

Translation Expertise in Game Localization: Interviewing the Translator and the Project Manager of *Black Myth: Wukong*

Dawei Zeng¹

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author's Email: s2113236@siswa.um.edu.my

Article History:

Submission: September 2, 2025 | Revision: October 15, 2025 | Accepted: October 20, 2025

Abstract

Background: The 2024 release of *Black Myth: Wukong* marked a milestone in Chinese game development, with localization playing a pivotal role in its international reception. **Aims:** While previous research has primarily focused on textual and cultural analysis, this study offers an insider perspective by drawing on interviews with the game's Chinese-English translator and project manager. **Methods:** Employing Distributed Cognition Theory as the analytical lens, the study investigates how translation expertise is enacted, negotiated, and dynamically constructed within a real-world localization project. **Result:** Findings reveal that translator decision-making is not solely an individual cognitive act but a distributed process involving tools, collaborative editing, and multimodal coordination. The project manager's account further highlights how institutional support and workflow design shape the development of translator expertise. The study also discusses emerging trends in Chinese-English game localization, opening further discussion on culturally marked strategies in global game localization. **Implication:** By bridging theoretical perspectives and industry practice, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how translation expertise is constructed in game localization and offers practical insights for translator training.

Keywords: *Black Myth: Wukong*, Game Localization, Translation Expertise, Interview, Distributed Cognition

Introduction

The phenomenal global success of the Chinese 3A video game *Black Myth: Wukong* in 2024 has significantly heightened scholarly interest in game localization, particularly within the Chinese gaming context. Existing studies have focused on its translation strategies (Chuang, 2025; Jin, 2025; Wang, 2025), reconstruction of cultural identity (Lei & Wang, 2024), and cultural adaptation (Zitong et al., 2025) and dissemination (Hu & Zhao, 2025). However, despite widespread acclaim for the quality of its localization, relatively little attention has been given to the translators behind the scenes or their translation expertise.

Translation expertise encompasses a variety of dimensions, including linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness, technical know-how, and managerial skills, and is often discussed using interchangeable terms such as professionalism, competence, and expertise (Granell, 2011; Mangiron, 2021b). Existing studies have typically explored translation expertise through PACTE's multicomponent models (Albir, 2017), minimal definitions emphasizing the ability to generate multiple viable translations (Pym, 2003), or expert performance approaches drawn from cognitive psychology (Shreve, 2006). Furthermore, translation process research typically uses experimental

methods to differentiate novices from experts based on their textual processing abilities, automation, and contextual awareness (Alves & da Silva, 2021).

Nevertheless, these approaches often abstract translation expertise into decontextualized skill sets, overlooking how expertise dynamically emerges and evolves in authentic localization scenarios. More recently, scholars have advocated for viewing translation expertise as situated, distributed, and contextually bound, arising through social interaction within specific professional environments (Angelone & Marín García, 2017; Schlager & Risku, 2023). Such perspectives align with the emerging 4EA (embodied, embedded, enacted, extended, and affective) approaches to cognition, emphasizing that cognitive processes are deeply interconnected with social, material, and situational contexts (Risku & Rogl, 2022).

Yet empirical, situated explorations of how translation expertise is constructed and demonstrated within prominent real-world localization projects—particularly high-profile IPs such as *Black Myth: Wukong*—remain scarce. A major challenge to conducting such research is the restrictive non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) imposed by game studios and localization companies (Mejías-Climent, 2021), limiting researcher access to translators and project managers. To address this gap, this study employs an ethnographic approach within a game localization company, enabling rare access to a translator and project manager directly involved in the Chinese-English localization of *Black Myth: Wukong*.

Specifically, through qualitative interviews, this study investigates how translation expertise is discursively constructed and practically enacted by these localization practitioners. By analyzing their narratives about localization practices, this research highlights translation expertise as a dynamic and collaborative process, shaped through negotiation, creative decision-making, and interaction within a distributed cognitive ecosystem. Rather than treating translation expertise as a static trait, the study offers a nuanced perspective on its performance and co-construction in high-stakes, real-world game localization contexts.

Literature Review

Game Localization Research

Game localization has emerged as a critical practice in response to the global popularity of video games. Regarding the product, studies have addressed cultural adaptation (Carlson & Corliss, 2011; Czech, 2013; Mangiron et al., 2014), transcreation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), translation strategy (Czech, 2013) and translation norm (Onar & Çatak, 2022). Regarding the process, scholars have explored localization strategies like sim-ship models (O'hagan & Mangiron, 2013), translator-developer collaboration (Mangiron, 2021a) and the development and promotion of independent games (Gonçalves, 2022). A substantial number of publications have used Japanese–English pairings as case studies, reflecting the global success of Japanese games (Hadzinsky, 2014).

In contrast, Chinese–English game localization has yet to be the focus of scholarly attention, despite China's rise as a major game development hub (Zhang, 2013). Zhang have examined diverse dimensions of Chinese game localization, including censorship practices (Zhang, 2012), fansubbing and grassroots localization (Wang & Zhang, 2017), and transcreation strategies (Zhang & O'Hagan, 2019). However, direct empirical access to localization teams has

been constrained by stringent non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) and competitive industry practices (Mangiron, 2017). Specific studies on Chinese video game production workflows remain relatively scarce (Stafford, 2024).

To shed light on the professional realities of game localization workflows, several studies have adopted interview-based methodologies. For instance, Jayemanne (2009), through interviews with localization professionals, characterized game localization as a multifaceted and continually evolving practice requiring not only linguistic precision but also significant cultural adaptation and strategic decision-making. Similarly, Fontolan et al. (2024) interviewed professional localizers to explore their perspectives on authenticity and game changes during localization. Their findings underscore that incorporating professionals' voices can deepen scholarly understanding and improve industry practices. Additionally, Fontolan et al. (2022) demonstrated that although player feedback is considered in localization revisions, player agency remains circumscribed by commercial imperatives and organizational constraints.

In the context of Chinese game localization, Wu and Chen (2020) interviewed Chinese practitioners who indicated that Chinese game companies primarily adopt a post-gold localization model, driven by economic considerations, often delaying localization until a game has achieved domestic success, and consider deep localization, such as adapting visuals and game mechanics, as "icing on the cake" rather than a core focus.

Translation Expertise

Expertise has long been a central subject of research within translation studies (Fraser, 2011). Initially, translation expertise was approached from a cognitive psychology perspective, notably through the Expert Performance Approach (EPA) developed by (Ericsson et al., 1993), which defines expertise as consistently superior performance acquired through deliberate practice (Shreve, 2006). However, scholars increasingly recognize that translation expertise should not be regarded merely as an individual's cognitive property; rather, it is a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon emerging from interactions within socio-technical environments (Muñoz Martín, 2016; Schlager & Risku, 2023).

Situated, distributed, and extended cognition theories provide a suitable framework for understanding translation expertise by emphasizing its dynamic, collaborative, and context-sensitive nature (Risku & Rogl, 2022). Hutchins (1991)'s ethnographic exploration of ship navigation exemplifies how cognition emerges through interactions among individuals and their technological environment. Recent empirical translation studies further illustrate how expertise is socially and discursively constructed. For instance, Schlager and Risku (2024)'s interview with professional translators revealed how translation expertise is dynamically co-constructed in social interactions, while En and En (2019)'s interview with volunteer translators demonstrated their negotiation and performance of expert identities in LGBTIQ* migrant community projects. However, these empirical studies rarely address translation expertise within the specialized, multimodal, and highly collaborative domain of game localization.

While general conceptualizations of translation expertise provide a useful theoretical foundation, the complexity of game localization demands additional, context-specific competences. Within the domain of game localization, researchers have identified essential

competences such as linguistic, cultural, technical, and managerial skills, along with knowledge of platform constraints and genre-specific features (Bernal-Merino, 2008; Granell, 2011). Mangiron (2021b) further highlights particular challenges like blindfolded translation (translation without access to the game), severe space restrictions, handling variables and placeholders, gender-inclusive translation, and creativity. Transferable skills—problem-solving, communication, computer literacy, and time management—are also indispensable. Given the multimodal, technological, and collaborative demands inherent in game localization, a distributed and situated cognition approach appears especially suited to capturing how translation expertise manifests in this context.

Yet, existing scholarship has not empirically explored how translation expertise is constructed through actual collaborative processes in authentic game localization projects. In particular, there is a notable absence of studies combining situated theoretical frameworks with empirical data from high-profile localization cases such as *Black Myth: Wukong*. To address this gap, this study employs qualitative interviews to explore how localization professionals themselves construct their expertise within real-world collaborative scenarios.

Distributed Cognition Theory

Distributed Cognition (DC), initially proposed by Edwin Hutchins in the 1980s within the field of cognitive anthropology, focuses on how cognitive activities extend beyond the individual mind, distributing across people, artefacts, environments, and time. Rather than limiting cognition to internal mental processes, DC emphasizes that changes in knowledge structures frequently emerge from interactions with symbolic resources such as language, tools, and other representations (Alač & Hutchins, 2004).

In the context of game localization, DC implies that artefacts—such as game texts, scripts, terminology databases, CAT tools, and reference materials—are not merely supportive tools for translators' internal cognition; rather, they constitute integral components of the cognitive system. Among these artefacts, language stands out as an elaborated artefact (Clark, 1998), where linguistic structures function as social tools mediating individuals' interaction with the world. Following Goodwin (2000), language's meanings are inherently situated and can be fully understood only within their context of use. In other words, how language is used reflects the cognitive processes and contextual reasoning of its users. From this perspective, interviewing translators becomes an effective method for exploring how their expertise is shaped through ongoing interactions with artefacts, tools, and localization tasks.

Approaching game localization as a socially and materially distributed practice has significant analytical implications. It underscores the collaborative involvement of heterogeneous actors as well as multimodal resources, technological tools, and historically situated knowledge. Such a perspective expands the unit of analysis beyond individual cognition, highlighting collective reasoning, collaborative practices, and the role of material contexts. Thus, Distributed Cognition provides a robust theoretical lens through which we can investigate how translators interact with artefacts and collaborate with others, thereby illuminating the reflective, situated, and distributed nature of the localization decision-making process.

Method

Research Design

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of localization professionals involved in the Chinese-English localization of the game *Black Myth: Wukong*. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC).

Participant

Two professionals participated: a translator and a project manager, both of whom were directly employed by a prominent Chinese game localization company. The interview was also observed by the company's manager and several junior translators. Although they did not participate as primary informants, the manager posed one question during the session. To ensure anonymity, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Detailed participant profiles are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee profiles

Pseudonym	Role	Specific Tasks	Education Background
Liu	Translator	Chinese-English Dialogue Translation	BA in Foreign Languages from a key university in China
Beren	Project Manager	Organization of Translation Projects (Chinese-English, English-Indonesian, English-Thai)	BA in Languages

Data collection

Interviews were conducted remotely via Tencent Meeting in August 2024, lasting approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, audio-recorded using an iPhone, and subsequently transcribed manually. Finalized transcripts were collaboratively revised and approved by both researchers and participants. Minor edits were made solely for readability purposes in this paper.

Participants agreed to participate after a formal request was made by the localization company's manager. The translator was not provided with interview questions in advance, while the project manager reviewed and approved the interview outline beforehand.

The semi-structured interviews covered key topics, including:

1. Decision-making processes regarding terminology, style, and cultural adaptation.
2. Collaborative interactions with other localization stakeholders (e.g., developers, voice actors).
3. Reflections on professional development and insights gained from localization experiences.

We acknowledge the limited sample size of this study, but contend that this limitation does not undermine the validity of the findings. Instead, it allows for an in-depth examination of how game localization professionals articulate and perceive translation expertise within their specific work context. The limited number of participants also reflects the pragmatic challenge of recruiting industry professionals who are willing to openly discuss their localization processes, given the industry's confidentiality requirements.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with themes identified inductively. Interview

transcripts were imported into NVivo software for qualitative analysis. The results presented in the following section are grouped in seven key dimensions: (a) Distributed Decision-Making in Terminology Translation; (b) Stylistic Design and Characters' Personalized Language; (c) Rhythm Alignment between Translation and Voiceover; (d) Creative Approaches to Song Translation; (e) Project Coordination and Localization Workflow; (f) Emerging Trends in Chinese-English Game Localization; (g) Professional Development through Situated Practice.

Results

A. Distributed Decision-Making in Terminology Translation

The localization of *Black Myth: Wukong* required careful handling of culture-specific items (CSIs) that lack direct equivalents in English or carry divergent connotations (Aixelá, 1996). Translator Liu noted that terms like “Heaven” or “Oracle” were deliberately avoided to prevent unintended religious associations for Western audiences. However, such decisions were not made unilaterally by the translator. Instead, they emerged from early-stage discussions with clients and iterative negotiation among team members, illustrating the collaborative and distributed nature of terminological decision-making.

A more emblematic case is the treatment of the term “妖怪” (*yaoguai*). Rather than rendering it as “monster”, the team chose to preserve its cultural specificity via *pinyin* transliteration. Liu advocated for this choice based on precedents in Japanese-English localization, where terms like “youkai” and “sake” have been naturalized into English. He convinced the development team that Chinese games can introduce such culturally specific expressions through gradual exposure. The final decision reflected not only Liu’s intertextual awareness but also the team’s shared understanding of target audience expectations and genre conventions. In this sense, translation expertise was collectively employed to strike a balance between semantic fidelity and cultural visibility.

Although, as Moreno García (2024a) notes, *pinyin* is the most common transliteration or romanization of Mandarin Chinese, but not all culturally embedded terms follow the same strategy. For instance, the term “土地公” (*Tudigong*), initially proposed in its *pinyin* form, was eventually localized as *Keeper*. While Liu believed that using *Tudigong* could help introduce Chinese cultural elements to Western audiences, which echoes Moreno García (2024a) The team’s observation that *pinyin* is the most common transliteration or romanization of Mandarin Chinese led them to determine that, due to the high frequency of the term in the game, the use of *pinyin* could increase the cognitive burden on players unfamiliar with Chinese culture. The final decision thus prioritized player immersion, consistent with a functionalist localization strategy.

The reasoning behind these choices further reveals the structure of the localization project. Liu noted, “*The client has their own preferences. We adapt to them as a service provider.*” The project manager Beren elaborated that many terms, including *yaoguai* and *potion*, had been discussed and finalized during early-stage terminology and style guide meetings with the client. As he explained:

At the very beginning of the project, we had a relatively long series of communications with the client, where we discussed translation style and localization vocabulary planning...The

DOI: 10.70036/cltls.v2i4.190

ISSN 3030-3664 (online), <https://citrus.buxdu.uz/>, published by Bukhara State University

Copyright © Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License

(CC BY)

terms you mentioned—like yaoguai—were all part of those initial discussions where we reached a consensus or preference. For example, 丹 (referring to Chinese elixirs) was originally proposed to be transliterated as ‘dan’, as a way to promote Chinese culture. However, the client later changed it to ‘potion’ to improve accessibility. (Project Manager, Interview)

This testimonial illustrates that many translation decisions are not determined solely by translators but evolve through ongoing dialogues with stakeholders. This reflects what Jones (2018) characterized as “a constant back and forth between versions and agents, with edits and translations happening in an unordered fashion”. Terms may be re-evaluated multiple times based on marketing considerations and anticipated player reactions.

While translators are responsible for producing the initial draft, the final version of a localized game text is often the result of extensive post-editing by reviewers, client-side decision-makers, and voiceover teams. As Liu noted:

I tend to choose more classical expressions, but reviewers often revise them into more modern forms. In the end, I try to ensure the translation aligns with what most of us collectively expect. (Translator, Interview)

This comment illustrates how translators contribute linguistic expertise but rarely hold final authority. Their agency is negotiated within a multi-tiered workflow shaped by project managers, editors, and clients. This reflects a broader asymmetry in the localization hierarchy, as noted by Wu and Chen (2020), where developers occupy top positions, in-house localizers remain mid-level, and external translation providers operate at the bottom of the chain. Translators bear responsibility for quality and linguistic fidelity, but their decisions are filtered through institutional hierarchies, market logics, and non-linguistic departments. This gap between task responsibility and power relations is a key challenge in the formation of professional identity, underscoring the asymmetrically distributed nature of cognitive labor in the game localization process. Although the game company, *Game Science*, acknowledged the localization team’s work in the game, the translator’s role remains comparatively peripheral.

Still, such a structural dynamic is not without its merits. In the game localization process, the expertise of different participants can be leveraged, and within this extended cognitive system, culturally sensitive and audience-appropriate translation solutions are co-constructed. Game localization thus becomes a site where linguistic creativity intersects with institutional regulation, and where translators’ agency is both exercised and constrained.

B. Stylistic Design and Characters’ Personalized Language

Beyond the handling of cultural references, one of the most striking aspects of this game’s localization is its deliberate stylistic design, particularly the use of grammar, rhythm, and voice to construct vivid character personalities. According to Liu, stylistic choices were often inspired by other media. When localizing the old monkey’s dialogue, he mimicked the inverted speech of Master Yoda from *Star Wars* to evoke a sense of philosophical depth and age-old wisdom. For instance, Yoda’s iconic line: “Patience you must have.” This inversion became a stylistic model for similar reflective lines in the game. One example is the old monkey’s monologue.

Source Text (Chinese)	English Text (Translation)
空有天赋，不思进取，小富即安，沉迷享乐，想安逸，又想名利，想快意江湖，又想成佛作祖，哪有这样的好事？	Gifted they may be, yet strive they not; Content with little and lost in lust. Seek the ease yet crave the renown. They yearn for freedom yet aspire to Buddhahood. They always want both. Yet, nobody can, and nobody should.

Source: Game text in *Black Myth: Wukong*

Liu explained that “*I wanted the old monkey’s lines to sound old and sage-like—so I used inversion to add some solemnity and weight.*” This poetic structure not only echoes classical English rhetoric but also reinforces the character’s introspective and weary persona.

Rhythm and poetic sensibility also marked the localization of Lingji Bodhisattva’s chant during the Yellow Wind Ridge cutscene:

Source Text (Chinese)	English Text (Translation)
黄风岭，八百里，曾是关外富饶地。 一朝鼠患凭空起，乌烟瘴气渺人迹	Yellow Wind Ridge, a mighty ole’ range, Once buzzin’ with joy and glee. But the pesky rats took hold, A sudden unfold, Turned it all barren and bleak....

Source: Game text in *Black Myth: Wukong*

Although the game retained Chinese audio here, the translator preserved the rhyme and cadence in English, resulting in fan enthusiasm, as many attempted to perform the translated lyrics to the original melody. Even without English dubbing, the translation served as a musical paratext, enriching player experience and fostering cultural engagement.

Dialect stylization further illustrates Liu’s translation expertise. For example, Lingji Bodhisattva’s lines were localized to capture a rustic charm and oral authenticity:

Source Text (Chinese)	English Text (Translation)
小施主来此的目的，老衲多少猜到几许。	Reckon I got an idea why ye have come here, me friend.
心急吃不着热面皮，暂且助你一臂之力。	Haste makes waste. I’ll lend ye a hand.

Source: Game text in *Black Myth: Wukong*

Here, Liu’s choice of dialect terms like “ye” and “me friend,” combined with a Scottish accent in voiceover, reflected the original North Shanxi dialect. Such choices enhanced performability, deepened character portrayal, and enriched immersive storytelling. Liu emphasized that stylistic translation is not merely about linguistic flair—it must align with character identity, dramatic purpose, and player immersion. From this perspective, translators assume a narrative and performative role, co-creating immersive game experiences.

Interestingly, a player in Reddit comments that “*for the English dub, they probably hired a U.S. production team. For the Headless Monk (here it refers to Lingji), maybe they just asked for something ‘non-mainstream’... The casting team thought it sounded cool and they went with it—even if no one really knew whether it was an authentic Scottish accent! (Reddit.com, 2025)*” This

comment reflects players' growing awareness of localization as a production process, and their attentiveness to stylistic authenticity.

The player did make a point that these stylistic decisions were not made alone. Liu recalled that some of his more poetic or archaic translations were later revised by editors for accessibility and performance. For example:

Source Text	First Draft	Final Version
区区庸鄙，可惜了老子的酒 魄.....丧.....倾	You base knave, my best brew is lost! Simplicity.	You weakling, a mere waste of my booze. Die in the void...

Source: Translation Script of *Black Myth: Wukong* provided by the localization company

These edits reflect the collaborative nature of localization. Translators work in tandem with editors, voice directors, and other production staff. As Liu noted, editors often prioritized fluency, clarity, and suitability for voice performance. The stylistic decisions described here exemplify how translation expertise is situated within a distributed cognitive system, shaped by negotiation, revision, and collaborative refinement among multiple stakeholders.

C. Rhythm Alignment between Translation and Voiceover

The rhythm of dialogue is a critical yet often overlooked dimension in game localization, especially when incorporating voiceover. Translators don't merely transfer meaning, they must also align the translated dialogue with the audio performances. From the early stages of translation, Liu consciously attended to rhythm as part of his translation strategy:

Within the materials provided by the client, I always take into account the duration of voiceover and the syllabic stress of articulation. (Translator, Interview)

He emphasized that line breaks in Chinese, especially when paired with a natural pause in speech, should ideally be mirrored in English to preserve prosodic flow.

For example, in the Chinese voiceover, if a sentence is split into two parts with a pause in between, then ideally, the English line should also have a natural semantic break. (Translator, Interview)

This illustrates how the translator, even before receiving audio assets, was already anticipating the sound and cadence of the English version. However, Liu also acknowledged the limits of this foresight:

Some segments I didn't get to see the actual performance or how they were delivered in Chinese, so I might have left out certain elements. (Translator, Interview)

Such constraints are not uncommon, as Liu added:

I think over half of the lines had visual references, but some were missing due to production schedules. (Translator, Interview)

This lack of synchronized access shifted control over rhythm and tone to later stages in the pipeline. As a result, dubbing teams or clients often revised lines to better suit performance needs:

The client was more familiar with the scene, so they would sometimes add content based on the rhythm. (Translator, Interview)

This further proves the constraints of “blind localization” highlighted by Moreno García (2024b). Since translators lack access to the original scenes or audio, omissions may occur. By contrast, the dubbing team working with more complete audiovisual context can supplement the dialogue or restructure it for rhythmic alignment.

Moreover, participants often have different priorities. As Liu observed, the client focused more on comprehensive meaning and performance delivery, while he focused on naturalness and core message fidelity:

I tended to focus on how to express the core idea naturally. But the client was more concerned with whether the meaning was fully conveyed and rhythmically appropriate. So of course there were differences—it’s completely normal. (Translator, Interview)

Although the translator proactively considered intonation, pacing, and line segmentation, the final product was inevitably shaped by editors, clients, or voice actors. These collaborative modifications illustrate how translation rhythm is co-constructed across distributed teams. As Liu noted,

Many of my translations made it into the final voiceover, but some were revised by different editors along the way. It’s a collective effort to ensure the final version fits the sound and animation. (Translator, Interview)

The project manager confirmed that voiceover was handled by an external studio abroad, and the translator was not involved in the dubbing sessions:

They used an overseas team for the voiceover, so the client didn’t bring Liu back in to assist. (Project Manager, Interview)

This reaffirms that cognitive labour is not isolated in the mind of a single expert, but enacted and reshaped through interactions with others, tools and constraints. Translation, in this case, becomes an intersubjective process negotiated across linguistic, technical and performative domains.

D. Creative Approaches to Song Translation

While most translation tasks in *Black Myth: Wukong* involved narrative or system texts, song translation represented a distinct creative challenge, demanding rhythmic, tonal, and poetic sensitivity beyond linguistic accuracy. Translator Liu highlighted the artistic freedom inherent in translating lyrics, particularly for iconic Chinese songs such as *Dare to Ask Where the Road Is* (敢问路在何方):

We typically follow the metrical patterns of English short poems—for example, alternate line rhymes or rhymes at the end of each line. For lyrics, or texts closely tied to English voiceover, we even try to match the rhymes in both English and Chinese. (Translator, Interview)

A notable example appears in the cutscene song *Listen Not*, where the translator rendered a rhythmically and philosophically rich Chinese verse into English:

Source Text (Chinese)	English Text (Translation)
小施主来此的目的，老衲多少猜到几许。	Reckon I got an idea why ye have come here, me friend.
心急吃不着热面皮，暂且助你一臂之力。	Haste makes waste. I'll lend ye a hand.

Source: *Listen Not*, Song Lyrics in *Black Myth: Wukong*

The translator strategically maintained the original rhythmic cadence and rhyme scheme (e.g., snow/glow; future/hope as a slant rhyme), consciously replicating the Chinese syntactic rhythm (“like X” structure). Liu explicitly pursued tonal synchronization, aiming for the English lyrics to mirror the rhythm and tone of the Chinese original closely—even if it meant partially sacrificing literal meanings:

In the translation process, I tried to match each Chinese character’s tone with the corresponding syllable in the English lyrics—so the rhythm of the English lyrics would sound almost identical to the Chinese original. (Translator, Interview)

Such a strategy is ambitious in localization practice. The translator admitted:

Of course, this approach is very risky, as it inevitably sacrifices part—sometimes a large part—of the original meaning. But it’s a personal passion of mine. (Translator, Interview)

From a distributed cognition perspective, this practice illustrates translation expertise as a dynamic interplay between individual linguistic skills and collective creative constraints, including poetic conventions, performative demands, and audience expectations. The translator becomes both linguist and lyricist, performing a form of rewriting embedded within the broader localization ecosystem. Importantly, player responses indicate that this creative strategy successfully resonated with the audience, inspiring fans to produce English cover versions of the Chinese originals (see: (Serge, 2024; Shaun, 2024)). These fan adaptations further amplify the game’s cross-cultural impact, highlighting the interconnected and distributed nature of creativity in game localization.

E. Project Coordination and Localization Workflow

In this section, we analyze interview data to explore how project management structures and workflow infrastructure shape translator creativity and agency during game localization.

Liu, the translator, explicitly linked early organizational support to enhanced creative output. He particularly emphasized receiving key reference materials provided by the project team:

“Beren mailed me a four-volume Journey to the West. It really helped... When preparing the files, having all the reference materials compiled made it easier for me to apply creative ideas.” (Translator, Interview)

This example illustrates how material resources function as cognitive scaffolds, enabling translators to embed canonical references and stylistic nuances that enrich cultural authenticity.

However, the initial absence of a centralized terminology databased or translation memory system posed significant obstacles. Liu explained this infrastructural shortcoming clearly:

“The project didn’t start with any translation software or database, so there were definitely

some hiccups. A large bunk of excel files make the query process too long. I often had to check where a certain phrase was echoed elsewhere... I could only open one file at one time to search for the text that I was about to translate. Without a memory system, efficiency really suffers. Moreover, since there are many colloquial variables of the terms in the dialogue, it's tempting to coin a new one while an existing translation should be reused." (Translator, Interview)

Such infrastructural gaps not only increased operational burdens but disrupted textual cohesion, which is crucial in large-scale narrative localization projects.

The project manager, Beren, also acknowledged these infrastructural deficiencies in early stages:

"At the beginning, we didn't have any database or translation tools in place. Since I have to manage multiple project simultaneously, it took me one week later to build a term base after our translators started translation." (Project Manager, Interview)

These remarks underline the crucial role of infrastructure in supporting distributed cognition within localization teams. Initially, the lack of external cognitive tools such as terminology databases and translation memory (TM) systems placed excessive operational burdens on translators. Once the project manager established robust terminology management and TM systems, workflow efficiency improved dramatically. Liu, for example, noted that the newly available tools allowed him to shift focus from routine operational tasks to more creative translation endeavors. This aligns with Shreve (2020)'s observation that translators, constrained by working memory limitations, offload cognitive demands onto external artefacts. Thus, the project manager's role extended beyond mere administrative support, providing cognitive scaffolding that directly enhanced translator agency.

Moreover, the structural division of the localization pipeline, with separate translators for dialogue and system texts, further demonstrated how external artefacts support extended cognition (Heersmink, 2017). Although Liu never directly interacted with the translator responsible for system UI texts, their shared access to a common term base ensured terminological and stylistic coherence. This highlights the role of artefacts in enabling distributed collaboration and collective expertise, even in the absence of direct communication. Ultimately, translation expertise is neither individually confined nor purely linguistic; it emerges from organizational support, collaborative processes, and technical infrastructure. Liu's literary sensitivity and stylistic competence were thus inseparable from the broader localization ecosystem, where innovation arises from the convergence of human and technological resources.

F. Emerging Trends in Chinese-English Game Localization

As Chinese games increasingly reach global markets, localization strategies are evolving, notably through the selective use of *pinyin* to retain culturally specific terms. This practice signals growing confidence in exporting Chinese culture, moving beyond the earlier trend of extensive domestication.

During our interview, Liu reflected on this shift with both enthusiasm and caution:

Now that the English version like Black Myth: Wukong has been released, this trend (of using pinyin) seems inevitable. More and more developers will feel confident saying, “I can use pinyin to translate Chinese terms”. That said, I think we shouldn’t take it too far too fast. It’s like when Black Myth: Wukong’s developer changed ‘dan’ back to ‘potion’. You cannot rush these things. It needs to be gradual. You cannot just fill an entire game with pinyin terms. That would be like playing a Japanese game where everything is written in romaji – no one would understand it. The trend is fundamentally positive, but shouldn’t become excessive or too widespread. (Translator, Interview)

This reflection shows that the translator acknowledges the symbolic value of retaining Chinese cultural authenticity, but also cautions against overwhelming target players with unfamiliar terminologies. As he notes, too much *pinyin* risks disrupting immersion—just as Japanese games overloaded with romaji can alienate international players.

The translator further explained:

“We should certainly have the confidence to use pinyin for unique Chinese concepts, but we shouldn’t extend this practice too broadly, or it may harm the effectiveness of localization.” (Translator, Interview)

The project manager similarly emphasized this selective rationale:

“First we need to evaluate whether a concept has a direct cultural equivalent in Western cultures. If there is a fully equivalent term, there’s no need for forced cultural export. Only when there’s no exact Western equivalent, or if it’s close but not exactly the same, do we have a reason to insist on using the original term. For example, “龍” used to be translated as ‘Chinese Dragon’. However, the symbolic connotations of a Chinese ‘龍’ differ substantially from its Western counterpart. In cases like this, relating the Chinese term with its original pinyin (loong) more effectively conveys the intended cultural nuance.” (Project Manager, Interview)

Thus, localization is neither a simple binary choice between foreignization and domestication nor merely linguistic in nature. It involves nuanced negotiation, informed by semantic necessity, player expectations, and cultural significance. Importantly, these decisions emerge collaboratively, shaped by translators, project managers, developers, and other stakeholders within distributed cognitive systems. The translator acts not as a passive conduit but as a proactive cultural mediator, an expert whose role encompasses linguistic proficiency, cultural negotiation, and collaborative alignment within production workflows. This clearly reaffirms the situated, and socially distributed nature of translation expertise in contemporary game localization

G. Professional Development through Situated Practice

For Liu, localizing *Black Myth: Wukong* went far beyond linguistic execution. It significantly shaped his professional growth. Reflecting on the experience, he explained:

This experience of being fully involved in the translation of a large-scale project really helped me grow as a professional game translator. (Translator, Interview)

Such reflections underline that localization projects provide immersive and high-stakes

DOI: 10.70036/cltls.v2i4.190

ISSN 3030-3664 (online), <https://cltls.buxdu.uz/>, published by Bukhara State University

Copyright © Author (s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License

(CC BY)

environments ideal for professional learning. Rather than static skill sets, translation expertise develops dynamically through iterative cycles of drafting, feedback, revision, and cross-functional coordination.

Liu also expressed his desire for deeper integration within the voiceover workflow, illustrating that his understanding of translation expertise extends beyond linguistic accuracy:

I hope to be more involved in dubbing discussions... so I can better ensure the quality of what English-speaking players hear. (Translator, Interview)

This aspiration reflects an expansion of his cognitive role from purely linguistic translator toward a cross-modal mediator, who could actively shape the multimodal coherence and player immersion. Liu succinctly captured this evolving expertise:

Being involved in the entire localization process really trained my ability to handle complex content. (Translator, Interview)

Moreover, Liu highlighted his expertise as emerged through the intersection between academic training and situated practice. At the conclusion of the interview, the company manager posed an insightful question, connecting Liu's academic background with his practical work:

I was quite impressed by your resume, especially noting your master's thesis related to classical literature translation into English. Do you feel your academic work helped you in translating Black Myth: Wukong? (Company Manager, Interview)

Liu replied:

Since I graduated not long ago, my academic research was closely aligned with translating Black Myth: Wukong, given its basis in the classical Chinese novel Journey to the West. So naturally, I hoped to apply insights from my academic studies back into my translation work. (Translator, Interview)

Clearly, Liu's trajectory from a graduate to a professional game translator involves deliberate practice (Shreve, 2006), but this alone is not sufficient to explain his expert performance (Hambrick et al., 2014). Liu's localization experience of *Black Myth: Wukong* illustrates clearly how translation expertise evolves through situated learning and professional socialization.

Through retrospective qualitative interviews, this study revealed how translation expertise in localizing *Black Myth: Wukong* is dynamically constructed within a distributed cognitive ecosystem. Rather than being a linear or purely linguistic task, localization decisions emerged from multi-party negotiations involving translators, project managers, dubbing directors, and other stakeholders. These processes were constrained by institutional structures yet empowered by collective decision-making. The findings reinforce Risku (2010)'s reconceptualization of translation expertise as situated and distributed, shaped through interactions among human actors, tools, and institutional frameworks

Three key insights emerge from the analysis. First, translation expertise is a collective achievement, formed through interactions among multiple human actors, technological tools, and institutional contexts. Second, contrary to earlier findings by Wu and Chen (2020) about Chinese developers' hesitation toward simultaneous global release (sim-ship) models (O'hagan &

Mangiron, 2013), the success of *Black Myth: Wukong* suggests an evolving openness to this strategy. Third, translators still hold relatively peripheral positions in the broader development hierarchy, limited by tight production timelines and restricted agency. To fully utilize translators' expertise, translators should be granted greater creative agency, such as deeper involvement in voiceover production.

Conclusion

This exploratory study aims to provide new insights into the construction of translation expertise within the context of Chinese-English localization for *Black Myth: Wukong*. The most relevant finding is that the constraints of game texts and the influence of other participants pose a challenge for the game translator, yet it is also in the process of tackling this challenge that their translation expertise develops. Limited by focusing on one translator, one project manager, and a small selection of texts, the findings are preliminary and primarily based on self-reported data. Future research should incorporate comprehensive ethnographic methods, including direct observations of localization workflows and interactions among translators, managers, and other stakeholders. Additionally, reception studies with international players could help bridge the gap between intended localization effects and actual player interpretations. Ultimately, as the global gaming industry expands, ongoing attention to translation expertise as a socially distributed, dynamic, and context-sensitive practice will be crucial for advancing our understanding of what makes a good game translator.

Originality Statement

The author declares that this article is their own work and to the best of their knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for publication in any other published materials, except where due acknowledgment is made in the article. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom the authors have worked, is explicitly acknowledged in the article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright Statement

Copyright © Authors. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate, and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this license may be seen at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

References

- Aixelá, J. F. (1996). Culture-specific items in translation. *Translation, power, subversion*, 8, 52-78.
- Alač, M., & Hutchins, E. (2004). I see what you are saying: Action as cognition in fMRI brain mapping practice. *Journal of cognition and culture*, 4(3-4), 629-661.
- Albir, A. H. (2017). Translation and translation competence. In *Researching translation competence by PACTE Group* (pp. 3-34). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Alves, F., & da Silva, I. A. L. (2021). Bridging paradigms to approach expertise in Cognitive Translation Studies. *Advances in Cognitive Translation Studies*, 89-108.
- Angelone, E., & Marín García, Á. (2017). Expertise acquisition through deliberate practice: Gauging perceptions and behaviors of translators and project managers. *Translation Spaces*, 6(1), 122-158.
- Bernal-Merino, M. Á. (2008). Training translators for the video game industry. In *The didactics of audiovisual translation* (pp. 141-155). John Benjamins.
- Carlson, R., & Corliss, J. (2011). Imagined commodities: Video game localization and mythologies of cultural difference. *Games and Culture*, 6(1), 61-82.
- Chuang, J. (2025). A Study on Translation Strategies for Localization of Chinese Elements in Black Myth: Wukong Based on Cultural Adaptation Theory. *International Linguistics Research*, 8(2), p10-p10.
- Clark, A. (1998). *Being there: Putting brain, body, and world together again*. MIT press.
- Czech, D. (2013). Challenges in video game localization: An integrated perspective. *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*(1), 3-25.
- En, M., & En, B. (2019). "Coming out"... as a translator? Expertise, identities and knowledge practices in an LGBTIQ* migrant community translation project. *Translation Studies*, 12(2), 213-230.
- Ericsson, K. A., Krampe, R. T., & Tesch-Römer, C. (1993). The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance. *Psychological review*, 100(3), 363.
- Fontolan, M., Costa, J. P. d., & Malazita, J. W. (2024). The Cake is a Lie: On video games, localization and authenticity. *Digital Translation*.
- Fontolan, M., Malazita, J. W., & da Costa, J. P. (2022). Language, Identity and Games: Discussing the Role of Players in Videogame Localization. *Game Studies*, 22(3).
- Fraser, J. (2011). The broader view: How freelance translators define translation competence. In *Developing translation competence* (pp. 51-62). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Gonçalves, H. (2022). A localization tale: localization of a videogame named Sofia and the Barbarian-A Kid's Tale. *Translation Matters*, 4(1).
- Goodwin, C. (2000). Action and embodiment within situated human interaction. *Journal of pragmatics*, 32(10), 1489-1522.
- Granell, X. (2011). Teaching video game localisation in audiovisual translation courses at university.
- Hadzinsky, C. (2014). A look into the industry of video games past, present, and yet to come.
- Hambrick, D. Z., Oswald, F. L., Altmann, E. M., Meinz, E. J., Gobet, F., & Campitelli, G. (2014). Deliberate practice: Is that all it takes to become an expert? *Intelligence*, 45, 34-45.
- Heersmink, R. (2017). Distributed cognition and distributed morality: Agency, artifacts and systems. *Science and engineering ethics*, 23(2), 431-448.
- Hu, M., & Zhao, X. (2025). Game as a medium strategies and implications of the international communication of 'Black Myth Wukong' in the perspective of transcultural communication. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 1-23.
- Hutchins, E. (1991). The social organization of distributed cognition.
- Jayemanne, D. (2009). Generations and Game Localization. *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 3(2), 135-147.
- Jin, C. (2025). A Study on Multimodal Translation Strategies from the Perspective of Eco-Translatology: The English Localization of Portraits in Black Myth: Wukong. 2025 11th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2025),
- Jones, H. (2018). Wikipedia, Translation and the Collaborative Production of Spatial Knowledge (s): A socio-narrative analysis. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 38, 264-297.

- Lei, Y., & Wang, W. (2024). Beyond 'Black Myth: Wukong' itself: the construction of identity from an intercultural communication perspective. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 19(1-2), 29-46.
- Mangiron, C. (2017). Research in game localisation: An overview. *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization*, 4(2), 74-99.
- Mangiron, C. (2021a). Found in translation: evolving approaches for the localization of Japanese video games. *Arts*,
- Mangiron, C. (2021b). Training game localisers online: teaching methods, translation competence and curricular design. *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer*, 15(1), 34-50.
- Mangiron, C., & O'Hagan, M. (2006). Video Games Localisation: Unleashing Imagination with Restricted Translation. *Journal of Specialised Translation*(6), 10-21.
- Mangiron, C., O'Hagan, M., & O'Reilly, P. (2014). *Fun for all: translation and accessibility practices in video games*. Peter Lang Bern.
- Mejías-Climent, L. (2021). Game Localization: Stages and Particularities. In *Enhancing Video Game Localization Through Dubbing* (pp. 79-116). Springer.
- Moreno García, L. D. (2024a). Exploring the official and unofficial paratexts of Chinese indie video games on Steam Pages: Paratextual functions and cross-interactions. *Digital Translation*, 11(2), 116-139.
- Moreno García, L. D. (2024b). Recontextualizing disassembled texts: Exploring the concept of the "Web of Texts" in mobile game "Blind" localization from Chinese into foreign languages. *Babel*, 70(1-2), 64-88.
- Muñoz Martín, R. (2016). Reembedding translation process research. *Reembedding translation process research*, 1-224.
- O'Hagan, M., & Mangiron, C. (2013). Game localization. *Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company*.
- Onar, B. C., & Çatak, G. (2022). Translation and localization of video games: An analysis of uncharted 4 in Turkish. *Connectist: Istanbul University Journal of Communication Sciences*(62), 91-122.
- Pym, A. (2003). Redefining translation competence in an electronic age. In defence of a minimalist approach. *Meta*, 48(4), 481-497.
- Reddit.com. (2025). *I'm sure I'm not the first to say this, but this guy rips.*
https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackMythWukong/comments/1lkr3r9/im_sure_im_not_the_first_to_say_this_but_this_guy/
- Risku, H. (2010). A cognitive scientific view on technical communication and translation: Do embodiment and situatedness really make a difference? *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 22(1), 94-111.
- Risku, H., & Rogl, R. (2022). Praxis and process meet halfway: The convergence of sociological and cognitive approaches in translation studies. *Translation & Interpreting: The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research*, 14(2), 32-49.
- Schlager, D., & Risku, H. (2023). Contextualising translation expertise: Lived practice and social construction. *Translation, Cognition & Behavior*, 6(2), 230-251.
- Schlager, D., & Risku, H. (2024). What does it take to be a good in-house translator? Constructs of expertise in the workplace. *The Journal of Specialised Translation*(42), 2-19.
- Serge. (2024). *"Unfinished" English cover ver. from "Black Myth: Wukong".*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPBIFxqErXw&list=RDGPBIFxqErXw&start_radio=1&ab_channel=SergeS
- Shaun. (2024). *勿听 Listen Not | Black Myth: Wukong | Bajie & Violet Spider Love Song (中英版 Chinese & English Version).*
- Shreve, G. M. (2006). The deliberate practice: Translation and expertise. *Journal of translation studies*, 9(1), 27-42.
- Shreve, G. M. (2020). Translation as a complex adaptive system. *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Cognition*.

- Stafford, J. L. (2024). Janky or non-fluent? A small-scale practitioner survey on Chinese-English videogame localisation approaches. *Digital Translation*, 11(2), 140-161.
- Wang, D., & Zhang, X. (2017). Fansubbing in China. *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies*, 29(2), 301-318. <https://doi.org/10.1075/target.29.2.06wan>
- Wang, Y. (2025). A Study on Game Localization Translation from the Perspective of Communicative Translation Theory: A Case Study of Black Myth: Wukong. *Journal of Linguistics and Communication Studies*, 4(2), 65-71.
- Wu, Z., & Chen, Z. (2020). Localizing Chinese games for Southeast Asian markets: A multidimensional perspective. *The Journal of Internationalization and Localization*, 7(1-2), 49-68.
- Zhang, L. (2013). Productive vs. pathological: The contested space of video games in post-reform China (1980s–2012). *International Journal of Communication*, 7, 21.
- Zhang, X. (2012). Censorship and digital games localisation in China. *Meta*, 57(2), 338-350.
- Zhang, X., & O'Hagan, M. (2019). Transcreation in game localization in China: A contemporary functionalist approach to digital interactive entertainment. In *Diverse voices in translation studies in East Asia*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Zitong, W., Bing, Z., Yiming, Z., & Shiyi, D. (2025). A three-dimensional study on the international communication of Black Myth: Wukong. *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 1-20.