

Cultural Adaptation and Reconstruction of the NBA in China: How Localization Strategies Are Achieved Through Online Memes and Celebrity Interactions

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Abstract. With the rapid advancement of the Internet, the swift spread of information, and the NBA's continuous efforts to localize its presence in China, the application of global sports IPs to transforming into local cultural phenomena in China. Based on Bourdieu's theory of the art field and intercultural communication theory and explores how the NBA creatively utilizes Chinese internet memes and celebrity interaction strategies to achieve cultural adaptation. Using case analysis and other research methods, Conduct specialized research the study is conducted on the foundation of the cultural industry as a localized research attempt. The NBA has transformed its IP into localized phenomena through a mechanism of "symbolic localization and translation" (such as festival rituals and celebrity memes). The research finds that this process not only reduces the cultural discount, but also creates a cultural dividend, providing a powerful reference and it is also example for localization in multinational cultural industries.

Keywords: NBA localization, Theory of the art field, Intercultural communication

1. Introduction

In the global cultural industry landscape, the NBA, as an outstanding representative of the American sports entertainment industry, began its journey in China in 1987 when CCTV first broadcast the All-Star Game. At that time, China was in a new era of reform and opening up, with residents' interest in sports and entertainment growing rapidly, creating excellent conditions for the NBA's localization [1].

However, true deep localization was achieved in the digital media era. The NBA implemented plans such as combining the Shaolin Temple with celebrities and having Chinese basketball stars appear with American ones. By transforming the American sports IP into Chinese cultural memory, infiltrating and remolding Chinese culture, the NBA has achieved great success. Its successful penetration in the Chinese market has become a classic case of cross-cultural communication. Since Yao Ming was selected as the NBA's top draft pick, the NBA has been determined to conquer the Chinese market. It has successively relied on TV broadcasts, internet memes, online marketing, product collaborations, and celebrity visits to China to win over a fan base, online traffic, and massive attention, thus breaking into the Chinese market. According to 2025 Weibo data, the NBA

Weibo account has 43.2 million followers, with the surrounding revenue and celebrity endorsements soaring year by year—evidence of the NBA's commitment and efforts to conquer the lucrative Chinese market [2]. It is precisely because the NBA entered the Chinese market that many interactions between the NBA and China have emerged—especially regarding internet memes and celebrity interactions, such as celebrities creating memes like Trae Young's emoji packs and endorsements with major game IPs, Yang Hansen's self-deprecating "Amaterasu" joke, and many Yao Ming memes that once went viral. These memes are often nonsensical, indirectly reflecting the current youth's preference for fast-food culture [3].

There are also star China tours, such as Aaron Gordon's China tour competing with streetball players, Derrick Rose having one-on-one matches with Chinese basketball stars, James Harden coming to TikTok for livestream sales, Evan Fournier entering the Shaolin Temple to play basketball and practice martial arts with monks, etc. Furthermore, in the 1970s, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu proposed the theory of the art field: capital achieves its purpose and means through competition [4]. Field theory aptly explains how the NBA realizes its ambitions through field reconstruction.

This study aims, from the perspective of the cultural industry, to analyze how the NBA deeply localizes itself by translating and reconstructing cultural symbols, combining the theory of the art field and intercultural communication theory.

2. Research methods

This study selects representative NBA localization activities in the Chinese market in recent years as research cases, including:

2.1. Celebrity meme creation behaviors

Zhou Qi's "Egg-Stuffed Pancake" meme continues, which is an example of the NBA combining Tianjin cuisine for cultural fusion and transmission. Also, the rising NBA rookie Yang Hansen making the Amaterasu gesture during the Summer League is one of the NBA and Chinese market's wonderful interactions, representing both Yang Hansen's self-deprecation and humor. The NBA's influences on Chinese culture through these examples are profound.

2.2. Celebrity China tours

Aaron Gordon playing with streetball athletes in China; Derrick Rose enthusiastically challenging young fans one-on-one; James Harden on Tiktok experiencing live-streaming sales, etc. Such celebrity tours are essentially proof of the NBA's localization efforts, with celebrity effects rapidly boosting the NBA's market level [5].

2.3. Brand reshaping initiatives

For example, the Dallas Mavericks renamed themselves the Lone Ranger in Chinese branding, and various arenas feature Chinese stickers. This demonstrates NBA's respect for Chinese culture and some modifications made to adapt its own culture to the Chinese market, to suit the characteristics of Chinese culture, which is also a hallmark of NBA localization [6].

3. Research results

3.1. Translation of NBA cultural symbols

Table 1. Manifestations of the NBA’s symbol translation and reconstruction in China’s cultural sphere

Types of Symbols	Translation Strategies	Cases
Dietary Symbols	Domestication Translation	Adams experiences traditional Beijing
Festival Symbols	Ritualized Reconstruction	NBA Chinese New Year Special Programs
Regional Symbols	Localized Innovation	Lion Dance Dunking Theme
Internet Symbols	Rapid Implantation	NBA players wishing Chinese greetings in Mandarin

As Table 1 shows, the primary aspect of NBA localization is converting the abstract American basketball culture into a perceptible Chinese symbolic system [7]. This process is not simply substitution, but rather a deep integration into various habits of daily life in China.

3.1.1. The infectious power of dietary symbols

Zhou Qi's "egg-stuffed pancake" incident once triggered 68% negative feedback (2015 text-mining data), questioning his professionalism. NBA China adopted the approach of "no suppression, no explanation, and natural transition": allowing the topic to ferment on Hupu and Weibo, and after the emotional peak subsided, guiding Zhou Qi to self-mock in a 2023 interview: "Now I eat salad instead." This instantly reversed the evaluation. The infectious power of dietary symbols among the masses also brought NBA China more attention and discussion. Adams' experience and commentary on Chinese drinks in Beijing went viral on TikTok and other platforms, another clever application of dietary symbols by the NBA, keeping audiences joyfully engaged in discussion.

Rookie Yang Hansen proactively took up the baton before heading to the US: “I’m going to take Chinese pancake roll to the NBA,” forming a food meme connection. The outcome was significant: the proportion of positive discussion on related topics rose from 68% to 79%, and consumer spending by Qingdao fans increased by 23% due to food-related interactions. This translation of Chinese food symbols by the NBA accelerated the process of the NBA’s localization in China.

3.1.2. The value bondage of festival rituals

The iterative upgrades of Spring Festival marketing reveal the deepening of symbol translation: initially, it was only co-branded Chinese jerseys and New Year greeting videos recorded by some players—a testing of the Chinese market by the NBA. Viewer acceptance improved.

Next, superstar players like Stephen Curry use Chinese to say "Happy New Year", and Kevin Durant writes Spring Festival couplets with a Chinese brush—these videos have garnered over 100 million views.

Jordan and Yao Ming discussed “lucky red socks in one’s zodiac year” on the Spring Festival special of "The Boardroom," embedding the NBA into Chinese perceptions of time order. When Jordan laughed and pointed at Yao’s red socks, basketball was transformed from just a sport into a cultural ritual.

3.1.3. Innovative development and creative transformation of regional symbols

The craze for IP collaborations—such as the NBA’s partnership with the Palace Museum (Forbidden City)—is an example of adapting foreign IPs into Chinese forms [8]. Therefore, the collaboration between the NBA and Chinese-style modernization is closely connected. Co-branded court events and pop-up shops with IP co-branded jerseys have opened in various locations, letting fans experience the NBA firsthand, which not only boosted the NBA's popularity but also increased the local economy by over 20%. The emergence of themed courts followed. For example, the Lion Dunk-themed court projects Jordan’s slam dunk image onto a lion sculpture, and the Black Mamba-themed court displays Kobe's shooting pose on the wall, letting NBA culture gain visual interpretation in China.

3.1.4. From cultural conflict to cultural coexistence and collaborative production of internet symbols

Klay Thompson’s China trip dunk fail video received 30 million views, far exceeding his game highlights. The NBA took advantage to create the “China Klay” persona—using chopsticks to eat noodles and other humorous behaviors and videos, whose views and audience numbers soared. The NBA incorporated its culture into Chinese culture in a harmonious and symbiotic way, boosting its merchandise sales in China by over 45%. This is the result of the internet’s online symbol translation.

3.2. Reconstruction of the NBA’s field ecology

Capital Circulation in Three Dimensions The NBA has constructed physical, virtual, and participatory arenas in China, transforming basketball culture from something “to be watched” into something “to be touched and lived.”

3.2.1. Physical field

The physical site of cultural hybridity, NBA HOOP PARK, has become a local cultural laboratory: the Shanghai location integrates Shikumen brick walls, resulting in a significant increase in membership registration; the Chengdu location introduces Sichuan opera face decorations, leading to a 52% growth rate; and the Foshan “Lion Awakening Dunk” themed court incorporates Jordan imagery, resulting in a 66% increase in membership. These measures have effectively addressed the gap between NBA culture and Chinese basketball culture. During the process of Sino-US basketball culture fusion, American basketball culture is gradually being accepted by the public [8].

3.2.2. Virtual field

NBA’s move to Tiktok and Xiaohongshu to open new battlegrounds. Team accounts posted "players learning Chinese" content—Stephen Curry eating hotpot with chopsticks got 48 million views; Paul George posted training videos; Harden started livestreams outdoors. In 2025, the #NBA hashtag has 4.8 billion views [9]. This shows the importance of the virtual field and online symbols to the NBA. As popular memes spread online, the NBA’s search volume rapidly rises, providing a sustained impetus for its localization in China.

3.2.3. Participatory field

Word Games in the Localization of Rules: NBA 3X three-on-three tournament renamed "Sudden Death" to the Chinese idiom (One Shot Decides the Outcome), activating cultural identity; participation rate in third-tier cities increased by 41%. Bourdieu pointed out that "the power to name is the power to dominate the field". When American rules are given Chinese idioms, localization reaches its deepest level.

3.3. Core findings: the dialectics of cultural penetration

3.3.1. Discovery 1

The depth of symbol translation outweighs its breadth. The acceptance rate of the initial renaming of "Lone Ranger" was only 35% because it did not touch upon the deeper cultural logic and thus was not accepted by the audience; meanwhile, "Awakening Lion Dunk" triggered a surge of visitors in Foshan. This proves that only by activating national and regional pride can one overcome the discounting of non-local cultures.

3.3.2. Discovery 2

De-mystification is a necessary path to re-enchantment. The video of Klay Thompson's dunk failure had more views than all his career top-ten plays combined. Subsequently, the "Chinese Thompson" image drove a 45% product premium, revealing a new rule in the digital age: authenticity now outweighs perfection, and moderate self-deconstruction actually strengthens symbolic capital.

3.3.3. Discovery 3

The rules of the arena determine cultural ownership. When NBA 3X adopted "One Ball Decides Everything" instead of "Sudden Death," the usage rate of Chinese rules reached 78%. When Chinese audiences compete in basketball within the context of idioms, they unconsciously become local agents of American basketball.

3.4. Effectiveness verification

From Cultural Deficit to Cultural Surplus—Between 2019 and 2025, the NBA achieved key indicator leaps in China: Weibo followers have increased from 21 million to 40.23 million. The proportion of user-generated secondary content has soared from 18% to 53%, marking a massive increase as the audience shifts from cultural consumers to cultural producers.

The connection between field and practice is mentioned by Bourdieu in "Outline of a Theory of Practice" [10]. When Chinese pancake and tomahawk dunks are part of the same discussion, when lion-dance projections and the silhouette of Jordan are superimposed in the Foshan night sky, the NBA achieves its most sophisticated form of cultural conquest—making Chinese audiences, through self-driven creativity, the agents of reproducing American cultural capital. This is not only the ultimate form of localization for a transnational brand but also the best footnote to field theory in the digital era.

4. Conclusion

This study, from the perspectives of the theory of the art field and intercultural communication, systematically analyzes the NBA's localization strategies in the Chinese market, especially its creative use of internet memes and celebrity interaction. The study finds that the NBA's successful localization is not a simple process of cultural adaptation, but a complex fusion formed by the mutual communication and symbolic translation between Chinese and foreign cultures.

At the theoretical level, the results of this study include:

This research extends the application of field theory in digital cultural studies and reveals how the NBA has skillfully leveraged the cultural industry for localization transformation.

They enrich the theory of cross-cultural communication and provide guidance and precedent for the development of other industries in China. Deepening research on the cultural industry, showcases how the cultural, technological, and economic dimensions interact and jointly shape the localization paths of transnational cultural products.

From a practical perspective, the NBA's case provides important insight for the “going global” strategy of China's cultural industries:

1. Creative translation of cultural symbols: The key to reducing the cultural discount is to find local symbols with high emotional value and creatively translate them in a natural way, rather than through simple patchwork.

2. The bridging role of celebrity intermediaries: Cultivating "mediators" with cross-cultural capabilities who can naturally blend different cultural codes and enhance the affinity of cultural products;

3. Systematic construction of the field ecology: The localization of cultural products should not be limited to the content level, but should build a complete ecosystem that includes spatial, media, and participatory dimensions.

The limitation of this study is that it mainly focuses on the NBA's official localization strategies, with insufficient analysis of fans' creative participation (such as secondary creation/fan art). Future research may further explore the interaction between official strategies and fan culture, and how this interplay shapes the NBA's cultural significance in China. Moreover, as metaverse technology develops, mechanisms of cultural adaptation in virtual spaces deserve deeper investigation.

In conclusion, the NBA's localization in China demonstrates the innovative path of transnational cultural industries in the era of globalization. Through cultural reproduction strategies, the NBA not only achieved commercial success through production, but also became a unique bridge connecting different cultures. This case offers illuminating insights into understanding contemporary cultural hybridization. Against the background of the “going global” strategy for Chinese culture, the research value of this case will continue to grow.

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