A Brief Analysis of the Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in the Game Field — Taking Black Myth: Wukong as an Example

Weigen Liu*

Jingdezhen Ceramic University, Jingdezhen, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: Nowadays, games have become increasingly prominent in influence worldwide and are even hailed as "the ninth art." Despite the rapid development of China's economy and technology, the relatively backward development of the electronic game field has made numerous players lament. Black Myth: Wukong, a large-scale role-playing game adapted from the classic Chinese novel Journey to the West, has attracted widespread attention and acclaim from players around the world upon its release. The game contains a large number of texts rich in Chinese cultural connotations, and translation plays a crucial role in smoothly promoting the game's internationalization. From the perspective of Functional Equivalence Theory, this paper briefly analyzes the strategies and methods adopted by translators in game text translation, aiming to provide translation practice references for the "internationalization" of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Functional Equivalence Theory; Game industry; Chinese culture; Translation practice

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of global science and technology and economy, people's demand for a better life continues to rise. For China, electronic games have gradually shed the label of a "ferocious beast" and instead become an important companion in people's leisure time [1]. The game industry boasts a huge scale and broad development prospects. According to the 2024 China Game Industry Report, the actual sales revenue of China's game market reached 3.25783 trillion yuan, with a year-on-year growth of 7.53% [2]. Meanwhile, the actual overseas sales revenue of China's self-developed games stood at 18.557 billion US dollars, registering a year-on-year increase of 13.39%. Having maintained a scale of over 100 billion US dollars for five consecutive years, it has hit an all-time high [3]. Moreover, after its launch, the game set off a "Black Monkey craze" worldwide in a short period of time. The real scenic spots and historical sites featured in the game have become popular, and game-related peripherals are eagerly anticipated by players around the world. Even many overseas players have

been inspired to read the classic Chinese novel Journey to the West, visit Chinese cultural relics, and experience traditional Chinese culture. The global popularity of the game is largely attributable to its translation, which indicates that the text translation is excellent—it not only helps overseas players understand the game's plot but also conveys the traditional cultural connotations implied in the text in other languages, thereby promoting the output of Chinese culture. This paper adopts the Functional Equivalence Theory proposed by translator and linguist Eugene Nida, takes the official translations provided by the game as practical cases, and analyzes some of the texts therein.

2. Functional Equivalence Theory

Functional Equivalence Theory originates from the translation studies of Eugene Nida, and its theoretical evolution has undergone a deepening process from "Dynamic Equivalence" to "Functional Equivalence." This theoretical shift marks a transition in translation studies from linguistic structure to communicative function, providing more practical guiding principles for translation practice [4]. This theory aims to establish conversion standards between the source language and the target language and minimize differences. The equivalence in "Dynamic Equivalence" includes four aspects: 1. Lexical Equivalence; 2. Syntactic Equivalence; 3. Textual Equivalence; 4. Stylistic Equivalence. Among these four aspects, Nida believed that "meaning is the most important, while form is secondary" [5]. This theory provides a new perspective for translation practice, enabling target language audiences to better understand the cultural information, connotations, and emotional factors implied in the source language to the greatest extent.

Functional Equivalence Theory is widely applied in the game field. Black Myth: Wukong, rooted in traditional Chinese culture, contains a large number of texts with profound Chinese cultural connotations. In this paper, based on the game's plot, cultural connotations, and game visuals, the author cites examples to analyze the translation strategies and methods adopted in the game texts from the perspectives of syntax and lexis.

3. The specific application of Functional Equivalence Theory in games

3.1. Translation of character names

Example 1: Sun Wukong (Monkey King)

Comment: The name "Sun Wukong" carries rich religious and cultural connotations. The character "Kong" (Emptiness) originates from the Sanskrit term "Sunya" (Shunyata), which is a fundamental and core concept of Buddhist philosophy, as well as the highest category of Buddhist doctrines. It means that all dharmas (phenomena) spoken by the Buddha have no inherent self-nature—neither possessing sovereignty (non-self-sufficiency) nor substantiality (no real and unchanging essence), and phenomena are empty in their very existence [6]. This concept constitutes the basic idea of the "ultimate truth" in Buddhism. "Wukong" (Awakened to Emptiness) indicates that the practitioner has dispelled delusions and successfully attained enlightenment. If the translator merely adopts the "transliteration" method, it will be difficult for Western players to understand the profound meaning behind the name. Therefore, the transliteration with annotation method used in Jenner's English translation of Journey to the West can be adopted: using the pinyin "Sun Wukong" with the annotation "Monkey Awakened to Emptiness" to explain its religious and cultural connotations. The game has introduced the Chinese image of "Wukong" to the world and directly used the transliteration "Sun Wukong." Although this may cause comprehension difficulties for overseas players to a certain extent, it not only reclaims the image and name of "Sun Wukong" but also encourages

overseas players to learn about Chinese culture.

Example 2: The Red Loong, Black Loong, Yellow Loong, Cyan Loong

Comment: From Example 2, it can be seen that the translator mainly adopted the "literal translation" method to translate the game character names. All four translations select the literal colors. According to Xiaoya'er (Minor Erya), "Li" in Chinese means "black"; Volume 2 of Shizi (Master Shi) points out: "In the Jade Abyss, a Li Loong coiled, with a pearl under its chin." A Li Loong refers to a black Loong. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "black" in English means "having the very darkest colour, like coal or the sky at night", which specifically denotes color and is very appropriate. Among them, "The Red Loong" and "Cyan Loong" adopt the translation principle of "avoiding emptiness and emphasizing reality." If translated as "Red-beard Loong" and "Cyan-back Loong" respectively, it would be overly rigid. These four divine Loongs are known as the "Four Great River Dragons" and are important characters in the game. The translations take various colors in the literal sense as the main body; although they cannot reflect the characteristics of each Loong King, they can serve the plot, allowing foreign players to associate the four Loong Kings with the same identity the moment they see the translations, thereby helping them understand the game plot.

In addition, "Loong" directly adopts the source language-oriented "transliteration" method instead of the common English term "dragon." The "Loong" in Chinese culture is often an auspicious mythical beast without wings on its back, with positive implications; while the "dragon" in English is often a ferocious monster with wings on its back, with evil connotations. Moreover, the translation "Loong" has a certain historical origin and social acceptance. In the 19th century, British missionary Joshua Marshman, when annotating the Loong in his work A Grammar of the Chinese Language, used "dragon" for the English explanation but "Loong" for the phonetic notation, which had a certain impact on the subsequent English translation of the Loong. The "Loong" in the game not only conforms to the image of the traditional Chinese Loong totem without wings on its back, but also belongs to a positive identity in the game. This translation method retains the source language culture, distinguishes it from the English "dragon", and makes the image of the "Chinese Loong" more deeply rooted in the hearts of foreign players.

Example 3: Craving Eyes, Fuming Ears, Hubris Nose, Envious Tongue, Grieved Body, Opinion and Desire

Comment: The game employs a complex cinematic narrative to modernize the expression of traditional culture. Its narrative is structured around the six senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind) and integrates Buddhist concepts of the "Five Poisons" (greed, anger, arrogance, ignorance, doubt) [7]. The names in this example all originate from Journey to the West, a classic rich in Buddhist and Taoist cultural elements. For instance, Sun Wukong is often referred to as the "Mind-Ape" in the novel, so these concepts are likely derived from Buddhism. Buddhism holds that there are six roots within the human body, known as the "Six Internal Roots of Perception." Corresponding to the internal roots are the "Six External Dusts." In Buddhism, "dusts" refer to the "Six Dusts"— Buddhist doctrines define form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharma as the Six Dusts, while the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are the Six Roots of Perception. Faced with these terms deeply embedded in Buddhist culture, the translator dug into their core, closely linked them to the game's plot, catered to the majority of ordinary players, and adopted the "creative translation" method. For the term (Craving Eyes), a literal translation like "Eye-seeing Joy" would completely discard its cultural connotations. represents one of the "impure Six Roots" in Buddhism, and the word "joy" might easily mislead players. According to the game's content, this level focuses on the theme of "greed"—both Elder Jinchi and Great King Black Wind bring about a series of tragic consequences due to greed. The Oxford Dictionary defines "craving" as "a strong desire for something", which focuses on "greed"

and retains the critical religious and cultural core, making it highly appropriate for this plot. In the level of (Hubris Nose), Huangmei compares himself to a god and Buddha, confuses cause and effect, deceives all beings, recruits disciples, deludedly attempts to replicate the Journey to the West, and even builds the "Little Leiyin Temple" and "Mahavira Hall" in an effort to replace Lingshan, the sacred Buddhist site—only to end in total defeat. The Oxford Dictionary defines "hubris" as "the fact of being too proud. In literature, a character with this quality ignores warnings and laws, and this usually results in their downfall and death." This word perfectly aligns with the content of this level and implicitly foreshadows Huangmei's final fate.

In summary, the translations of these names do not fully reflect the Buddhist cultural connotations; instead, they sacrifice part of these connotations to serve the game's plot. Starting from the game's content, the translations lower the comprehension threshold for overseas players and provide them with an optimal version. Such translations will not confuse players with obscure content but will instead attract them to delve deeper into the underlying cultural connotations.

3.2. Translation of character lines

Example 4: Out of sight, out of mind is a fool's task. Seeing but seeing through is what wise men do.

Comment: This example is from "Great King Black Wind" in the game. Just like the Black Bear Spirit in the original Journey to the West, he studies Buddhist doctrines, so his lines are quite "Zen-like." This line is an excellent case of applying the "Functional Equivalence" theory. The original sentence is rich in religious and cultural connotations but poses a translation challenge.

In the translation of "Out of sight, out of mind", the translator adopted the "domestication" translation strategy, directly using an existing English proverb to help players understand; moreover, the rhyme of "sight" and "mind" compensates for the loss of rhythmic structure in Chinese. However, according to the Collins Dictionary, "out of sight, out of mind" means "said to mean that it is easy to forget about someone or something, or to stop caring about them, when you have not seen them for a long time." This proverb focuses more on "forgetting", while the connotation of "avoiding the world and keeping tranquility" implied in the original sentence is not reflected.

The Buddha mentioned in the Diamond Sutra: "All phenomena are illusory." The term (Sanskrit: Nimitta) in Buddhism is like a cocoon wrapping the truth. When dealing with the sentence "Seeing but seeing through", the translator decoded its "Zen meaning", stripped off its religious connotations, translated as "seeing" (i.e., facing phenomena directly), and used the inherent meaning of "see through"—the Oxford Dictionary defines it as "to realize the truth about somebody/something", which accurately fits the connotation of breaking through illusions.

In the translations of a fool's task and what wise men do, the translator extracted their core, adopted the distinct contrast in Western philosophy—"binary opposition", and used "fool and wise man" to emphasize the correctness and error of the two approaches. Although the translations "a fool's task" and "what wise men do" do not reflect Eastern philosophical thoughts, through semantic transfer, they enable overseas players to associate with Western sages, realizing the in-depth transmission of cultural connotations.

On the whole, the translations achieve cognitive effect equivalence and aesthetic equivalence, conforming to the "natural response within the recipient's linguistic and cultural expectations" in the Functional Equivalence principle.

4. Conclusion

Black Myth: Wukong represents a paradigmatic example of what Chinese cultural policy terms "innovative cultural transformation and development" — the simultaneous creative reinterpretation and innovative development of traditional cultural elements [8]. A review of player feedback on localization tells that foreign players are very satisfied with how culture-loaded words are handled, helping Chinese culture move beyond the nation [9]. The global popularity of Black Myth: Wukong not only proves the profound charm of Chinese culture but also indicates that Chinese culture can be perfectly integrated with digital technology and enter the vision of people around the world through innovative channels. From the perspective of "Functional Equivalence", this paper analyzes the official translation of the game and finds that when dealing with words with distinct Chinese characteristics, the translator tends to adopt "transliteration", while for words and sentences rich in cultural connotations, "free translation" and "creative translation" are mostly used. This requires translators to have extremely high translation ability, cultural literacy, and knowledge accumulation. The game's successful overseas expansion and "internationalization", which have attracted global players' attention, are largely attributable to the official translation team—their contributions deserve great credit [10].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

[1]   He CZ, Liu ZZ, 2025, Cross-media Narration and Cultural Communication of Games: Black Myth: Wukong Empowers the Global Communication of Chinese Culture. Journal of Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences), 33(1): 33–43. https://doi.org/10.13806/j.cnki.issn1008-7095.2025.01.004

[2]   China.org.cn, 2024, Journey to the West (Cultural Interpretation). Accessed on August 29, 2024. https://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/2024-08/29/content_117393749.html

[3]   Li XY, Wang H, 2025, A Study on Game Translation of Black Myth: Wukong from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Open Access Library Journal, 12(3): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1114050

[4]   Wang S, 2025, Core Connotation of Functional Equivalence Theory, in Exploration of the Application of Functional Equivalence Theory in Business English Translation Teaching. International Science and Research Publishing Limited. Accessed on September 17, 2025, http://www.issplc.com/upload/pdf/2025/09/17Exploration%20of%20the%20Application%20of%20Functional%20Equivalence%20Theory%20in%20Business%20English%20Translation%20Teaching.pdf

[5]   Jiang HQ, 2004, Context and Translation. Foreign Language Research, 21(5): 54–56. https://doi.org/10.13978/j.cnki.wyyj.2004.05.012

[6]   Fang LT, 2003, Sunya: An Interpretation of a Buddhist Concept. Journal of Renmin University of China, 2003(6): 55–60. http://xuebao.ruc.edu.cn/CN/Y2003/V/I6/55

[7]   Dai Y, 2025, Complex Narrative Structures. In The Value Reconstruction of Traditional Culture in the Modern Game Industry: A Case Study of Black Myth: Wukong. Dean & Francis. Accessed on November 18, 2025, https://www.deanfrancispress.com/index.php/fe/article/download/3554/FE009162.pdf

[8]   International Science and Culture Center for Academic Contacts (ISCCAC), 2025, An Integrative Analysis of Trans-cultural Diffusion of Cultural Video Games Based on the Theory of Knowledge Production: A Case Study of Black

Myth: Wukong. ISCCAC Official Website, accessed on August 28, 2025, https://www.isccac.org/d/file/articles/2025-08-28/78cf202e87e636cbd348e153eabb7c88.pdf

[9] VG Insights, 2024, Black Myth: Wukong: Global Sales, Player Feedback & Cultural Impact Analysis (2024). VG Insights, accessed on September 16, 2024, https://vginsights.com/reports/black-myth-wukong-global-impact-2024/

[10] People's Daily, 2025, Data on China's Game Industry. People's Daily Digital Edition, accessed on January 27, 2025, https://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/pad/content/202501/27/content_30054211.html