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# Symbolic Narratives of Chinese Traditional Culture in Overseas Games: A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Image Construction

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**Abstract:** In the context of globalization, video games have emerged as significant media for cross-cultural communication and image construction. From a cross-cultural perspective, this paper develops a three-layer theoretical model of "symbol-narrative-image" to examine the traditional symbolic narrative mechanisms in 22 major Chinese overseas games from 2013 to 2026. The study finds that Chinese overseas games primarily convey China's material, national, and value-based images through the cross-cultural interpretation of three types of symbols: artifacts, behaviors, and concepts. At the narrative level, four strategies—genre translation, perspective selection, interactive storytelling, and localization adaptation—collectively constitute the practical pathways for cross-cultural communication, enabling overseas players to internalize cultural meanings through participatory experiences. This research reveals the unique mechanism of games as interactive media in image construction—distinct from the observational cognition of traditional media—providing a new analytical tool for cross-cultural communication studies in the digital age and offering practical insights for Chinese game companies' overseas strategies.

**Keywords:** Chinese Overseas Games; Traditional Symbols; Symbolic Narrative; Cross-Cultural Communication; Image Construction.

## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of China's "Cultural Going Global" and "Digital China" initiatives, cross-cultural communication through video games has emerged as a cutting-edge strategy for shaping national image. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 presented a significant opportunity for the shaping of China's image. Over the past decade, as the Initiative has steadily progressed across participating countries and regions, China's image as a major country committed to peaceful cooperation, openness, and inclusivity has been further enhanced. However, the construction of national image relies not only on traditional diplomacy and mainstream media but also necessitates the synergistic participation of diverse media.

The rise of the digital cultural industry offers new possibilities for the international dissemination of national image. The Annual Research Report on China's Digital Culture Going Global (2022) notes that in recent years, China's digital cultural and entertainment industry has actively expanded into overseas markets, transmitting Chinese cultural elements, historical narratives, and contemporary social landscapes to international audiences through forms such as games, films, and music. Among these, online games, as a new medium born from the internet era, have gradually become significant vehicles for shaping China's image due to their high entertainment value, strong interactivity, and capacity to carry culture. According to the 2025 China Game Industry Report, the actual overseas sales revenue of self-developed Chinese games has exceeded 100 billion RMB annually for six consecutive years, reaching 20.455 billion USD in 2025. This scale effect means overseas games are no longer merely commercial products but have become cultural forces in cross-cultural communication.

Despite the evident commercial success of Chinese overseas games, their cultural communication function has yet to receive sufficient academic attention. Existing research primarily focuses on overseas marketing strategies or the presentation of cultural elements within games, with few studies systematically exploring how games construct national image through traditional symbols from the perspective of symbolic narratology. In reality, the symbols of artifacts, behaviors, and concepts within games undergo cross-cultural interpretation through narrative design, subtly influencing overseas audiences' perceptions of China. Therefore, this paper proposes the following core research questions: How do Chinese overseas games construct national image through traditional symbolic narratives? What are their mechanisms of symbol presentation and narrative strategies? By analyzing the experiences and issues related to symbolic narratives in overseas games, this paper aims to provide references for the creative design of Chinese game companies and promote the contemporary international dissemination of Chinese stories.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Literature Review

Academic research on Chinese overseas games primarily focuses on two dimensions: the relationship between games and cultural communication, and the analysis of industrial overseas strategies. In domestic research, Guo Yi et al. (2023) [1]point out that Chinese game overseas expansion faces urgent issues such as differences in overseas players' recognition and understanding of Chinese cultural elements, as well as corporate risks and concerns arising from profit prioritization. Zhang Xin et al. (2024) [2]further propose that Chinese online games going overseas need to advance synergistically in terms of content, channels, and values to enhance the effectiveness of Chinese culture's international communication. At the level of industrial strategy, Fan

Tingting et al. (2025) [3]focus on the weaknesses of Chinese overseas games in cultural communication efficacy and market performance, breaking through the "industry-culture" dichotomous framework in game research. Xie Xuefang et al. (2025) [4]propose overseas models driven by digital-intelligent narrative, intelligent collaborative communication, and technological empowerment. Recent case studies predominantly focus on successful products such as Genshin Impact and Black Myth: Wukong, exploring their localization strategies and cultural export pathways.

International academic research on cross-cultural game communication similarly presents two main threads. The first is game localization research. Sayaheen (2024) [5]indicates that many games encounter various technical, linguistic, and cultural issues during the localization process, necessitating a redefinition of the levels of the localization concept. Toftedahl (2025)[6], taking two independent game companies in Sweden and China as research subjects, argues that omitting localization planning can severely impact game development. The second thread examines games as vehicles for cultural communication. Bo et al. (2024)[7] found that games can elicit positive emotional responses from domestic and international audiences, as well as evoke deeper emotions such as admiration, identification, and anticipation.

Reviewing domestic and international research, existing achievements provide an important foundation for understanding the cultural communication of overseas games. However, two shortcomings remain: First, most studies focus on marketing strategies or the superficial presentation of cultural elements, lacking systematic analysis of symbolic narrative mechanisms. Second, research rarely establishes a theoretical connection between games' cross-cultural communication and national image construction, particularly lacking explanations of the pathways through which symbols are transformed into perceptions of national image via narrative.

### 2.2. Theoretical Framework: The "Symbol-Narrative-Image" Three-Layer Model

Based on an interdisciplinary perspective integrating semiotics, narratology, and cross-cultural communication theories, this paper constructs a three-layer mutually constitutive model of "symbol-narrative-image," aiming to reveal how Chinese overseas games achieve image construction through traditional symbolic narratives.

**Table 1.** Correspondence of Symbolic Hierarchy to Specific Objects and National Image Dimensions

| Symbolic Hierarchy | Specific Objects | National Image Dimension |
|---|---|---|
| Artifact Symbols | Architecture, Clothing, Utensils | Material Image |
| Behavioral Symbols | Interactive Actions, Social Rules | National Character Image |
| Conceptual Symbols | Narrative Archetypes, Philosophical Thoughts | Values Image |

At the symbolic level, this paper categorizes Chinese traditional symbols into three hierarchies—artifacts, behaviors, and concepts—which correspond respectively to three dimensions of image construction. Artifact symbols (such as architecture, clothing, and utensils) convey China's material image—that is, a form of civilization with profound accumulations in craftsmanship, aesthetics, and technology—through visual presentation and functional integration. Behavioral symbols (such as ritual actions, social rules, and martial arts moves) convey China's national character image—namely, the collective traits of modesty and politeness, valuing loyalty and friendship, and combining firmness with gentleness—through character interaction and gameplay design. Conceptual symbols (such as the harmony of nature and humanity, feelings of family and country, and the principle of integrity) convey China's values image—that is, the deep-seated concepts of tolerance and openness, adherence to justice, and the pursuit of harmony—through plot design and value guidance.

At the narrative level, the cross-cultural communication of symbols is not a simple transplantation but undergoes a complete mechanism of selection, interpretation, adaptation, and feedback. The selection phase follows the dual logic of cultural authenticity and cross-cultural suitability, choosing symbols that both represent the core of Chinese culture and are easily understood by overseas audiences. The interpretation phase transforms the connotations of symbols into perceptible game experiences through methods such as visualization, interactivity, and dramatization. The adaptation phase involves localization adjustments for different target markets to reduce cultural discounts. The feedback phase uses user evaluations and behavioral data to optimize symbol design in a cyclical manner.

## 3. The Symbolic Narrative System of Chinese Overseas Games

### 3.1. Case Selection

This study focuses on Chinese overseas games from 2013 to 2026. Case selection followed two criteria: first, inclusion in the National Cultural Export Key Projects directory or recommendation in the China Game Industry Report; second, deep integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements into the game content. Ultimately, 22 core samples were identified, encompassing globally influential titles such as Genshin Impact, Naraka: Bladepoint, Black Myth: Wukong, and Sword of Legends Online (see Table 2). The samples cover diverse genres including fantasy adventure, and historical simulation. At the symbolic level, all involve the three categories of artifact, behavioral, and conceptual traditional symbols, providing a rich foundation for systematic analysis.

### 3.2. Artifact Symbols: Visual Presentation of the Material Image

As the most intuitive cultural carriers, artifact symbols convey China's material image—a form of civilization with profound accumulations in craftsmanship, aesthetics, and technology—through perceptible material forms. In Chinese overseas games, artifact symbols primarily encompass three categories: architecture, clothing, and utensils. The core of their presentation lies in the dual balance between detailed restoration and functional integration.

At the level of architectural symbols, Liyue region in Genshin Impact is modeled after Zhangjiajie and Huanglong, utilizing next-generation engines to recreate the magnificent

landscapes of floating mountains and Chinese-style pavilions.

**Table 2.** Sample Themes of Overseas Games and Their Traditional Cultural Elements

| Game Name | Genre | Traditional Chinese Culture Elements |
|---|---|---|
| Genshin Impact | Fantasy Adventure & Puzzle | Chinese mythology & geographical culture |
| Honor of Kings | Tactical Arena | Ancient Chinese heroes & legends |
| Naraka: Bladepoint | Martial Arts Battle Royale | Chinese martial arts & cold weapon culture |
| Where Winds Meet | Martial Arts Action | Northern Song & Yanyun culture, Wuxia culture |
| Honkai Impact 3 | Sci-Fi Action | Chinese mythology in storyline |
| Honkai:Star Rail | Sci-Fi Adventure | Chinese-style characters & philosophical concepts |
| Black Myth: Wukong | Fantasy Action | Chinese mythology (Journey to the West) |
| Shining Nikki | Fashion Dress-Up | Traditional Chinese costumes & opera culture |
| Infinity Nikki | Dress-Up Adventure | Chinese aesthetics & opera culture |
| Sword of Legends Online 3 (JX3) | Martial Arts MMORPG | Chinese Wuxia culture, etiquette & Jianghu spirit |
| Infinite Borders | Strategy Competitive | Three Kingdoms history, strategy & cooperation |
| A Dream of Jianghu | Martial Arts MMORPG | Chinese Wuxia culture, etiquette & Jianghu spirit |
| Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy | Xianxia Adventure | Ancient Chinese mythology & Wuxia culture |
| Xuan-Yuan Sword | Xianxia Action | Legends of Chinese ancestral ancestors |
| War of the Three Kingdoms | Card Strategy | Three Kingdoms history & loyalty culture |
| The Scroll of Taiwu | Simulation RPG | Wuxia culture & traditional craftsmanship inheritance |
| Song of Floating Life | Simulation & Romance | Imperial court life, traditional architecture & costumes |
| Call Me Emperor | Emperor Simulation | Ancient governance, official appointment & statecraft |
| Call Me Big Boss | Business Simulation | Traditional Chinese business culture |
| Shushan: The First Chapter | Xianxia Action | Taoist cultivation & Chinese martial arts |
| Dragon Guardian | Fantasy Adventure | Chinese dragon culture & guardian spirit |
| Game of Khans | Strategy | Grassland civilization & Chinese strategic thought |

The pavilions and towers in the scenes adhere to the mortise-and-tenon structures and upturned eaves of traditional architecture, allowing overseas players to intuitively experience the architectural philosophy of "harmony between nature and humanity." At the level of clothing symbols, the "Dream of Wandering in a Garden" outfit set in Shining Nikki replicates the cloud collars, water sleeves, and paddy-field garments of Kunqu opera costumes, with patterns digitally presented using Suzhou embroidery techniques. These designs enable overseas players to perceive the aesthetic connotations of traditional Chinese clothing through character interaction. At the level of utensil symbols, weapons such as double-edged swords and longswords in Where Winds Meet accurately replicate ancient forging techniques, with the forging textures on the blades and the wrapping details on the handles clearly visible. The attack movements of different weapons correspond to authentic martial arts moves, allowing players to appreciate the craftsmanship wisdom of traditional Chinese weapons during combat. The precise presentation of artifact symbols collectively constructs China's material image as an "ancient civilization" and a "great craftsmanship nation."

## 3.3. Behavioral Symbols: Interactive Transmission of the National Character Image

Behavioral symbols convey China's national character image—namely, the collective traits of modesty and politeness, valuing loyalty and friendship, and combining firmness with gentleness—through character interaction, social rules, and action design. Centered on interactive experiences, these symbols allow players to perceive Chinese behavioral patterns and social concepts through participation.

At the level of ritual actions, in the social system of A Dream of Jianghu, players can increase friendship with other characters through ritual actions such as bowing and offering toasts. The design of these rituals references ancient social norms, enabling overseas players to experience Chinese modesty and respect in virtual social interactions. At the level of social mechanisms, the guild system in Call Me Big Boss transforms traditional business ethics into game rules. Players advance their guild level through honest transactions and mutual benefit, experiencing the principles of "cheating neither the old nor the young" and "a promise is a promise" during trading. At the level of martial arts moves, the combat system in Naraka: Bladepoint is based on Chinese martial arts, integrating techniques from schools such as Shaolin, Wudang, and Emei. The defensive Iron Shirt technique, the softness-overcoming-hardness of Tai Chi, and the agility of Emei daggers all authentically replicate the power generation and rhythm of real martial arts. More importantly, the game embodies the martial virtue spirit of "combining offense and defense" and "stopping war with martial prowess" through mechanisms like "parry" and "dodge." These designs allow overseas players to perceive, through competitive entertainment, the philosophical core of Chinese martial arts—"firmness and gentleness in harmony"—and the value orientation of "valuing righteousness over profit."

## 3.4. Conceptual Symbols: Subtle Infiltration of the Values Image

Conceptual symbols carry China's philosophical thoughts, narrative archetypes, and moral principles, achieving subtle infiltration through plot design and value guidance to convey

a values image of tolerance and openness, adherence to justice, and the pursuit of harmony. The core of presenting these symbols lies in the deep integration of cultural connotations with narrative logic, avoiding direct didacticism.

At the level of philosophical thought, the "Heaven-Man Induction" system in The Scroll of Taiwu links character attributes to the natural environment—cultivating in mountains enhances insight, while practicing near rivers improves agility—allowing players to experience the philosophical implications of "harmony between nature and humanity" through gameplay. At the level of narrative archetypes, Black Myth: Wukong takes the stories of Sun Wukong's havoc in heaven and his journey to the West as its main thread, reinterpreting them to reveal the dual themes of "resisting authority" and "staying true to one's heart." Its hero's journey narrative resonates with the heroic adventures in Western mythology, while Sun Wukong's image and the journey-to-the-West plot are rooted in the Chinese mythological system. At the level of moral principles, the charity quests in Call Me Big Boss encourage players to donate resources to help impoverished commoners, unlocking the "benevolent and charitable" title and conveying the concept of "benevolence." These designs transform values from being "told about" to being "experienced," subtly constructing China's values image as an "ancient civilization" and a "state of etiquette."

### 3.5. Narrative Strategies: Four Pathways for Cross-Cultural Communication

The cross-cultural communication of symbols relies on the support of narrative strategies. Chinese overseas games have developed four core narrative pathways in practice, collectively achieving the effective transmission of cultural connotations.

First, genre translation: cross-cultural reconstruction of cultural cores. The mythological epic genre combines Chinese mythology with heroic narratives; Black Myth: Wukong uses the "hero's journey" framework to carry Sun Wukong's rebellious spirit. The Jianghu chivalry genre focuses on individual destiny and feelings of family and country; Sword of Legends Online 3 conveys the chivalrous spirit through plots featuring "a true hero is one who serves the country and its people." The historical simulation genre recreates ancient societies; Call Me Emperor uses an emperor-nurturing framework to allow players to perceive Confucian concepts while governing. All three genres achieve the fusion of cultural cores with global narrative frameworks.

Second, perspective selection: precise creation of immersion. The third-person omniscient perspective suits grand narratives; Xuan-Yuan Sword uses a god's-eye view to present the developmental context of Chinese civilization. The first-person immersive perspective strengthens emotional resonance; Chinese Paladin: Sword and Fairy lets players experience love and hate as the protagonist. Multi-perspective switching presents complex plots; the "Shenzhou Zhejian Lu" chapter in Honkai Impact 3 shows multiple facets of the same event through different characters' perspectives, enabling players to form a three-dimensional understanding.

Third, interactive narrative: cultural internalization through participation. Plot choices allow players to influence story outcomes through their decisions; choices in Sword of Legends Online 3—such as "whether to help the weak" or "whether to keep a promise"—trigger different endings, allowing players to internalize values through their selections. Gameplay integration transforms culture into game mechanisms; the embroidery gameplay in Call Me Big Boss and the calligraphy gameplay in Song of Floating Life let players perceive traditional skills through entertainment. User-generated content stimulates secondary dissemination; the Serenitea Pot system in Genshin Impact allows players to build Chinese-style courtyards, with outstanding works shared within the community sparking broader cultural interest.

Fourth, localization adaptation: precise implementation of cross-cultural communication. Language translation employs a strategy combining "transliteration + annotation" and "free translation," such as translating "道" as "Tao" with supplementary explanation. Cultural annotations provide background knowledge through in-game manuals; the mythological bestiary in Black Myth: Wukong includes stories from Journey to the West and Classic of Mountains and Seas. Value adaptation seeks cultural resonance points; the overseas version of Honor of Kings transforms historical figures' "loyalty to the emperor" into "loyalty to the team," retaining core characteristics while aligning with overseas players' cooperative values. These four strategies collectively constitute the complete system of symbolic narratives in Chinese overseas games, providing operable practical pathways for cross-cultural communication.

## 4. Games Discussion

### 4.1. Theoretical Contribution: The Value and Innovation of the Three-Layer Model

The "symbol-narrative-image" theoretical model proposed in this paper provides a new analytical tool for understanding the cultural communication mechanisms of Chinese overseas games.

First, it advances semiotic analysis from "element identification" to "mechanism interpretation." By distinguishing three types of symbols—artifacts, behaviors, and concepts—and establishing their corresponding relationships with the dimensions of material, national character, and values images, the model reveals the hierarchical and systematic nature of symbolic meaning-making. Second, it illuminates the unique mechanism of games as interactive media in cross-cultural communication. Third, by incorporating the communication mechanism of "selection-interpretation-adaptation-feedback" into the model, it responds to the theoretical concerns of "cultural discount" and "audience decoding" in cross-cultural communication research, providing an operational analytical framework for subsequent empirical studies.

### 4.2. Practical Implications: Strategic Recommendations for Chinese Overseas Games

The findings offer three practical implications for the symbolic narrative design of overseas games. First, symbol selection requires balancing cultural authenticity with cross-cultural suitability. Artifact symbols can retain highly recognizable visual features; behavioral symbols need to simplify complex procedures while preserving core meanings; conceptual symbols require finding cultural resonance points through plot interpretation.

Second, narrative strategies should serve the subtle transmission of values. Successful overseas games such as

Genshin Impact and Black Myth: Wukong avoid overt cultural preaching, instead allowing players to "internalize" cultural connotations through active participation via plot choices, gameplay integration, and user co-creation. This finding suggests to developers that the entertainment value of games is not an obstacle to cultural communication but rather its unique advantage.

Third, localization adaptation needs to move from "translation" to "interpretation." Beyond linguistic translation, greater attention must be paid to the adaptation of values. Future game overseas expansion should evolve from "product export" to "cultural dialogue," seeking common ground amid differences.

### 4.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study has two limitations, which also provide valuable directions for future research. First, the limitation lies in the selection of samples. All 22 core samples are top-performing and successful games, failing to cover the overseas expansion practices of small and medium-sized game developers. These small and medium-sized developers' games may adopt more simplistic or experimental approaches in symbolic narration. Future research could expand the sample scope to examine the applicability of the constructed model across different types of game developers. Second, there is insufficient empirical research on audience reception effects. This study mainly constructs a theoretical model based on textual analysis; while it draws on overseas players' comments and interview data, it does not conduct large-scale questionnaire surveys or experimental studies. In future research, audience research methods can be integrated to quantitatively verify the impact of different symbolic types and narrative strategies on the perception of cultural images.

In addition, with the accelerated application of AIGC technology in the game field, the communication effects of intelligently generated symbols and the issue of cultural authenticity have emerged as new and noteworthy research topics that deserve in-depth exploration.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has examined, from a cross-cultural communication perspective, the traditional symbolic narrative mechanisms of Chinese overseas games from 2013 to 2026 and their impact on image construction. By constructing a theoretical model and analyzing 22 core samples, the study reveals how overseas games convey China's image through the cross-cultural interpretation of symbols and narratives. The research finds that successful overseas games balance cultural authenticity with cross-cultural suitability: artifact symbols present material heritage, behavioral symbols express national characteristics, and conceptual symbols transmit value concepts. At the narrative level, genre translation, perspective selection, interactive narrative, and localization adaptation constitute the practical pathways for cross-cultural communication. Future research in this field could expand the sample scope, incorporate empirical methods for deeper analysis, and attend to the new possibilities presented by AIGC technology.

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