

Cross-cultural Communication of 'Chinese Imagery' in the Global Expansion of Chinese Video Games—A Case Study of Arknights: Endfield

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Abstract. With the rise of global competition in cultural soft power and the widespread development of China's video game industry around the world, games have gradually become one of the main carriers for cross-cultural communication and the dissemination of Chinese culture abroad. Using Wuling City in Arknights: Endfield as a case study, this paper applies Hall's encoding/decoding framework and conducts textual analysis to examine how the game constructs 'contemporary Chinese imagery' and how overseas players receive it. The research shows that, through modern reinterpretation of Chinese-style architecture, the everyday display of contemporary public spaces, and governance-oriented coding of Chinese-style public slogans, the game has expanded the scope of Chinese imagery beyond traditional symbols to an urban area characterized by a sense of everyday life and modernisation. Overseas players' responses are representative-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional readings. The above indicates that Chinese imagery in the world spread of Chinese video games has not been propagated unilaterally; instead, it has continuously accumulated new cross-cultural meanings through players' recognition, reconfiguration and contestation.

Keywords: Global expansion of Chinese video games, Chinese imagery, Arknights: Endfield, encoding/decoding, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

With increased competition from all over the world for cultural soft power, video games have changed and are now also important instruments of cross-cultural communication and national image promotion. In recent years, with the continuous expansion of China's game industry abroad, Chinese games have begun to move beyond simply exporting commercial products and are now carrying culture and values. Therefore, cross-cultural communication in the global spread of Chinese games is no longer limited to the exhibition of cultural symbols but is gradually taking the form of deeper interaction between game content and players. Overseas players are no longer passive recipients either. Through discussions on the Internet and participation in player communities, they have also become co-creators of the game's culture system.

Released around the world on multiple platforms in early 2026, *Arknights: Endfield* is a typical case for this research. In the five weeks after release, the game had made over US\$56 million worldwide, and of this amount, as high as 74% came from abroad. More significantly, the cultural expressions do not have to be traditional Chinese symbols related to historical aesthetics, mythology or martial arts. Settings such as Wuling City and Marker Stone have been used to integrate Chinese-style architecture, contemporary public spaces, and Chinese-style public slogans into the industrial area to showcase the cultural spirit of modern China. These forms have extended the expressive scope of Chinese culture and offered a new way to present modern Chinese imagery around the world.

Textual analysis of scenes involving Wuling City in *Arknights: Endfield* is conducted at two levels in this paper: encoding and decoding. First, three representative types of visual texts are selected to study how the game uses 'contemporary Chinese imagery'. Then, English comments from social platforms are analysed according to the style of architecture, urban spaces, technological industries and daily life atmosphere. According to Hall's model, the comments can be classified as dominant-hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional readings to explore how overseas players receive, negotiate and reproduce this cultural representation. This paper wishes to show that 'Chinese imagery' in the global spread of Chinese video games has moved beyond traditional cultural symbols to present a picture of China characterized by contemporary reality and modernisation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Hall's encoding/decoding framework

The analytical framework of this paper is encoding and decoding. Hall criticizes the linear view of communication as a sequence of 'sender–message–receiver' and stresses that meaning is produced through production, circulation, consumption and reproduction [1]. Communicators encode texts in specific ideological and cultural contexts, but audience decoding does not always align with the intended encoding; it may take on dominant-hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional positions. In studies of the global spread of video games, this can be used to examine how developers incorporate 'Chinese imagery' into settings, narratives and symbols, as well as how overseas players accept, negotiate or reinterpret such imagery in their own cultural context.

2.2. Existing research on Chinese video games

Research on the world spread of Chinese video games can be divided into three types: analysis of cultural symbols, studies of communication mechanisms and models, and research on overseas reception.

The first studies focused on the visible components of traditional Chinese culture in game texts and visual imagery, exploring how Chinese games create images of China through character design, scene design, narrative motifs and artistic style [2]. With the development of this scholarship, people's attention has gradually moved from the external observation of symbols to the culture and emotions they contain. *Black Myth: Wukong*'s cross-cultural appeal stems from its use of the classic *Journey to the West*, but also from the reorganisation of universal themes such as fate, resistance, sacrifice and self-worth; thus, the threshold for overseas players to learn about Chinese culture has been reduced [3].

For the mechanism of cross-cultural communication, when Chinese games go abroad, linguistic localisation, cultural recontextualisation and narrative translation are needed to reduce barriers to

cultural understanding [4]. Other scholars believe that games are new platforms for the global dissemination of culture and pay attention to the combined function of technical support, platform distribution, community interaction and player participation [5]. With the development of YouTube, Steam, Bilibili and other platforms for the spread and discussion of games, research has moved from 'game text' to the scope of 'platform communication' and player-created derivative works. Communication abroad is no longer a one-way street led by game companies; instead, it is jointly constructed by platform mechanisms, player comments, derivative works and interactions in comment sections [6].

At the same time, a study of Honor of Kings has also explored how overseas players are gradually becoming familiar with Chinese games and found that cultural adaptation, gameplay habits and community interaction all influence player attitudes [7]. Research based on YouTube comments about Genshin Impact analyzes how overseas players identify, discuss and interpret Chinese cultural elements through interaction [8]. A cross-linguistic study of multilingual Steam reviews has also shown that players from different cultures vary in their aesthetic preferences, narrative interpretations and modes of evaluation; therefore, research on the global spread of Chinese games should pay attention to the decoding practices of specific audiences [9].

In short, the existing studies have provided some support for exploring the world of Chinese video games.

3. Encoding contemporary Chinese imagery

Most Chinese games present Chinese culture through historical buildings, myths and legends or traditional symbols, but Wuling City does not do so and instead integrates traditional aesthetics with modern life.

3.1. Chinese-style architecture: from classical to contemporary urban space

Hall's system of signs, professional codes and ideological systems are used to encode media texts, and audiences decode these texts according to their own culture and social circumstances [1]. Arknights: Endfield does not build Wuling City as a place of history in its architecture. Add elements of classical Chinese architecture to the new commercial area, campus and community life. Wuling's Commercial Street is a typical case; it combines traditional buildings with modern shopping malls in actual urban areas such as Shanghai Xintiandi, Chengdu Taikoo Li, and Hangzhou Qinghefang. The buildings are low-rise and situated along the street; shops, walkways, squares, waterways and outdoor seating areas have been added to create an open commercial space. At the same time, the roofs also have Chinese characteristics, such as projecting eaves, pitched roofs and layered rooflines, and thus create a modern consumer space with a Jiangnan water town atmosphere.

At the same time, the Design of public institutions and residential areas incorporates modern functions into a classical-style building. The classical exterior of the Bureau of Swordmancers includes a gatehouse and inscribed plaques and stone lions at the entrance, which convey the solemnity of traditional institutional architecture; at the same time, a grey industrial wall and lighting system are also features of a modern public institution. The Design of the Tianshi Bureau Academy integrates architecture and landscape, as seen in campuses such as those at the China Academy of Art: a tall gatehouse, pitched roofs, steps, and campus greenery; an admissions office, publicity booths, and student activity areas are added to give the setting the everyday life of a Chinese university. Moon gates, white walls, hedges and courtyard paths are also used to bring in elements of Jiangnan gardens in the landscape of a new area.

3.2. The everyday presentation of contemporary public space: from scenes of daily life to urban experience

Cultural meaning also resides in the organisation of space, action and the details of daily life by a text, not only in recognizable symbols.

Traditional Chinese Buildings have been added to Wuling City. Currently, the public areas constructed by scene modelling and NPC interaction have turned 'Chinese imagery' into tangible living spaces.

The Space Design of the Commercial Area is to reflect the daily life of consumers in modern Chinese cities. Based on the design for a real-life neighbourhood, Fangxing Avenue will be a place for people to live and gather in daily life. There are many shops in the street, and each has parasols, outdoor tables and chairs, planters, and NPCs who pass by or are idle. Players do not have an abstract commercial function but live in an urban area and use it for dining, shopping, leisure, travel and socializing. Thus, the game expands the concept of 'Chinese imagery' from classical symbols to scenes of daily life and consumption, making it more relatable to contemporary Chinese cities.

Community public spaces show the grassroots features of contemporary Chinese urban life in terms of leisure, exercise and collective activities, such as red synthetic running tracks, parallel-bar fitness equipment, green spaces and square-dancing NPCs. They are public activity areas that can be found in Chinese residential compounds and parks. The addition of square dancing is also very meaningful; it translates a representative form of collective leisure in Chinese urban public spaces into NPC behaviour, and thus Wuling City appears continuously inhabited by its people. Thus, it has avoided a grand narrative and instead presented the order of urban life through everyday scenes.

The Design of campus space integrates modern Chinese educational environments with the experience of public life. The spatial details of the Tianshi Bureau Academy are closer to the operation of a modern campus, such as an admissions office, publicity booths, a running club, queues for boxed meals, and campus water-sprinkling vehicles. The Material Research Institute, the Technology Development Bureau and the Technology Production Office are also located in the public area. The mechanical facilities, water-saving facilities, seedling racks and experimental ponds in the institute are closer to technological development and infrastructure for 'contemporary Chinese imagery'.

3.3. Governance-oriented encoding through Chinese-style public slogans

In terms of public communication, slogans are highly condensed spatial texts. They are often presented in the form of banners, wall-mounted pictures, bulletin boards and signs to spread values, policy directions and behavioural norms effectively [10]. Public slogans in the style of Wuling City in *Arknights: Endfield* also serve to present an image of China. These slogans are not open cultural symbols but are closer to the public communication environment in actual Chinese cities, towns, villages and campuses. They are now stable in daily life and have become part of the governance of Chinese modernisation.

Policy-oriented slogans localised the macro-level goals of Chinese modernisation. The first type of slogans in Wuling City focus on themes such as ecological civilisation, using science and technology to strengthen agriculture, and energy development. The in-game slogan *Lv Shui Qing Shan, Ke Xue Fazhan* (Lucid Waters and Lush Mountains; Pursue Scientific Development) integrates two well-known expressions, *Lv Shui Qing Shan*, *Jiushi Jinshan Yinshan* (Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets) and 'Scientific Outlook on Development', to convey the green, coordinated and sustainable ideas of Chinese modernisation. The slogan *Qiangnong*

yudi, zhinongyu ji ('Strengthen agriculture through land; advance smart agriculture through technology') reformulates the policy formulation *Canglianyu di, zhinongyu ji* (Safeguard grain security through farmland and technology). Strengthen the overall production capability of grains by protecting farmland and advancing agricultural science and technology, thus promoting agricultural modernisation, ensuring food security, and empowering the people.

Public-civility notices are micro-level manifestations of Chinese modernisation in daily life. In-game slogans such as '*Caomu youling, shanshui gongsheng*' (Plants have life; mountains and waters coexist) and *Hexie Niwo, Qingwu Xuanhua* (Harmony begins with you and me; please keep your voice down) are typical Chinese-style public-civility notices. By using parallel construction and rhyme, they present environmental protection and mutual respect as joint responsibilities. Continuing the trend of contemporary China, these notices are often in the form of banners and signs along running tracks, in green belts, in communities and elsewhere. Thus, they show a micro-level view of Chinese modernisation: modern life includes not only technological development but also ideals of civility, safety and health.

4. Overseas players' decoding of contemporary Chinese imagery

Based on English-language comments and posts from Reddit and YouTube, this paper studies how overseas players understand the Chinese-style architecture, contemporary public spaces, and slogan texts in the Wuling region. The decoding of Wuling City by the players is not limited to a single interpretation or a simple misreading; rather, it can be divided into dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional readings.

4.1. Dominant-hegemonic readings: recognition and acceptance of contemporary Chinese urban imagery

Dominant-hegemonic readings are evident when some players accept the game's encoding of 'contemporary Chinese imagery' more readily and are able to associate Wuling City with modern Chinese cities.

One comment is that 'the best thing about Wu Ling is how similar it is to China', and another player wrote that 'Wuling really reminds me of Hangzhou in some places'. These evaluations show that the design of Wuling City can make overseas players feel a sense of familiarity with real Chinese cities, especially the urban landscape of the lower Yangtze River area. At the same time, some players are aware of the features of modern urban planning and daily life in Wuling City. Expressions such as 'green sustainable walkable', 'fully walkable city', 'residential area', and 'people working and hanging around' show that players are interested in the architecture but also feel that the city should be a place for life and work.

A higher-level form of dominant-hegemonic reading is that some players no longer see Wuling City merely as a place of Chinese-style architecture but as a modern Chinese space integrating modern industry, urban life and traditional aesthetics. Some players believe that Wuling has moved beyond the traditional 'medieval' and 'imperial era' settings of Chinese anime-style games, and instead combines industry, cities, scientific research, and ideas about nature in contemporary China.

4.2. Negotiated readings: aesthetic acceptance and the reorganisation of cultural meaning

Comments in the negotiated category generally praise Wuling's art, environmental details and urban scenery, but they do not interpret these through the lens of 'contemporary Chinese imagery'; instead,

players reframe the setting according to the cultural systems they are more familiar with, weakening, generalising or diverting the cultural expression.

Some players describe the streets, lanes and modes of transport in Wuling City as "typical of East/Southeast Asian countries". Although this view recognizes a connection between Wuling and Chinese urban space, it also includes them in a shared East or Southeast Asian urban experience. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, some spatial details of contemporary Chinese cities may be generalised due to regional similarities, and their specific references in Chinese reality are partially weakened. Second, many players view Wuling merely as a "future city". One player mentioned seeing "something futuristic that he loved", and another called Wuling "the most beautiful Digital City he had ever seen". Although these remarks praise the visual effects of Wuling City, they do not explore the deeper cultural connotations or Chinese urban experience. It is then converted into a general Futurist aesthetic.

Other players compare Wuling with settings from anime-style games they already know. Some think it is more natural and modern than Liyue in Genshin Impact or the Xianzhou in Honkai: Star Rail. Although the above indicators are positive, they also reduce Wuling City's cultural reference as an image of a contemporary Chinese city and make it seem more like a Chinese-themed area in an anime-style game.

4.3. Oppositional readings: questioning an idealised China-influenced region

Oppositional Readings are not frequent in the sample of player comments, but they do reveal the resistance that contemporary Chinese imagery may face in cross-cultural communication. Such comments doubt the feasibility of an idealised narrative centred on a 'fictional China-influenced region'. Some players believe that 'Wuling is just another mandatory China-influenced region created by a Chinese company', and thus ignore the aesthetic value and humanistic substance contained within it. They consider the detailed construction of the game to be national bias rather than a form of art. Another person believes that Wuling is too idyllic compared to the survivalist environment of V4, and although they like the aesthetics of Wuling, they do not think it suits the original crisis-ridden, post-apocalyptic setting of the game.

Oppositional Readings are therefore not solely due to a lack of understanding of Chinese culture. They also relate to the players' expectations of genre, narrative conflict and consistency of the game world. The more orderly, fully functional and highly idealised an urban area in Wuling City is presented, the more likely it is that some players will feel uneasy and believe it is too artificial or lacking in realness. It can be seen that the communication effect of contemporary Chinese imagery in the global spread of games is not solely determined by the clarity of its symbols but also by whether it can align with the wider world-building and player expectations of the game and cross-cultural contexts.

5. Conclusion

This article uses the example of Wuling City in Arknights: Endfield to explore how 'contemporary Chinese imagery' is created and received in the global spread of Chinese video games. The results reveal that the modern reinterpretation of Chinese-style architecture, the presentation of public space in everyday life and the governance-oriented encoding of Chinese style public slogans allow the game to extend Chinese imagery beyond the traditional symbols, and to an experience of space that intertwines classical aesthetics, urban life and elements of modernization. Today's Chinese imagery is not unidirectional, but rather is articulated, re-appropriated and challenged. Dominant-hegemonic

readings acknowledge and embrace the modern Chinese city, its tech-industries and its traditional beauty. Negotiated readings recreate the present scenario as a generalized Asian city, or a Chinese troped region in a game of the anime genre. Oppositional reading is aimed at questioning the construction of an idealised city. But there is a subjective element and quantitative analysis has not yet been used to validate the classification and interpretation of the game scenes and the player's comments. In future studies, interviews, questionnaires, quantitative methods should be used together, and the coding standards should be improved and compared the differences between the decoding of players from different cultures.

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