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A Player Reception Study of Black Myth: Wukong: The Translation of Culturally Specific In-game Items

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Abstract

The English and Chinese video game markets are the largest worldwide, resulting in high demand for localization between these languages. In the Chinese-to-English direction, this has traditionally involved highly culture-specific video games based on Chinese history or inspired by Chinese literature, which were often approached through text-only, lower-budget partial localizations. These practices have gained increasing academic attention in recent years. More recently, however, several higher-budget titles have been localized into English and widely publicized on the global stage, the most prominent being *Black Myth: Wukong*, an action role-playing game (ARPG) inspired by the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*. This study investigates the approaches used to translate culturally specific in-game items with interactive properties and examines how players have received these translations. By integrating elements of corpus design with player reception research, the study demonstrates that foreignizing strategies can enhance a sense of cultural immersion, while domesticating strategies can facilitate a smoother interactive gaming experience. It also shows that attempting to achieve both simultaneously presents significant challenges. Moreover, the strong tendency toward foreignizing approaches challenges the notion that such games have been localized in a traditional sense and instead points to a more hesitant "journey west."

Keywords: Black Myth: Wukong, Chinese video game localization, player reception, action role playing game (ARPG), CSIs, immersion, interactivity.

1 Introduction

This article involves a corpus-based study contextualized with reception-based data. It focuses on the popular Chinese action role-playing game (ARPG) *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024), which boasts the most concurrent players at launch (over 37 million) in a single-player game on Steam of all time (Dinsdale, 2024), and won awards for Best Action and Player's Voice at The Game Awards (King, 2024). Moreover, it

investigates the approaches used to translate interactive culturally specific in-game items. It also seeks to reveal how players in a target Anglophone locale have received these translations, and whether the translations helped or hindered immersion and the interactive experience. The research aims to address these questions:

1. What translation approaches have been used for culturally specific in-game items?
2. How were the translation approaches received by the players?
3. Did the approaches help or hinder the sense or immersion or interactive experience?

Chinese-to-English is a major language pair in video game localization, and it is fraught with challenges. As Robertson (2025, 6–7) observes, not only is there a large linguistic difference between Chinese and English, but many Chinese video games are highly culturally specific and take inspiration from Chinese history, literature, or both. This means such video game texts contain many culture-specific items (CSIs), which Aixelá (1996, 58) describes as source-culture text items that are problematic to translate because of their non-existence in the target culture, or because they generate a different intertextual status between source and target cultures.

In research conducted on the translation of highly culturally specific Chinese RPGs, Robertson (2024, 2025) discovered that CSIs in video games can have different interactive properties not present in traditional text translation or audiovisual translation (AVT). Furthermore, this research revealed that four teams of experienced professional translators approached CSIs differently based on their interactive properties. In general, less interactive CSIs, such as quest items that can only be used in crafting, were translated using strategies that more closely conveyed the source culture, whereas more interactive CSIs, such as usable items that have a direct impact on gameplay, were translated using strategies more aligned with target-culture norms and expectations. Much can therefore be learned by observing the translation of CSIs that are also in-game items with different interactive properties.

In addition to developing highly culturally specific video games, China also has the largest video game market in the world, valued at $48.7 bn with 710.1 million gamers, followed by the US, worth $47.6 bn with 219.8 million gamers (Newzoo, 2025). When considering that other Anglophone locales, such as the UK and Canada, also feature in the top ten video game markets (Newzoo, 2025), it follows that there is a high demand for localization between Chinese and English video games. This has been more apparent over the past decade, with titles such as *Arena of Valor* (TiMi Studio Group 2018, Tencent Games), *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020, HoYoverse), *Where Winds Meet* (Everstone Studio, NetEase Inc. 2024), and *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024).

Owing to its popularity, cultural specificity, and recent release, *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024) was selected as the focus of this study. It was inspired by the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West* (Wu Cheng'en, 1592), set in the Tang Dynasty

(619–907 CE). As Robertson (2025, 21) writes, "The tale is rich with Chinese folklore, as well as Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian ideology," and therefore it follows that the game is highly culturally specific. The original novel has been translated into English by various translators, including Arthur Waley (1958) and Anthony C. Yu (1983). Additionally, it was loosely adapted into a popular television series in Japan that was released in the UK as *Monkey* (1978), which gained status as a cult classic and spread to other Anglophone locales (Croot, 2021). Indeed, these would have been more useful reference materials for translators if *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024) had been a faithful adaptation of the novel; however, it is set after *Journey to the West* and contains both existing and many new CSIs.

2 Cultural Specificity in the Translation of Chinese to English Video Games

Fung (2014, 56–58) explains that the emergence of highly culturally specific Chinese video games is not solely a phenomenon that can be attributed to China's creative sector, but also a product of the relationship between it and the Chinese government. This has resulted in the development of video games with themes containing educational values that can promote a sense of patriotism among players. As such, this unique blend of cultural specificity has drawn the attention of several researchers.

Hsu (2020), as well as Wu and Chen (2020), have conducted research in this area. They all utilized elements of Venuti's (1995) theory of domestication and foreignization, which represent two culturally dichotic approaches to translation facilitated through different translation strategies. In Venuti's words, domestication entails "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home," and foreignization places "an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (2018, 15). Moreover, Shuttleworth and Cowie (1997, 59) remark that domestication results in translations that are transparent and fluent, minimizing the strangeness of the foreign text for TL readers, whereas foreignization entails a deliberate break from target-culture conventions by preserving foreign elements of the source text. Previous research focusing on localizations between Japanese and English has pointed toward a tendency for domesticating approaches, as Mangiron (2018, 129) writes:

> *The localisation industry has largely tended towards adaptation and domestication, particularly when localising Japanese games, but without really asking players whether they prefer such strategies or if they would rather enjoy playing games that preserve some of their original flavour.*

However, this has not been the general case in localizations between Chinese and English. For example, Hsu (2020) states that a domesticating approach can be problematic when translating highly culturally specific content in Chinese games related to historical events. Additionally, Wu and Chen (2020) observe that players of games in English in Southeast Asian locales, such as Indonesia, prefer foreignizing approaches, especially when it comes to the translation of character names. Furthermore, the author of this research has worked as a Chinese-to-English video game translator for over a decade and has often read client briefs advocating more foreignizing approaches.

Robertson (2024, 2025) delved further into the translation of CSIs in Chinese-to-English video game localization by using a quasi-experimental case study approach. This involved analyzing the work of four translation teams from Keywords Studios (2025), an international technical and creative service provider to the global video game industry. The teams localized a simulated Chinese wuxia (meaning martial hero) RPG text via the partial localization model. As explained by Robertson (2025, 58–61), this model is typically used in lower-budget projects and primarily involves working with text only, which can mean no access to audio content such as voiceovers, visual content such as screenshots, or any interactive content from the full game. The ST was created by a game text writer based on categories of CSIs, as well as genre-specific narratives found in the first chapters of five popular wuxia RPG games: *Jianwang 3 Fingertip Jianghu* (Tencent 2019), *Justice Online* (NetEase Inc. 2019), *A Dream of Jianghu* (NetEase 2019), *Moonlight Blade Mobile* (Tencent Games 2019), and *Gujian 3* (Aurogon Info & Tech 2018; Wangyuan Shengtang). The games were selected based on the highest number of recorded downloads and ranged from 1.3 million to 20 million (Robertson 2025, 64). This resulted in a game text of 1,650 words that simulated the first chapter of a wuxia RPG. The teams were also provided with a simulated client brief, created by Keywords Studios based on projects for similar games, which encouraged approaches that preserved elements of the source culture. The game text contained forty-four culturally specific terms (fitting within 13 categories of CSIs), and each was translated by four teams, resulting in a total of 176 CSI translations. Robertson (2024, 2025) found that foreignizing approaches were used 54% of the time, while domesticating approaches were used 30% of the time. Moreover, a hybrid approach using both foreignizing and domesticating strategies was used in 8% of CSIs, and another 8% of CSIs were translated equally using either domesticating or foreignizing approaches.

This foreignizing tendency mostly adhered to the client brief and was most noticeable for CSIs such as the names of historical figures or historical organizations, as well as the names of fictional characters and fictional martial arts sects. During interviews, the linguists indicated that they primarily used these approaches based on transmedial knowledge, shaped by the way CSIs have been translated in various other forms of media, such as novels, video games, and TV shows. This closer adherence to the client

brief (or commission) resulted in a tendency toward foreignizing approaches, which echoed the trends identified by Hao Hsu (2020) and Zhiwei Wu and Zuojia Chen (2020).

From a functionalist perspective, close adherence to the commission directly corresponds with skopos theory (Vermeer, 1998/2002), in which the purpose of the translation, as defined in the commission, is placed above other considerations, such as coherence or fidelity. However, 30% of the CSIs were rendered using domesticating approaches, which represented a step away from the client brief. This occurred more frequently with categories of CSIs that had interactive functions, such as usable items, and this discovery marked the genesis of the concept of interactive CSIs. In such cases, the linguists consistently pointed out that these CSIs had functional or interactive properties and that they needed to be translated clearly to aid player comprehension and facilitate a smoother experience.

This seemingly contradicts the importance of the commission in skopos theory, but it makes sense when considering how Bernal-Merino (2015, 98) reconceptualized video game translation as the translation of multimedia interactive entertainment software (TMIES), in which the "I" stands for interactive. Bernal-Merino (2018, 130) refers to the way in which textual, audio, graphical, and interactive elements can work in unison for an optimal gaming experience and describes this as polysemiotic consistency. This reflects how each semiotic layer is carefully considered to prevent what Bernal-Merino (2016, 34) refers to as polysemiotic dissonance, which disrupts gameplay. In terms of functionalist theory, this move away from the commission to give players what they need resonates with UCT (user-centered translation), as proposed by Suojanen, Koskinen, and Tuominen (2015, 1), in which "the central role of the user, or reader, in the translation process" is prioritized. Accordingly, the translation of more interactive CSIs in Robertson (2024, 2025) was shaped more by function and interactive properties than by what was stipulated in the client brief.

This phenomenon was described as *windows of interaction* (Robertson 2025, 183–185) and refers to the action of simultaneously rendering elements of a game with more foreignizing approaches, as per the client brief, to maintain the authenticity of the source culture in as many areas as possible, while utilizing domesticating approaches for elements relating to interactivity to facilitate a smoother gaming experience. This meets most of the criteria of the commission but also strongly resonates with the concept of UCT (Suojanen, Koskinen, and Tuominen, 2015) and therefore presents a more nuanced perspective on how translators mediate such cultural decisions. It also echoes Bernal-Merino (2020, 298): "the concept of playability becomes essential when determining whether a translation is fit-for-purpose." Under such circumstances, players are transported to a faraway land with unfamiliar surroundings but can still understand the names of abilities and how to use items.

The translation of CSIs in Chinese-to-English video game localization has been explored in the aforementioned studies but could be further contextualized with a player reception-based study. Deckert and Hejduk (2024, 2) reason that the collection and analysis of user data could be highly productive, especially in the case of multimodal products such as video games. Moreover, Deckert and Hejduk (2024, 3) also explain that while studies have explored the challenges of video game translation, researchers have mainly hypothesized about the effects of translation decisions. There have nevertheless been some player reception-based studies. The first was undertaken by O'Hagan (2009), conducted on a small scale with only one participant, and focused on how overall player experience can enhance cross-cultural game design. O'Hagan saw potential in conducting such studies on a larger scale and did so with Flanagan (O'Hagan, 2016). This approach was also adopted by Mangiron (2014), who focused on the quality of localized versions of games. These studies established player reception as a rich ground for research. However, aside from an ongoing research project focusing on the reception of Chinese-to-English video game localization (Stafford, 2025), there are no existing studies on the reception of CSIs translated in Chinese-to-English localization. Therefore, this study provides valuable feedback on how different approaches to the translation of highly culturally specific Chinese video games can impact immersion and the interactive experience.

3 Methodology

The research design includes two main stages: (1) a targeted corpus study, which involved the selection of CSIs, and (2) the identification of translation approaches and strategies (3.1). This was followed by a reception study component involving interviews regarding the selected CSIs (3.2). After the data were presented in the results, a discussion followed that constructed a narrative around the main trends.

3.1 Corpus Component: Collection and Analysis of CSIs

While there are six chapters in the game, this task focused on CSIs occurring in chapter one. The first stage involved the selection of CSIs from chapter one of the game, which were analyzed in terms of general cultural approach (domesticating or foreignizing) and specific translation strategies. This directly addressed the first research question. The analysis of all six chapters would not be feasible in a smaller study, but Robertson (2025, 65) reflects that the first chapter of an RPG tends to include many elements present throughout the rest of the game, including an introduction to key non-playable characters (NPCs), essential game functions, and the general plot (cf. Kramarzewski & Nucci 2023, 188, 299). Indeed, as stated by Suckling and Walton (2017, 138–139), a beginning chapter of a video game should feature environmental storytelling, in which

elements of the story unfold through play, which can "seamlessly enhance both our understanding of the story and requirements of gameplay." Therefore, much can be revealed by exploring an opening game chapter. The Chinese source text and English translations of CSIs were gathered from chapter one by switching between the English and Chinese language options.

While the game is based on Chinese literature and mythology, not every term can be considered culturally specific; therefore, focus was placed on items that were culturally specific to areas such as Chinese literature, mythology, cosmology, ideology, martial arts, and traditional Chinese medicine. For instance, items such as yarn, which can be used to craft other items in the game, are more ubiquitous across many cultures worldwide and are not culturally specific or the target of this study, whereas items such as a Celestial Taiyi Pill, referring to the Chinese concept of the primordial unity of yin and yang, were selected. Moreover, this study focuses on CSIs that are in-game items. This engages with the work of Robertson (2024, 2025), who demonstrated how professional translators used different strategies in the translation of in-game items depending on their interactive properties, with less interactive items mainly being translated using foreignizing strategies, and more interactive items being intentionally translated using more domesticating strategies to facilitate a smoother gaming experience. A comparison of the translation of in-game items with different interactive properties therefore provides a useful site of comparison. Indeed, *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024) contains many in-game items, and in a playthrough conducted by the author, a total of 14 in-game items were found in chapter one that were CSIs with different interactive properties.

3.2 Reception Component: Player Interviews

The second stage involved interviewing players who had completed Chapter One and therefore encountered the relevant CSIs. Before the interviews, this project received ethical approval from the Research Policy and Ethics Team of Newcastle University. The main linguistic criterion for the selection of players was that their first language was English and that they had played the English localization. Participants were then given a personal information sheet about the goals of this research and asked to carefully read and sign the consent form before the interviews took place.

Semi-structured interviews were used to ascertain the players' opinions about each of the in-game items featured in this study. Participants were first asked why they played the game, whether they had any knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, and which age group they belonged to, after which the questions moved to more specific areas. Players were asked how they felt about the names of the items in terms of how well they fit the environment of the game world, using a Likert-like scale of 1–10, where one represented a poor fit, a mid-range score of 5–6 was more neutral, and ten

represented a perfect fit. A scale of 1–10 was selected over a scale of 1–5, as it can result in a more nuanced spread of data. Players were then asked whether this helped or hindered the sense of immersion, to promote further relevant discussion and justify the scores. Next, they were asked how clearly the names of the items corresponded with their functions, again using a scale of 1–10, followed by a similar question regarding whether this helped or hindered the gaming experience. In this sense, the first score related to cultural immersion within a mythological Chinese setting, and the second focused on the interactive gameplay experience. These addressed the second research question. The questions for each CSI entry were as follows:

- How well did the name fit the environment of the gaming world, from 1–10, with 1 being a poor fit, and 10 being a perfect fit?
- Did this help or hinder your sense of immersion? If so, how?
- How clearly did the name fit its function in the game, from 1–10, with 1 being completely unclear, and 10 being perfectly clear?
- Did this help or hinder your experience of playing the game?

Once the CSI data and the interview data were collected and analyzed in the results (section 4), there was scope for a deeper discussion of aspects of immersion and interactivity through play. The third research question was explored in greater depth in the discussion (section 5) through in-depth examples and comments taken from the interviews.

4 Results

Section 4.1 reveals the cultural approaches and translation strategies used to localize the categories of CSIs in the opening chapter of *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024). Section 4.2 then establishes the basic background information of the anonymized participants. Finally, section 4.3 presents the results of both the corpus analysis and the player reception interviews. In sum, both the first and second research questions have been addressed.

4.1 Cultural Approaches, and Translation Strategies

The individual translation strategies observed in the translation of the opening chapter of the game can be listed under domesticating approaches and foreignizing approaches. Many of these common translation strategies were also present in the results of Robertson (2025, 80–82). The strategies are presented in the table below.

Table 1. ***Translation Strategies***

Strategies belonging to the domesticating approach	
Omission	when elements of the source text are omitted.
Addition	something new is added to the translation that was not included or implied in the source text.
Substitution	a problematic element of a CSI is replaced. This results in a general transfer of sense, but with some change and cultural loss.
Generalisation	a more specific term (hyponym) is translated as a more general term (hypernym).
Concretisation	a less specific term (hypernym) is translated as a more specific term (hyponym).
Strategies belonging to the foreignizing approach	
Literal translation	a direct translation of a full CSIs, or a component of it, without any changes.
Transliteration by pinyin	the transliteration of Chinese into pinyin – the phonetic representation of Chinese in English. This retains the original pronunciation.
Explicitation	conveying the meaning of a CSI, that is implicit in the source language into something explicit in the target language.

As in Robertson (2025), some singular CSIs with several Chinese characters were subject to complex translation processes, in which some characters were rendered using different cultural approaches and strategies. As a result, there were several dual-strategy approaches; sometimes both strategies were domesticating or foreignizing. For example, in Robertson (2025, 82), there was a usable food item 四神粥 (literally: Four Gods Porridge), which was translated in one instance as *Herbal Congee*. While the first two characters literally mean "four gods," they refer to four types of herbs used in the dish, and thus "four gods" was rendered as "herbal," which is a substitution. Moreover, the third character literally means "porridge," but was translated into the more specific target-culture term "congee." Therefore, this singular CSI, composed of three characters, was subject to two different domesticating strategies.

There were also instances of CSIs being translated using two different foreignizing strategies. As in Robertson (2025, 81), the medicinal quest item 僵蚕 (literally: stiff silkworm) was translated as *Medicinal Silkworm*. The character for "stiff" was translated as "medicinal," which rendered the medicinal context more explicit and was therefore an explicitation, whereas "silkworm" was translated literally. In some cases, the same

CSIs were subject to both domesticating and foreignizing approaches. For example, in Robertson (2025, 83), the CSI 回春堂 (literally: rejuvenation hall) was translated as *Huichun Pharmacy*. This involved transliterating the first two characters meaning "rejuvenation" as "huichun," which is a foreignizing strategy, while rendering the third character "hall" as "pharmacy," which is a more specific term than "hall" and can be linked to the domesticating strategy of concretization.

However, in the present study, this combination of strategies was taken one step further. As presented in section 4.2, some single CSI entries were subject to three different strategies, which often included both domestication and foreignization.

4.2 Background Information about Participants

The players were recruited by advertising the study on social media, including LinkedIn, and on fan pages for *Black Myth: Wukong* on Facebook. As compensation for the interviews, which ran for approximately 40 minutes each, participants were given £20 Amazon vouchers. The purpose of the interviews was both to gather the participants' opinions and to provide a more objective numerical measure of player reception of immersion and interactivity, using the 1–10 scale established in section 3.2. Furthermore, the players' elaborations were also used in the discussion (section 6) to better underline key arguments. While it was stipulated that participants needed to have played the game in English, with English as a first language, no other restrictions relating to age or gender were imposed. However, to better contextualize the backgrounds of the players, Table 1 provides anonymized essential background data. The data include age group, gender, and the locale in which the game was played. Furthermore, the table also indicates whether the players have any background knowledge of Chinese culture or language, which might impact the way in which they assess the terms, and their reason for playing the game.

Table 2. ***Player Information: Age, Gender, Locale, Cultural and Linguistic Knowledge, and Reasons for Playing***

Player	Age group	Gender	Locale	Knowledge of Chinese language and culture	Reason for playing
1	35–44	Male	England	No Chinese, but familiar with Chinese martial arts movies.	Online reviews, personal recommendations, graphics, like *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2007–)
2	45–54	Male	England	Fluent Chinese and deep cultural knowledge.	Interested in Chinese culture, knew about the main character, and a family member had a copy.

3	18–24	Male	England	Basic Chinese, and some cultural understanding.	It seemed like *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) and had good reviews.
4	45–54	Male	England	No Chinese, but basic cultural understanding.	Trailers, reviews, and a fan of the genre.
5	35–44	Male	England	No knowledge of Chinese, and basic awareness of culture in movies.	Likes action games, and family member had a copy.
6	35–44	Female	England	No Chinese, but good cultural understanding.	A fan of action and adventure games, and Chinese martial arts movies.
7	35–44	Male	England	No Chinese, and very little cultural knowledge.	Family member had a copy, graphics are good and likes action games.
8	35–44	Male	England	No Chinese, and very little cultural knowledge.	Likes narrative driven action and RPGs games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar, 2018). Also had good reviews.

As the table shows, most players were aged 35–44 and were male; only one female player responded to the advertisement on social media. All eight players were from England (n = 8). In terms of Chinese language proficiency, one player indicated being fluent in Chinese, one reported having basic knowledge of Chinese, and the others reported having no knowledge of Chinese. Six players reported having some cultural knowledge, mainly stemming from movies. When it came to reasons for playing, four players indicated that the game had received good reviews, three stated that it looked like similar games they liked, three reported playing it because it was already owned by a family member, two listed cultural reasons, and two stated that they were attracted by the game's graphics.

4.3 Results: cultural approaches and player reception

Table 3 displays individual CSI category entries in the Chinese source text (ST), with a literal translation where it differs from the actual translation, alongside the English target text (TT) translation, contextual information, and the cultural approach and translation strategies used. Each table also shows the average results of the player reception interviews, which rate translation quality in terms of immersion and interactivity on a scale of one to ten.

Table 3. ***Items: Chinese ST, English TT, Function, Cultural Approach and Translation Strategy, Immersion Rating, and Interactivity Rating***

Chinese (& literal)	English	Function	Approach and strategy	Immersion (1–10)	Inter-activity (1–10)
落伽香藤	Luojia Fragrant Vine	Upgrades gourd	Foreignization (transliteration by pinyin, and literal)	7.5	2.7
三冬虫 (Three winter insect)	Awaken Wine Worm	Upgrades the gourd for more healing	Domestication (Omission, addition, and concretisation)	4.5	4.1
老葫芦	Old Gourd	Refills health	Foreignization (literal)	7.4	7.2
椰子酒	Coconut Wine	Restores 33% of max health	Foreignization (literal)	5.1	7.1
避凶药	Evil Repelling Medicament	Increases damage reduction for a duration	Foreignization (literal)	6.4	4.4
度瘴散	Anti Miasma Powder	Removes poisoned status and increases poison resistance for a duration	Foreignization (literal)	6.2	4.3
太乙小还丹 Taiyi (phonetic, but meaning primordial unity of yin and yang) small cyclical elixir	Celestial Taiyi Pill	Increases max mana	Domestication (generalisation), and foreignization (transliteration by pinyin, and omission)	8.9	4.2
延寿膏 (Longevity ointment)	Longevity Decoction	Increases maximum health for a duration	Foreignization (literal), and domestication (substitution)	6	6.8
伏虎丸	Tiger Subduing Pellets	Increases damage for a duration	Foreignization (literal)	6.6	3.4
清凉散 (Cool powder)	Body Cooling Powder	Removes burn and increases burn resistance	Domestication (addition), and foreignization (literal)	3.9	8.5

缩地青符 (Shrink earth green talisman)	Incense Trail Talisman	Teleports to nearest Keeper's Shrine and fully restores conditions.	Domestication (substitution, and omission), and foreignization (literal)	8.5	7.1
老山参	Aged Ginseng	Ingredient for crafting	Foreignization (literal)	8.2	5.7
紫芝	Purple Linzhi	Ingredient for crafting	Foreignization (literal, transliteration by pinyin, and explicitation)	8.6	4.4
碧藕 (Jade lotus root)	Jade Lotus	Ingredient for crafting	Foreignization (literal), and domestication (generalisation)	9	4.25

A total of 14 items were found in the playthrough of chapter one. Foreignization alone was used eight times (57%), domestication and foreignization together were used five times (36%), and domestication alone was used only once (7%). This represents a strong tendency toward foreignization, as 93% of entries were either fully or partly translated using foreignizing strategies. In terms of immersion and interactivity, there is a trend in which players received most items favorably in terms of immersion, but not interactivity. There was, however, a secondary trend in which the few items that were received favorably for interactivity also scored poorly for immersion. There were few instances in which an item was received positively for both.

Most of the usable items received much higher averages in terms of immersion. The highest score was for *Jade Lotus*, with an average of 9 out of 10. It was rendered using literal translation and generalization. This was closely followed by *Celestial Taiyi Pill*, at 8.9, which was rendered using generalization, transliteration by pinyin, and literal translation. There was a trend in which most of the items with higher immersion scores tended to include either literal translation, transliteration by pinyin, or both. While foreignizing approaches were more prevalent, many also included elements of domestication. However, in some instances, this combination of domestication and foreignization resulted in poor scores for immersion. For example, the lowest average score of 3.9 was for *Body Cooling Powder*, a result of addition and literal translation. The results simultaneously showed that a heavy reliance on more foreignizing approaches with some domestication can create terms that receive either the highest or lowest scores for immersion. This indicates that when the two cultural approaches are balanced in an optimal way, they can better facilitate a more user-centered translation that aligns with the concept of polysemiotic consistency, but when these approaches are not balanced, they can result in less user-centered polysemiotic dissonance. This

suggests that analyzing cultural approaches alone cannot account for the scores that were received.

Items with higher immersion scores tended to have the lowest scores for interactivity. *Celestial Taiyi Pill*, which had scored well for immersion, only scored 4.2 for interactivity. The lowest mark for interactivity was *Luojia Fragrant Vine*, at 2.7. As with *Celestial Taiyi Pill*, it also included an element of pinyin, which sounds very Chinese but does not convey any specific meaning in English. Conversely, *Body Cooling Powder*, rendered with addition and literal translation, was rated the worst for immersion but the best for interactivity, with an average score of 8.5. *Longevity Decoction* received a better-than-average score of 6 for immersion but received a higher score of 6.8 for interactivity. It was rendered via literal translation and substitution.

This indicates that the inclusion of the foreignizing strategy of using transliteration by pinyin may have a detrimental impact on player reception in terms of interactivity, as it only conveys a Chinese sound but no English meaning. Conversely, the foreignizing strategy of literal translation has been linked to items that were poorly received in terms of immersion, as well as others that were well received. This suggests that the application of the strategy is as relevant as the strategy itself. Similarly, domesticating strategies such as substitution and addition appeared to improve player reception in terms of interactivity; however, in the case of *Awaken Wine Worm*, a tri-part domesticating approach, including addition, resulted in a very low score of 4.1 for interactivity.

There were, however, some exceptions, which either performed well for both immersion and interactivity or poorly for both. For example, *Incense Trail Talisman* received 8.5 for immersion and 7.1 for interactivity. It was translated using a tri-part approach including substitution, omission, and literal translation. In stark contrast, *Awaken Wine Worm*, which also utilized a tri-part domesticating strategy including omission, addition, and concretization, received only 4.5 for immersion and 4.1 for interactivity. This suggests that it is possible to meet player expectations for both immersion and interactivity, but it is also possible to meet neither. Success or failure therefore seems dependent on the careful balancing of translation strategies. While much can be gleaned by observing the cultural approaches and individual strategies, there is clearly something beyond these factors influencing the reception of these terms, and this will be explored in the discussion below.

5 Discussion

This section seeks to construct a narrative around key examples that focus on how the translation of culturally specific in-game items can impact immersion and interactive experience. These will be contextualized with anonymized comments from the

interviewees. It begins with the most common trend, comprising examples in which player reception indicated a better sense of immersion, but at the cost of interactivity (5.1). It then shifts to the second most prominent trend, consisting of examples where player reception indicated a better interactive experience, but at the cost of immersion (5.2). The focus then moves to exceptional examples where immersion and interactivity were both enhanced (5.3), as well as instances in which the translation was detrimental in both respects (5.4).

5.1 Helping Immersion – Hindering Interaction

Many items were positively received in terms of immersion, and this was often a result of more foreignizing strategies. However, in some instances, the domesticating strategy of generalization was also included in multi-strategy approaches, such as the item with the highest rating, *Jade Lotus* (碧藕), with an average score of 9. The first Chinese character was translated literally as "jade," and the second was generalized from "lotus root" to "lotus." This dual-cultural approach was received positively by all players. For instance, when asked to give this a score for immersion, Player Two stated, "That's a 10. It sounds very Chinese!" Similarly, Player Six remarked, "Very Chinese sounding, we'll give it a 10. It fits better than all the rest!" The other players gave it similar scores and often mentioned the word "Chinese" in connection to immersion. However, it only received an average score of 4.25 for interactivity. When asked why, players correctly identified it as an ingredient but often stated that they could not remember its specific function. When asked to give it a score for how well the name matched the function, Player Eight reflected, "Give it a 3. You make something with it, but I can't remember what." In general, the players gave it a low score for interactivity but did not seem to attach much importance to this and dismissed it as simply being an ingredient for crafting.

For another ingredient, *Aged Ginseng* (老山参), which was literally translated, it received an average score of 8.2 for immersion and 5.7 for interactivity. As with *Jade Lotus*, most players commented on the fact that it sounded like it belonged to the game world environment, that it was a crafting item, but that they could not remember its specific function. This general sentiment was summarized by Player Four:

> *I remember what it looks like, but even now I can't remember what it does. So, it was in keeping with immersion, yes absolutely, it's a 10 out of 10! Can't remember what it does though, so on that basis 1 out of 10 for function. I think it was a crafting ingredient, but there are loads of them that I can't remember, or what you crafted them into.*

Thus, a trend emerged in which players reflected on how ingredients were simply items to be collected and used at some point during crafting. This corresponds with the observations of Robertson (2025, 93), in which similar items, referred to as quest items,

were often translated literally. Moreover, Robertson (2025, 164) reported that translators justified the use of more foreignizing strategies, such as literal translation, for quest items by stating that they were simply to be collected or given to NPCs, but not directly used like health potions, which have immediate in-game effects and therefore require different translation approaches.

Similar comments were made about another ingredient, *Purple Lingzhi* (紫芝), which received an average score of 8.6 for immersion but only 4.4 for interactivity. Its first character was rendered via literal translation as "purple," while the second character was transliterated as "zhi," with the transliteration expanded to the full form "lingzhi," which is the name of a mushroom and can therefore be considered an explicitation. As with this example, there was a tendency for players to remark that terms containing pinyin sounded Chinese and obtained higher scores for immersion. For example, Player Seven remarked, "I think it sounds Chinese. Yeah, I'll go 10"; however, they then added, "But I remember it wasn't even purple." Player Four also picked up on this and stated, "When you're in the midst of the game and trying to defeat bosses and stuff, you're just picking stuff up and not analyzing it, and it's not even purple, so I'd say 1 out of ten for that." This disconnect between the text and the graphics links back to the concept of polysemiotic dissonance, which is disruptive to the interactive experience. Thus, even though players provided low scores for these items in terms of interactivity because they sounded vague and were not memorable, they did remember how the name of an ingredient was misleading, highlighting the importance of polysemiotic consistency.

Moving on to items that had more immediate impacts on gameplay, *Celestial Taiyi Pill* (太乙小还丹) similarly performed well in terms of immersion, with an average score of 8.9, but poorly in terms of interactivity, with an average of 4.2. Its translation approach was complex and unusual. It involved translating the first two characters twice, but in two different ways. First, the general meaning of 太乙 was rendered as "celestial," which is a generalization, as the full meaning can be interpreted as the primordial unity of yin and yang. Indeed, if this had been included in the translation, it would have resulted in something even more unwieldy that may have impacted the textual limitations of the user interface (UI). However, the same two characters were then also transliterated as "Taiyi," which sounds Chinese but means nothing to most players in Anglophone locales. The third character, meaning "small," was omitted, and the final two characters, meaning "cyclical elixir," were generalized as "pill." Despite this complex, tri-part strategy, the function of the item (to increase the character's magic) was not revealed by its foreign-sounding name.

As a result, Player Five scored it a 9 for immersion and stated, "It definitely sounded Chinese." However, they then gave it a 2 for interactivity, in terms of how well the name fits the function, and reflected, "Well, it's a pill, so you know you take it, but yet again you still have to pause the game to actually read the description." The other players also

scored it highly in terms of immersion because it "sounded Chinese," despite not knowing what it meant. They mostly reflected that beyond "pill," there was no indication of what it would do. As Player Two, who gave it a 5 for interactivity, explained, "From the name it sounds like it's going to have a very positive effect on your character, but you can't really tell what it does based on the name." These comments reflected the general sentiment regarding other usable items that sounded both magical and mysterious, such as *Evil Repelling Medicament* and *Anti-Miasma Powder*, and how the names did not clearly relate to their functions. In such cases of polysemiotic dissonance, players expressed frustration at the need to frequently pause the game to open the inventory screen and read item descriptions before using them during challenging sections of play. This disrupted the flow of the gaming experience.

This starkly contrasts with observations in Robertson (2025, 168), in which eight experienced, professional Chinese-to-English translators and reviewers, who were also avid video gamers, applied more user-centric approaches for usable in-game items. This tended to result in item names that corresponded more closely with their functions. Despite working on a partial localisation with text only, the linguists were still able to distinguish between quest items that could not be directly used by the player, such as ingredients, and items that could be immediately used, such as health potions. As there was no game to play and no supporting visuals, translators could only make educated guesses based on their extensive practical experience. All four translation teams were able to do this and detect different types of interactive properties from the text alone.

This ability was referred to as *game sense*, and it was hypothesised that it developed from both extensive knowledge of gaming and frequent experience localising similar games using the partial localisation model. Consequently, the names of items closely corresponded with their intended functions. During interviews, the linguists explained that it was necessary for items to make sense to gamers. Moreover, they stated that transliteration of Chinese into pinyin, which has been frequently used in the translation of items in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024), was not suitable for items with clear functions, such as medicinal items (Robertson 2025, 133) or consumable food (Robertson 2025, 134).

When considering both the comments of the translators in Robertson's quasi-experiment (2024, 2025) and the player reception data in this study, a more compelling argument can be made against the frequent use of transliteration via pinyin in the naming of items or other CSIs with interactive properties. While transliteration can retain closer cultural proximity to the Chinese source material and enhance the sense of immersion, overuse can hinder interactivity, increase cognitive load, and ultimately result in a suboptimal gaming experience.

It is not clear why transliteration was used so frequently in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024). The examples discussed here have shown that players can be more accepting of mysterious-sounding names for crafting ingredients, which can be attributed to more foreignizing approaches. However, they were less receptive to the same approaches being applied to items with immediate in-game effects. The examples above highlight disconnections between text and graphics, as well as between text and interaction, resulting in polysemiotic dissonance and less favorable player reception.

Crucially, these practices raise an important question: has this game and all its textual features been fully localised for the target Anglophone locales? While many definitions of localisation exist, there is a shared understanding that it involves cultural adaptation for the target locale. There is no doubt that the game text has been translated into English, but there is a strong argument that some content falls short of the broader spirit of localisation.

5.2 Helping Interaction – Hindering Immersion

Conversely, there were also instances in which interactivity received a higher average player reception rating than immersion. A general pattern thus emerged, where translations mostly either performed well in terms of immersion, by sounding more Chinese and mysterious, or in terms of interactivity, by dialing down the Chineseness and mystery while increasing clarity. However, there were fewer instances (just three) in which interactivity received a higher player reception rating than immersion.

The item with the greatest discrepancy was *Body Cooling Powder* (清凉散). This received a remarkably high average of 8.5 for interactivity. The word *body* did not occur in the Chinese and is therefore an addition; however, the remaining characters were literally translated as *cooling powder*. Considering the name, it would be unusual if the item did not have a cooling function. Consequently, Player Three gave it a 7 for interactivity and observed, “If you got a fire debuff, it would remove it.” Player Four further remarked, “Yes, it’s extremely obvious, as there are elements in the game where you are burning up, so obviously if that’s the case, you would use this powder to alleviate that.”

Other players made similar remarks regarding interactivity. This can be regarded as a form of partial polysemiotic consistency, where the name clearly fits the function, but not the aesthetics of the game world. Indeed, the same item only received an average of 3.9 for immersion. Thus, Player Two gave it a score of 2 and remarked, “I can’t say that it particularly fits with the game environment.” Player Eight also gave it a low score of 4 and stated that it was “not really fitting the Chinese theme.” The other players provided similar reasons for giving low immersion scores.

This demonstrates that just because a strategy is considered a form of foreignization, it does not necessarily ensure a strong foreignizing effect. This can particularly be the case

with the literal translation of a Chinese CSI composed of multiple characters. While the combination of Chinese characters can create something culturally specific, as with *Body Cooling Powder* and many other examples, the individual characters themselves may not be culturally specific. As a result, a literal translation may provide clarity rather than cultural flavor.

These examples demonstrate that player reception of interactivity can be enhanced through both domesticating and foreignizing strategies, and that polysemiotic consistency can be approached in more than one way. In these cases, polysemiotic consistency appeared to be partially engaged but not fully achieved. While the translations corresponded with item functions, players did not feel that the names connected to the game world environment in the same way.

This raises the question of whether it is possible to combine appropriate approaches and strategies to produce translations that are well received for both immersion and interactivity in highly culturally specific video games. The answer to this question is yes, and this will be contextualised in the following section.

5.3 Helping Both Immersion and Interaction

Indeed, there were instances in which items were positively received for both immersion and interactivity. This was most evident in the case of *Incense Trail Talisman* (缩地青符), which received an average score of 8.5 for immersion and 7.1 for interactivity. It was translated using a combination of strategies that altered the original meaning, which was "shrink earth green talisman." In this case, *shrink earth*, meaning to reduce distances, was substituted with *incense trail*; the term *green* was omitted; and the character for *talisman* was literally translated.

Despite the complex approach to this translation, Player Three gave it a 6 for immersion and stated, "The incense and talisman parts sound Chinese," and then gave it a 7 for interactivity, in terms of how well the name fits the function, stating, "It teleports you back to a save point along the trail." Player One gave it a higher score of 8 for immersion, reflecting, "Because I assume anything to do with incense would be linked to meditation and spirituality," and then gave it an 8 for interactivity, explaining, "There's a similar one in *Assassin's Creed* where you can sit to meditate and unlock certain functions."

This demonstrates how some players have expectations stemming from genre norms or tropes encountered in other games. Moreover, it shows that it is possible to craft translations that convey a sense of immersion while also facilitating a smoother interactive experience, thereby achieving a stronger form of polysemiotic consistency.

Thus, by combining appropriate domesticating and foreignizing strategies, it was possible to translate terms that were well received in terms of both immersion and interactivity. These more carefully balanced approaches can provide a more user-centered outcome, while potentially still meeting the requirements of a China-based client or developer who may have commissioned a translation that strongly advocates a more literal conveyance of CSIs.

5.4 Hindering immersion and interactive experience

Although some approaches achieved the right balance, in one instance a translation was poorly received in relation to both immersion and interactivity. *Awaken Wine Worm* (三冬虫) received an average score of 4.5 for immersion and 4.1 for interactivity. It was translated by omitting the first two characters, which literally meant "three winter," then adding "awaken wine," and finally using concretization to change the third character from "insect" to the more specific "worm." This lack of foreignizing strategies was unusual compared to other items. With knowledge of the game, it can be argued that the addition of "awaken wine" loosely corresponds with its function of upgrading the Old Gourd, which stored the Coconut Wine that replenished health. However, the players still struggled to connect this domestication-heavy approach with the game world environment.

Regarding how well item names supported immersion, Player Two gave it a 2 and said, "It's a hindrance, I guess. It doesn't sound Chinese." While Player Three gave it a higher score of 5, they reflected, "It could be a bit of a Chinese thing, but not one that I've heard of." In relation to interactivity and how well the name fit the function, Player Five gave it a 3, remarked that the name was misleading, and explained, "You'd think it's a worm that awakens wine or something, but that doesn't make sense." Likewise, Player Four gave it a low score of 4 and stated, "With the word wine in it, I would associate it with the gourd in the game, and that's a pretty fair assumption, but the awaken and worm part, I'd need to look it up." Player Four added that while they did not mind pausing to read explanations and enjoyed the otherworldliness of it all, such names might take other players out of the experience.

Seven of the eight players frequently complained about how the translations disrupted their gaming experience. Only Player Four was as accepting of translations that broke polysemiotic consistency in this way. In video game translation, unintentionally taking the player out of the gaming experience is viewed as breaking a cardinal rule. As Bernal-Merino (2018, 130) states, "the conversation between the game-machine and players should not break down." Similarly, Deckert and Hejduk (2022) reflect on how even spelling deficiencies have the potential to break immersion or flow. This disruption of play or flow can also be framed through Csíkszentmihályi's (2009) flow theory, in which an optimal experience requires flow. As explained by Csíkszentmihályi (2009,

71), flow is achieved when "one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing." This example, as well as others in Sections 5.1 and 5.2, demonstrates that domestication strategies alone do not ensure polysemiotic consistency and raises further questions about the intentions behind Chinese-to-English translations that disrupt player flow.

6 Conclusion

This section highlights the main contributions from a methodological perspective, as well as identifying main trends (6.1). It also touches on the limitations of this study and ideas for future research (6.2).

6.1 Main Contributions

This study provides insight into the player reception of highly culturally specific Chinese video games, in this case an ARPG inspired by classical Chinese literature. This study combined elements of both corpus design and player reception to provide a more granular view of how diverse cultural approaches and translation strategies can impact player immersion and interactive experience. While general translation trends can be observed from a corpus-based approach, the comments from the interviews helped shape the narrative and provide direct user-centred feedback. This can be utilised by developers and localisation agencies who wish to facilitate a more user-centred approach to video game localisation, as well as instructors who train the next generation of video game localisation linguists.

In terms of cultural specificity in translation, this research reveals a more nebulous relationship between translation approaches and player reception. It demonstrates how the traditional dichotomy of domesticating and foreignizing approaches does not in itself necessarily lead to a term being received well or poorly in terms of immersion or interactivity. The cultural approach of foreignization was used to translate most of the CSIs. It can include strategies such as transliteration, which can lead to better player reception in terms of immersion while hindering player reception in terms of interactivity. However, other foreignizing strategies, such as literal translation, can often be associated with favourable outcomes in terms of both immersion and interactivity, although this is also dependent on the nature of the item.

Domesticating strategies were used less often than foreignizing strategies. This adds to the growing observation that Chinese-to-English video game localisation tends to rely more on foreignizing strategies than, for instance, games being localised from Japanese. Additionally, this study shows instances of domestication being part of both the most well-received and the most poorly received translations. This suggests that cultural

approaches and translation strategies are only one part of the picture. More important is how skilfully they are applied in relation to the graphical, audio, and interactive components of the items to achieve polysemiotic consistency, flow, and a more user-centred experience.

6.2 Future Research

This study has added to the growing narrative around the translation of CSIs in the localization of Chinese video games. However, it was not without limitations. A sample size of eight participants does not guarantee that the findings are broadly generalizable in a manner that would be representative of the entire phenomenon. Despite the small sample size, certain patterns could still be observed. Further research should strive to increase the sample to at least several dozen participants to allow for statistical analyses that could enable more generalizable and representative accounts. Moreover, due to the focus on one category of CSIs from the first chapter of the game, there is scope for a more thorough exploration of the translation of CSIs in this game. This could entail a wider range of CSI categories, including the names of NPCs, locations, items, skills, moves, and other elements of the game system.

While the localization of items was sometimes received favorably in terms of immersion and interactivity, there was a strong tendency toward the use of the foreignizing strategy of transliteration, which aided immersion but often at the expense of interactivity, flow, and thus playability. This was applied regardless of whether items were simply crafting ingredients or items with a more immediate in-game effect, and it resulted in a disruptive experience. To some extent, this appears to run counter to the fundamental principles of localization. It would therefore be valuable for scholars to explore this phenomenon in more detail. This could include an analysis of other categories of CSIs in this game. To develop a broader view of industry practice, researchers could focus on other culturally specific Chinese video games to explore whether the trends identified here are becoming more norm-like or whether new patterns emerge. Such research could further explore the line of inquiry opened by this study regarding whether the translation practices observed in this video game can even be considered localization in the traditional sense, or rather a byproduct of strict time constraints, a lack of resources, or indicative of a more reluctant journey west.

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