amid the unprecedented global transformations unseen in a century, the world's geopolitical landscape is increasingly characterized by the East's rise and the West's decline. The enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength, coupled with the Western retreat, has led to ideological conflicts and governance challenges, propelling China closer to the center stage of global affairs. [1] In the era of media convergence, a critical challenge for China's international communication efforts is how to draw upon the richness of traditional Chinese culture — adhering to the principle of creatively transforming and innovatively developing heritage — to enhance the global reach and influence of Chinese civilization and help the international community better understand China [2].

As the concept of “media as narrative” suggests, the globalization of digital cultural products is undergoing new transformations. China's gaming industry has achieved significant breakthroughs in the international market through technological innovation and cultural encoding strategies, underscoring its growing role in cultural dissemination. By October 6, 2024, data from the foreign analytics company VG Insights indicated that *Black Myth: Wukong* (BMW) had surpassed \$1 billion in total revenue on the Steam platform, garnering widespread attention from gamers worldwide. The game received a rating of 8 out of 10 in discussions on IGN, a globally renowned gaming media platform, and among 710,128 user reviews on Steam, 96% were positive.

As the first domestically produced AAA game, BMW seamlessly integrates traditional Chinese culture with cutting-edge gaming technology, sparking immense market interest at home and abroad and driving the development of related tourism industries. While facilitating cultural dissemination, the game also highlights the complex challenges that cultural products face in cross-cultural communication.

2. Literature Review

After reviewing existing research, we found that domestic studies primarily focus on the cultural expression, narrative strategies, and internationalization approaches of Chinese games, exploring how to incorporate Chinese cultural elements into game design to enhance global appeal. However, in terms of research methodology, domestic studies mainly rely on qualitative analysis and policy research, lacking in-depth discussions based on data-driven analysis or empirical investigations.

On the international front, discussions on Chinese digital culture have increased in recent years. Yet, research cases remain largely centered on the film industry, with insufficient attention paid to emerging forms of communication such as gaming. A search on academic platforms such as Web of Science and Google Scholar using keywords like “Chinese myths,” “Chinese mythology,” “Chinese legends,” and “Chinese folklore” reveals that Western academia's research on Chinese mythology is relatively limited, with some perspectives diverging from those of Chinese scholars. Similar to domestic academia, Western scholars recognize games as important vehicles for cultural communication. However, when it comes to specific content such

as *Journey to the West* and other Chinese myths, their research primarily focuses on three aspects: (1) Limited sources of information, with knowledge primarily confined to literary studies. [3] (2) A Eurocentric perspective, often viewing Chinese mythology through the lens of Western classical traditions. As McNeal (2012) argued, “The creation of Chinese mythology seems inevitably to appear in the shadow of Greek gods.” [3] (3) Strong ideological biases in evaluating Chinese game exports may influence interpretations of China’s cultural expansion through gaming.

Despite the growing body of research on intercultural communication theory, which provides critical theoretical foundations across various fields, games as an emerging medium of cross-cultural communication have yet to receive sufficient academic attention. Existing studies have examined BMW's impact overseas, focusing on its role in the literary transmission of *Journey to the West* and the inheritance of Chinese cultural heritage. However, most of these works are case studies, lacking a systematic exploration of their cross-cultural communication mechanisms.

Furthermore, current research rarely addresses the role of reaction videos in the internationalization of Chinese games. It does not examine how players negotiate, interpret, and even reshape the concept of Chineseness in this process. To address this gap, this study takes YouTube reaction videos and their comment interactions as the research object, to explore how international players interpret the cultural elements in BMW. In doing so, this study aims to fill the gap in research on the cross-cultural communication of Chinese games, contributing to a deeper understanding of the global communication mechanisms and cultural significance of Chinese gaming.

To avoid the limitations of case studies, this paper adopts grounded theory within an empirical research paradigm as the methodological framework. Through systematic coding and analysis, this study seeks to abstract a methodological approach that can inform future research on the cross-cultural dissemination of games, ultimately facilitating the creative transformation and innovative development of China’s rich traditional culture.

3. Research Questions

As China’s first AAA game and a landmark case of Chinese games expanding into global markets, BMW integrates a rich array of Chinese cultural elements through interactive storytelling and immersive gameplay, leveraging gamified expression to reach international audiences. However, this process is not a one-way transmission of information; rather, it is a dynamic process of interpretation, negotiation, and reproduction as international players engage with the game through viewing, playing, and discussing. In other words, the Chineseness embedded in the game is not a fixed or static entity. Instead, in cross-cultural communication, audiences decode these cultural elements based on their cultural backgrounds, identification, and modes of emotional consumption, leading to diverse meanings in different contexts. Against this backdrop, this study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: What Chinese cultural elements are reflected in BMW?

RQ2: How do YouTubers and viewers of reaction videos associate and discuss these cultural elements?

RQ3: How is Chineseness constructed and reshaped through the international dissemination process (internationalization) of video games like BMW?

4. Theoretical Framework

This study constructs a multidimensional analytical model for gamified cultural communication, drawing on Hall's encoding and decoding model (EDM), while integrating the roles of emotional consumption and identification, alongside cultural adaptation theory (CAT) and cultural discount.

Hall's EDM emphasizes that the meaning of media texts is not solely determined by producers but is continuously decoded in communication and reception. Players and views of reaction videos may interpret the cultural symbols embedded in the game through dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional readings, depending on their cultural backgrounds, identification, and prior knowledge of Chinese culture. Meanwhile, identification plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences understand and accept these cultural symbols. Players from different cultural contexts may project their experiences onto the decoding process. This influences their perception of Chineseness within the game. For instance, while Chinese players may see BMW as a faithful cultural representation, Western players might associate it with Orientalist narratives, leading to different paths of cultural interpretation.

Emotional consumption catalyzes this process. As an immersive medium, gaming evokes strong emotional resonance, shaping players' experiences as they engage with the game or watch reaction videos. These emotional experiences not only influence their receptiveness to cultural symbols but may also reinforce or diminish the effectiveness of cultural transmission. For example, some players with an interest in Chinese mythology may be more inclined to embrace the game's cultural elements. In contrast, others lacking prior cultural knowledge may feel disconnected or even misinterpret these elements.

Furthermore, CAT and cultural discount provide critical perspectives for analyzing the variations in cross-cultural reception. CAT suggests that content producers often adjust cultural symbols in cross-cultural communication to lower the comprehension threshold and enhance audience acceptance. However, cultural discount posits that due to differences in cultural backgrounds, certain cultural symbols may lose appeal or be misinterpreted during the dissemination process. For instance, the Chinese mythological elements in BMW may evoke strong emotional resonance in domestic markets. In contrast, due to audiences' limited familiarity with international markets, these elements might be downplayed, reshaped through a Western lens, or misread.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, using reaction videos and their comments on YouTube as the primary data sources. Through the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method, this research examines how BMW facilitates the international discussion of Chinese cultural elements and how YouTube and viewers of reaction videos contribute to discussing and constructing the concept of Chineseness on a global platform.

As one of the most public sphere-oriented social media platforms in the digital age, YouTube aligns with the fundamental characteristics of the public sphere as conceptualized by Habermas. YouTube provides users with an open communicative space, allowing audiences from different countries and regions to engage in discussions. Compared to traditional text-based communication, YouTube emphasizes visual and interactive forms of expression. Its openness fosters the convergence of

diverse opinions and perspectives, making it a crucial channel for global digital content dissemination. In recent years, reaction videos have become a notable digital marketing and cultural communication trend, particularly in the gaming industry. As a dynamic mode of expression, reaction videos offer valuable insights into players' emotional responses, identification, and feedback mechanisms, further amplifying the reach of gaming content.

This study conceptualizes YouTube reaction videos as a unique form of cultural production and a social influence phenomenon in online communication, focusing on their role in disseminating BMW. Before and after the game's release, numerous high-quality reaction videos emerged on YouTube. These videos, capturing real-time players' reactions to the game's playing methods, images, and storyline, provide international audiences with multi-dimensional perspectives on the gaming experience.

5.1. Data Collection and Sample Selection

In the data collection and analysis process, this study conducted a systematic search for reaction videos on YouTube. Using "BMW" as the search term, the researcher retrieved videos based on the game's release date, August 20, 2024, conducting searches on October 16, 2024, for videos published before August 20, 2024, and those posted between August 20 and October 16, 2024. The top 20 most-viewed videos were selected for analysis. However, before August 20, 2024, only 17 reaction videos on BMW were available on YouTube. As a result, a total of 37 videos were collected. To ensure data representativeness and relevance, active comment section discussions from these videos were selected for further analysis.

During the selection process, non-target language videos (e.g., Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese, Portuguese) were excluded to maintain a culturally diverse yet research-relevant sample. The final dataset included 33 reaction videos and their corresponding comment sections, totaling 1,809 comments, forming a well-structured dataset suitable for CDA. All videos and comments were meticulously recorded and systematically organized in Table 1.

Table 1. Top 20 BMW reaction videos (Aug 20 to Oct 16, 2024).

	Views	Upload date	Title	Likes	Comments	Video duration
1	8.2M 8,232,023	24.9.4	Strongest Build in BMW	487K	1,687	59s
2	7.4M 7,434,659	24.8.20	BMW English Dub vs Chinese Dub	418K	8,392	38s
3	6M 6,076,001	24.8.20	BMW Walkthrough Gameplay Part 1 - Intro (Full game)	147K	8,347	2h4m
4	5M 5,095,002	24.8.22	BMW Gameplay Walkthrough Full game [4K 60FPS] - No Commentary	74K	3,330	18m24s
5	3.9M 3,985,378	24.8.28	(BMW #1) Cuộc tái ngộ giữa Độ Mixi và tựa game đầy duyên nợ, gọi lại kí ức khó quên.	108K	2653	6h17m
6	3.8M 3,814,404	24.8.21	Most Anticipated Game of the Year Just Came Out	101K	5,936	44m55s
7	3,7M		พวกล้างลึง Live - BMW	55K	1,113	6h45m

	3,757,783		#1			
8	3.7M 3,719,103	24.8.20	Monkey King Vs Titan Fight Scene - BMW	34K	1,428	12m16s
9	3.2M 3,288,042	24.8.20	Seekor Kera Terkurung Terpenjara Didalam Gua - BMW Indonesia - Part 1	84K	4,249	1h14m
10	3.3M 3,254,820	24.8.21	BMW All Cutscenes Full Movie (2024) 4K ULTRA HD	28K	1,390	3h10m
11	3.2M 3,216,309	24.8.20	Sun Wukong is a pure menace BMW #shorts	271K	2,643	48s
12	3.1M 3,195,660	24.8.21	COMEÇO ABSURDO! - BMW - Parte 1	149K	2,350	1h5m
13	3.1M 3,130,466	24.8.20	BMW - Ending & Final Boss Fight (4K 60FPS)	32K	1,238	21m27s
14	2.9M 2,962,585	24.8.27	He was the chosen one to resurrect Sun Wukong BMW	250K	1,632	55s
15	2.9M 2,906,886	24.9.7	Okay, I'm fine #blackmythwukonggameplay	172K	1,044	29s
16	2.8M 2,878,328	24.8.23	BMW - True Ending & Four Heavenly Kings Boss Fight (4K 60FPS)	30K	1,514	23m58s
17	2.7M 2,748,301	24.8.22	BMW - Secret Final Boss & True Ending (God Erlang and Four Heavenly Kings)	31K	1,822	41m16s
18	2.6M 2,601,846	24.8.21	Elden Ring Pro Plays BMW	68K	4,680	40m
19	2.4M 2,445,023	24.8.21	So I Tried BMW	43K	6,289	5h44m
20	2.3M 2,307,179	24.8.26	Is BMW Worth Buying	83K	6,352	28m43s

Table 2. 17 videos on YouTube with the search term 'BMW' before August 20, 2024.

	Views	Upload date	Title	Likes	Comments	Video duration
1	5.3M 5,304,627	24.1.15	BMW Trailer	201K	1,411	56s
2	3.3M 3,333,886	23.12.8	BMW - Official Release Date Trailer Game Awards 2023	90K	3,497	2m42s
3	2.5M 2,544,334	24.8.8	BMW - Final Trailer PS5 Games	74K	4,032	4m50s
4	2.9M 2,978,059	24.8.17	BMW - Before You Buy	80K	9,069	12m2s
5	1.8M 1,806,540	24.8.8	BMW - Official Final Trailer	61K	4,266	4m45s
6	1.7M 1,743,684	24.7.23	BMW Is Different Than You Think...	85K	1,863	58s
7	1.6M 1,656,992	24.6.8	BMW - Pre-Orders Now Available August 20, 2024 - Confront Destiny	38K	3,381	1m27s
8	1.4M 1,415,742	20.8.20	BMW Official Release Date Trailer Summer Game Fest	31K	1,031	1m27s

			2024			
9	1.2M 1,244,760	24.6.8	BMW - Pre-Order CG Trailer PS5 Games	31K	1,114	1m23s
10	973K 973,787	24.8.16	Buddhist Chants Part BMW - Final Trailer Music (Cateek Cover)	21K	1,123	1m59s
11	745K 745,322	24.8.7	BMW: 10 Things YOU NEED TO KNOW	19K	2,273	17m18s
12	624K 624,688	24.6.13	BMW & God of War Ragnarok!	15K	disabled	12s
13	340K 340,617	24.8.7	What can we expect from BMW?	10K	799	32s
14	285K 285,790	24.6.25	BMW	21K	260	25s
15	265K 265,280	24.8.10	BMW SOUND TRACKS Buddhist Chants Part - Rebirth Mantra FINAL TRAILER	3.9K	309	3m9s
16	79K 79,570	24.8.2	the real Monkey King BMW /Wukong vs Sun Wukong fight	4.2K	17	27s
17	77K 77,749	24.8.15	The new game BMW by Game Science is, in my humble opinion, terrible. Play it for yourself and see!	528	667	59s

5.2. Coding Process

The coding process used by MAXQDA follows the three-stage grounded theory coding method: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stage, we initially read all video content and comments, marking key terms and phrases related to Chineseness, *Journey to the West*, and other Chinese or foreign cultural references, such as the Golden Cudgel, Erlang Shen, and Marvel. In the axial coding stage, these keywords and phrases were categorized to identify themes and patterns, organizing them into different categories: discursive stance, game elements and Chinese elements, opposing elements, opinions (positive, negative and neutral), and factual interpretations (positive and negative). Finally, in the selective coding stage, we refine the coding framework to form representative cultural interpretation patterns, aligning them with Hall's EDM, including dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional readings.

5.3. CDA

Following the coding process, CDA was conducted to examine how cultural symbols in the game were accepted or misinterpreted, how international audiences decoded the content of BMW and its reaction videos through the lens of emotional consumption, and how identity shaped the audience's decoding process. In the CDA, the study focused on three key aspects: (1) Acceptance and misinterpretation of cultural symbols: Analyzing how viewers in the comment sections understood Chinese cultural elements in the game and whether any misunderstandings or distortions occurred on international platforms; (2) Influence of identification on decoding: Examining how audiences from different cultural backgrounds decoded the game's content based on their identification, particularly how they associated personal

identity and emotions with the cultural elements presented in the game; (3) Facilitation and hindrance of emotional consumption: Investigating how emotional consumption influenced the acceptance of cultural elements, whether emotion enhanced cultural dissemination or created barriers to global reception.

The study reveals how BMW contributes to the global construction of Chineseness and explores the intercultural interactions and thematic reconfigurations within this cultural dissemination process. This study not only demonstrates how the internationalized cultural image of BMW is constructed but also proposes a hypothesis about the fluidity of Chineseness in the digital age — while games as a medium achieve unprecedented global visibility, they also face the risk of misinterpretation and transformation due to differences in decoding.

6. Findings

6.1. *Gamified Representation of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements*

As a medium for cultural communication, BMW integrates the framework of *Journey to the West*, visual symbols, auditory landscapes, and narrative motifs, to present cultural elements imbued with Chineseness and transform them into an interactive digital gaming experience. This gamification extends beyond the sensory reproduction of cultural elements, embedding dynamic meanings into cultural symbols through game mechanics.^[4]

By analyzing the representation of Chinese cultural elements in BMW, this study first applies Hall's EDM to examine how the game developers encoded Chineseness in the game's textual construction. Furthermore, using grounded theory, the study extracts significant cultural characteristics from YouTube reaction video commentaries. Through a content analysis of YouTube reaction videos and their associated discussion threads, the study identifies the most frequently mentioned cultural elements in the game and investigates how they are presented and interpreted as cultural symbols.

6.1.1. *Visual Symbols*

The game's character design and naming conventions are deeply rooted in Chinese mythology, reflecting a strong traditional cultural heritage. For instance, Erlang Shen is a classic figure from *The Investiture of the Gods* and *Journey to the West*, characterized by a third eye on his forehead. This eye symbolizes supernatural insight, allowing him to perceive the past, present, and future across the three realms. In Taoism, the “Heavenly Eye” represents divine vision, while Buddhism considers it one of the Five Eyes. BMW preserves the mythological “three-eyed deity” image of Erlang Shen. However, while traditional paintings and sculptures depict the third eye as static, the game reimagines it through dynamic visual effects, using flowing golden light to imbue it with a futuristic, almost cybernetic aesthetic. Similarly, Bai Gu Furen derives from the White Bone Demon in *Journey to the West*. While her design retains core aspects of the traditional White Bone Demon, it undergoes visual reconstruction to imbue her with new symbolic significance. One player commented: “Bai Gu Furen's design feels reminiscent of *Journey to the West* and infused with Cthulhu horror aesthetics.”

6.1.2. *Auditory Landscape*

BMW constructs a distinctively Chinese auditory system through multi-layered sound design. Its background music, “Wang Sheng Zhou,” incorporates traditional Chinese instruments such as the guzheng, and yangqin, blending them with electronic synthesizers and layered reverb effects. This fusion retains the transcendent essence of Buddhist chanting while infusing a cyberpunk-like futuristic quality, earning it the nickname “cyber-Buddhist incantation.” Similarly, the chapter theme “Huang Feng Qi Xi” features Storytelling in Northern Shaanxi, a National Intangible Cultural Heritage, described as “Chinese-style rap.” This auditory encoding serves a dual function: for domestic players, it acts as a catalyst for cultural identification, while for international players, it presents an exotic auditory experience.

6.1.3. Narrative Motifs

The game incorporates Chinese philosophical concepts into its mechanics, transforming them into interactive narrative experiences. The protagonist, The Destined One, is a modern reinterpretation of Sun Wukong from *Journey to the West* (Xu & Qu, 2025). In this adaptation, Sun Wukong is no longer a mere monk’s companion but a god-slaying warrior, aligning with the contemporary youth’s collective psyche of challenging authority, constituting a critical adaptation of the classic text. The game allows players’ combat choices to influence branching storylines; defeating a boss directly may unlock an “anti-deity” ending, echoing traditional Chinese notions of changing fate against nature. This design transforms abstract philosophical debates into embodied practices, enhancing cultural immersion. Additionally, the game’s portrayal of Sun Wukong shifts between monkey nature, human nature, and divine nature, achieving a balanced unity that reflects the emotional ethos of the Chinese identity within Chineseness.

6.2. Decoding Paths of International Audiences: Dominant-Hegemonic, Negotiated, and Oppositional Readings

At the decoding level, this study further examines how the viewers of YouTube reaction videos accept and discuss the cultural elements embedded in BMW. Using inductive analysis based on grounded theory and Hall’s EDM, the study investigates how YouTubers and their audiences construct meanings from the game’s text. Specifically, the study analyzes discussion patterns in reaction videos, the associative pathways through which viewers interpret cultural elements, and how these discussions reflect different cultural perspectives. Through CDA of reaction videos and comments, the study identifies three primary decoding paths in international audiences’ reception of BMW, aligning with Hall’s model: (1) Dominant-hegemonic decoding: Viewers fully accept the intended meaning encoded by the developers; (2) Negotiated decoding: Viewers selectively accept and reinterpret cultural symbols; (3) Oppositional decoding: Viewers subversively reinterpret or challenge the intended meaning. The study proposes that identification is a filter, shaping the emotional stance of discussions — whether supportive, skeptical, or oppositional — while emotional consumption acts as a catalyst, influencing the intensity of emotional responses, ranging from enthusiastic resonance to disengagement or rejection.

6.2.1. Dominant-Hegemonic Decoding: Cultural Identity and Emotional Resonance

From a hegemonic decoding perspective, international audiences can positively interpret and actively accept the Chinese cultural symbols embedded in BMW. This group primarily consists of Chinese or Southeast Asian individuals, such as

Vietnamese players, who have prior reading or viewing experiences of *Journey to the West*. A dual reinforcement mechanism drives their decoding process: (1) cultural identification based on historical contact and (2) emotional consumption activated by nostalgic memories.

Southeast Asian players, due to their historical and geographical proximity to China, exhibit a high level of familiarity with *Journey to the West* and traditional Chinese culture. For instance, Vietnamese YouTuber “Mixigaming” explicitly expresses a sense of affinity with Chineseness in the title of his reaction video: “A reunion with the fateful game: rekindling unforgettable memories” (Video #5, July 2024). This cultural identification is further reflected in user comments:

“This game is really meaningful to many of us here in Vietnam; many of us must have grown up watching the original TV series Journey to the West at some point in their lives, so you can guess how it is even more meaningful to Chinese people. I have been waiting for this game for a long time. Thanks so much for showing us, Brad!” (@williammarenguyen, July 2024)

“@williammarenguyen: I’m so happy, my foreign friend. We share the same childhood, and we all have the same Great Sage dream.” (@Daily Life of Freelance Designer, August 2024)

“Because China and Vietnam have long history, even the language is similar, a lot of words sound similar don’t forget Vietnam used CHu Nom.” (@aspirewot8408, August 2024)

The game triggers nostalgic memories among international audiences through its visual, auditory, and narrative elements, amplifying emotional consumption as a decoding enhancer. For example, a Southeast Asian player explicitly links the game scenes to personal memories:

“Yes, the same, I already saw Journey to the West in the 90s when I was young!! And many scenes in Huaguoshan and Journey to the West exist in China.” (@DJRainey, August 2024)

These responses indicate that dominant-hegemonic decoding occurs when identification and emotional consumption reinforce one another. When international audiences’ cultural backgrounds align with the encoders’ intentions, emotional resonance further solidifies their acceptance of Chineseness.

6.2.2. Negotiated Decoding: Cultural Hybridization and Emotional Ambivalence

Negotiated decoders exhibit an interactive tension between cultural identification and emotional consumption when interpreting the Chinese cultural symbols in BMW. While they are attracted to the game’s aesthetics, their local culture prevents them from fully accepting the Chineseness conveyed by the game, resulting in a fluctuating decoding stance between partial acceptance and selective rejection. For example, Japanese players’ understanding of *Journey to the West* is largely mediated by domestic cultural products like *Dragon Ball*, shaping a distinct identity-based perception. *Dragon Ball*’s protagonist, Goku, is inspired by *Journey to the West*, but he has been entirely assimilated into Japaneseness as a cultural symbol. As a result, some Japanese players misinterpret BMW’s cultural origins, unconsciously engaging in cultural appropriation by associating Goku with *Dragon Ball*, rather than *Journey to the West*. This identity conflict intensifies in cross-national player interactions,

leading to symbolic ownership disputes. Chinese players, based on cultural attachment, accuse Japan of “copying”:

“The Japanese stole Journey to the West and Romance of the Three Kingdoms and made them into games. They also stole a large number of Chinese cultural relics, music scores, and Chinese medicine prescriptions during the war of aggression against China. Japanese culture is a derivative of Chinese culture, including Japanese tea ceremony, architecture, clothing, writing, music...” (@ejdkdidkd3893, Sept. 2024)

Japanese players, in turn, respond defensively based on national cultural confidence:

“Imagine Chinese saying ‘stolen’. They copy every other country's media with no approval but triggered by something that is inspired from their culture and said they had been stolen.”(@rariher, Sept. 2024)

Due to their familiarity with Dragon Ball’s visual language, Japanese players find BMW’s Chineseness aesthetically accessible, but their political identity prevents them from fully acknowledging its Chinese cultural origins. Rather than bridging differences, YouTube reaction video comment sections often become battlegrounds for cultural ownership disputes. This controversy highlights the dynamic nature of negotiated decoding: while emotional consumption can catalyze cross-cultural dialogue when it surpasses a threshold, it may reinforce identity-based opposition, transforming negotiated encoding into adversarial discourse.

6.2.3. Oppositional Decoding: Cultural Conflict and Emotional Rejection

Oppositional decoding occurs when audiences reject the encoded meanings and reinterpret the content through their cultural backgrounds. In discussions surrounding BMW reaction videos, some foreign players, influenced by pre-existing cultural perceptions or ideological stances, struggle to fully accept the Chineseness embedded in the game, leading to misinterpretations and resistance. One notable example is the misinterpretation of the concept of “yaoguai.” Many Western players attempt to equate “yaoguai” with demons in Western mythology, overlooking their neutral connotations in Chinese tradition. This results in a distorted understanding of the game’s supernatural elements.

“Yaoguai usually has neutral connotations, not really demon.” (@claudius3359, September 2024)

Players start acknowledging the differences between Eastern and Western mythological frameworks. Ironically, such conflicts sometimes serve as a starting point for cross-cultural dialogue, prompting players to explore Chineseness more deeply. Another prominent debate revolves around the nature of Sun Wukong’s character. While he embodies rebellion against authority, his arc in *Journey to the West* ultimately leads to self-growth. However, some Western players, unfamiliar with this cultural background, interpret his defiance as pure anti-heroism, akin to Western individualistic narratives:

“His very existence will forever be a threat to heaven and therefore he can never have a peaceful life even after completing the journey to the West.” (@leslietheswfanatic1641, July. 2024)

“So gods are bad guys lmao.”(@Wisdomteeeth, Jul. 2024)

“@WisdomTeeeth yeah in Chinese mythology~ the gods in heave gods are not always good as power hungry and hypocritical.” (@AT-lp8gg, Oct. 2024)

This phenomenon reflects how Western players tend to interpret characters through a “hero-villain” cognitive framework, leading to a process of coding and decoding Sun Wukong’s image that ultimately prevents the full acceptance of Chineseness in the game. Additionally, the Western audience’s preference for anti-hero figures — such as Loki and Deadpool — further amplifies Sun Wukong’s rebellious, “god-slaying” traits, making them more inclined to perceive him as a charismatic antagonist rather than a spiritual pilgrim undergoing trials, as traditionally depicted in Chinese culture.

At its core, this conflict stems from the clash of cultural cognitive frameworks — when players apply familiar narrative templates to interpret unfamiliar symbols, deep cultural logic becomes overshadowed by surface-level entertainment demands. This exemplifies the challenge of video games as a cross-cultural medium: how can developers preserve cultural authenticity while also building a bridge of understanding for players from diverse backgrounds? The case of BMW suggests that achieving a balance between identity representation and emotional engagement in game design may be the key to resolving this issue.

6.3. The interactive mechanism of identification and emotional consumption

This study constructs a three-dimensional model of gamified cultural communication by incorporating the roles of emotional consumption and identification. It explores the dynamic shaping process of Chineseness in cross-cultural communication. Hall’s EDT reveals the dynamic negotiation between producers and audiences in cultural transmission. This study finds that discussions in reaction videos of BMW on YouTube suggest that international audiences’ interpretations of the game’s cultural symbols of Chineseness are fundamentally shaped by the interplay of identification and emotional consumption. This interaction not only influences the acceptance of cultural symbols but also drives the negotiation of Chineseness in international communication through the reinterpretation and reproduction of game content by audiences. Consequently, the game develops multilayered meanings in the global market through player-community interactions. (Figure 1)

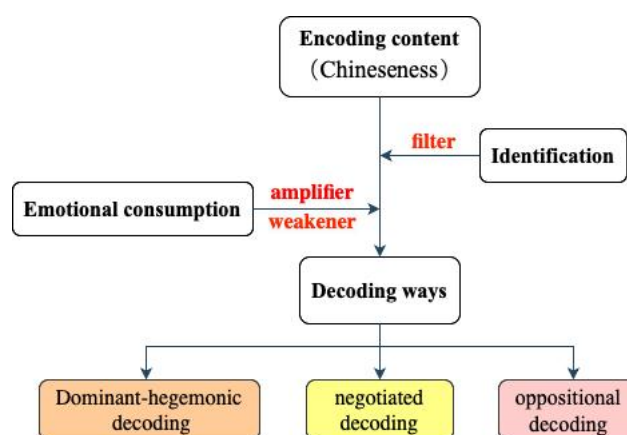


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of the interactive mechanism based on identification and emotional consumption.

6.3.1. Identification: The Initial Filter of Symbolic Decoding

Tajfel's social identity theory posits that individuals construct self-perception through group affiliation. In the dissemination of BMW, international audiences' cultural backgrounds and political stances serve as the "first-layer filter" in decoding, influencing how they interpret and respond to the game's cultural encoding.

For Southeast Asian players, historical ties and cultural similarities foster a sense of identification with the cultural symbols of Chineseness. For instance, Vietnamese players frequently reference childhood memories of *Journey to the West* in their comments, leading to a hegemonic decoding process in which they almost unreservedly accept the game's Daoist philosophy and *Journey to the West* narrative. Similarly, Japanese players, having been exposed to localized cultural products such as Dragon Ball, also find a sense of familiarity with BMW.

In contrast, some international players, driven by curiosity or shaped by stereotypes about Chinese culture, misinterpret the game's cultural elements. This superficial understanding leads to misunderstanding Chinese culture, hindering effective identification. For example, Western players sometimes perceive the game's mythical creatures as "mere random amalgamations with Asian traits (@1cop4921, Jul. 2024)", triggering an oppositional decoding. Daoist elements, meanwhile, are often misunderstood as a form of "mystical Eastern religion," with their underlying Daoist philosophical concepts left unexamined. Such misinterpretations render Chinese cultural elements as an exotic other, making it difficult for players to truly grasp and identify with the cultural value of Chineseness, instead reducing it to a form of exotic entertainment material.

6.3.2. Emotional Consumption: The Moderator of Discussion

Audiences tend to engage in positive decoding when emotional resonance aligns with identification. For example, some Asian players watching reaction videos of BMW on YouTube recall childhood experiences of watching *Journey to the West* TV adaptations or relate the game to Dragon Ball and other works influenced by *Journey to the West*. This nostalgic sentiment strengthens their acceptance of the game's portrayal of Chineseness, leading them to view it not just as an entertainment product but as an extension of their cultural memory.

Conversely, when the emotional experience evoked by cultural symbols fails to connect with the audience's pre-existing knowledge, it can lead to decoding difficulties or even resistance. For example, some Western players interpret the game's theme of "defying fate" as an expression of rebellious individualistic heroism, likening it to the anti-hero archetypes prevalent in Western pop culture. As a result, they may perceive Sun Wukong as a villain rather than a hero. Due to their lack of understanding of *Journey to the West* and its Daoist philosophical background, they struggle to fully grasp the cultural significance of "defying fate" in the Chinese context, instead treating it as an exotic narrative trope (e.g., "*This feels like an Eastern version of dark fantasy*").

At the same time, international audiences attempt to find familiar references within their cultural frameworks, such as drawing parallels between Wukong and Hanuman from Indian epics ("*Wukong is like Hanuman of Chinese Mythology.*" @p.vsaisumanth2962, September 2024) or likening him to the Disney version of Mulan — an image of a Chinese hero familiar to Western audiences. While such emotionally driven associations help lower cultural barriers to understanding BMW,

they may also lead to the simplification or misunderstanding of its original cultural connotations.

These phenomena indicate that in cross-cultural communication, emotional consumption can either serve as a bridge for cultural understanding or act as a catalyst for reinforcing stereotypes. When audiences find emotional resonance within their own experiences, cultural symbols are more effectively transmitted. However, when audiences fail to establish meaningful emotional connections, cultural elements risk being reduced to mere exotic entertainment materials rather than deeper cultural experiences.

Through the discussions surrounding reaction videos of BMW on YouTube, this study, grounded in Hall's EDM, finds that international audiences' identification and emotional consumption jointly shape their decoding processes. The decoders (international audiences on YouTube) interpret the game's content in different ways — dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional — based on their identity positions and emotional engagement. In this process, identification acts as a filter determining the audience's cultural stance and preconditions of their emotional tendencies — supportive, skeptical, or resistant. Emotional consumption, in turn, functions as a moderator that amplifies or weakens the initial tendencies through resonance or rejection, thereby shaping the intensity of the discussion — ranging from enthusiastic agreement to indifferent rejection.

In the context of globalization, the cultural communication of video games is far from a one-way transmission of information; rather, it is a tripartite negotiation among the encoder's intent, the audience's identity, and their emotional experiences. This interactive mechanism suggests that the international dissemination of games requires the precise encoding of cultural elements and a consideration of diverse audience identities and emotional expectations. Games can foster genuine cross-cultural communication by providing multiple points of entry for meaning-making.

7. Conclusions

The international dissemination of BMW is not a one-way cultural export but a dynamic negotiation process between the encoder (developers) and the decoders (international players). In this process, the construction of Chineseness is shaped not only by the developers' multimodal semiotic strategies including visual spectacles, auditory landscapes, and narrative motifs but also by the dual influence of international players' identification and emotional feedback, forming a continuously evolving and reconstructed dynamic process.

The game's encoding strategies enhance the recognizability of Chineseness by deeply embedding *Journey to the West* motifs, crafting regionally distinctive mythical creatures, and integrating Chinese philosophical thought. However, international players are not passive recipients; rather, they engage in dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional decoding within the framework of their cultural backgrounds. As a result, Chineseness manifests in diverse forms during cross-cultural communication. Balancing global expansion with local expression thus emerges as a major challenge for the game's dissemination. Two critical issues are particularly prominent:

First, stereotypes influence the reception and transmission of Chineseness. Due to pre-existing cultural frameworks, some international players may interpret the game

through an orientalist lens, reducing it to an exotic spectacle or reinforcing stereotypes about Chinese culture. For instance, they may focus solely on the game's visual aesthetics while overlooking its underlying philosophical connotations, leading to a superficial consumption of Chineseness.

Second, cultural barriers may result in misinterpretation or even rejection. When the game's cultural symbols extend beyond the audience's cognitive framework or lack effective cross-cultural explanatory mechanisms, semantic discontinuities may lead to misunderstandings. For example, Tianting (Heaven) is not merely a mythological space but also a metaphor for the feudal hierarchical system; translating it directly as heaven may weaken its cultural specificity and erase its original socio-symbolic meaning. Such misinterpretations could contribute to cultural discounting and even provoke resistance among certain players.

This study finds that the international dissemination of BMW presents a negotiated cultural identification. Chineseness is not a static concept but is continuously reshaped through interactions among different cultural communities. This phenomenon further highlights the double-edged effect of video games on cross-cultural communication: on one hand, as cultural media, games can facilitate new cross-cultural understandings, offering global players an immersive experience of Chinese culture; on the other hand, asymmetries in cultural encoding and decoding may reinforce pre-existing cultural biases.

Video games are not merely entertainment products but also new arenas for cultural dialogue in the digital age. The case of BMW demonstrates that the international dissemination of Chineseness requires the joint participation of developers, players, and academia. It is essential to respect the complexity of cultural symbols and acknowledge the agency of decoders. Looking ahead, as technological advancements and globalization continue to accelerate, video games emerge as the ninth art that transcends cultural boundaries. Achieving harmony in diversity and fostering genuine global cultural dialogue in this process will be a crucial challenge for academia and the industry.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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