



The Translation of Religious Metaphors in *Black Myth: Wukong* Based on Relevance Theory

Haolan Yan

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China
Email: 1209399117@qq.com

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Abstract

As an action role-playing game based on the Chinese classic novel *Journey to the West*, *Black Myth: Wukong* incorporates rich religious elements, especially Buddhist metaphors, which carry profound cultural connotations and philosophical implications. The translation of game dialogues helps promote the international dissemination of Chinese mythological culture. This study selects the bilingual dialogues from Chapter One of the game as the corpus, explores the translation of religious metaphors therein, and analyzes the contextual effects of the translations under the guidance of Relevance Theory. Drawing on Toury's metaphor translation strategies (metaphor into same metaphor, metaphor into different metaphor, metaphor into non-metaphor, and metaphor into zero), the study classifies and evaluates the translations, summarizing corresponding methods to achieve optimal relevance and maximize contextual effects. This research aims to provide new insights for game translation and facilitate the global spread of Chinese religious culture.

Subject Areas

Linguistics, Literature

Keywords

Black Myth: Wukong, Religious Metaphors, Relevance Theory, Toury's Translation Strategies

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the accelerated process of Chinese cultural products "going global", video games have gradually become a significant vehicle for cross-cultural

communication. Unlike traditional film, television, or literature, games are characterized by immersive storytelling and interactivity. Their language translation not only serves the function of information transmission but also crucially impacts players' cultural experience and emotional resonance. *Black Myth: Wukong*, a game based on *Journey to the West*, incorporates religious elements from Buddhism, Taoism, and others. These elements are manifested through metaphors within the game's dialogue, showcasing the profound connotations of traditional Chinese religious philosophy, such as samsara (cycle of rebirth), salvation, desire, and liberation. Religious metaphors act not only as a vehicle for the game's narrative but also as a bridge for cultural transmission. Consequently, their translation faces challenges stemming from cognitive differences between Chinese and English cultures.

Relevance Theory emphasizes that translation is an ostensive-inferential communicative process. The translator needs to select appropriate expressions to enable the audience to achieve the greatest contextual effects with minimal cognitive effort. In the translation of religious metaphors, this theory can reveal how translators handle culture-loaded information from the source language and evaluate the comprehensibility of the translated text within the target language environment. Simultaneously, by employing metaphor translation strategies (such as preservation, replacement, paraphrasing, and omission), a more concrete analysis can be conducted on how translators achieve optimal relevance in different contexts.

Therefore, this study focuses on the religious metaphors present in the dialogue of the first chapter of the game. Drawing on Toury's descriptive translation studies for analysis, it aims to bridge cultural gaps, facilitate readers' understanding of the game's religious connotations, and promote the internationalization of Chinese gaming culture. Against the backdrop of globalization, research of this kind helps mitigate misunderstandings arising from linguistic and cultural differences, enhances foreign players' cognition and appreciation of Chinese religious culture, and thereby strengthens the soft power output of Chinese culture.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. Relevance Theory and Metaphor

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson [1] and later applied to the field of translation by Gutt [2], views translation as an ostensive-inferential communicative process. The translator must consider both the informational intention and the communicative intention, achieving optimal relevance through explication and implicature—that is, enabling the audience to gain the greatest contextual effects with minimal cognitive effort. Religious metaphor, as a form of discourse, contains both explicit and implicit content. The principle of relevance can interpret its deeper meaning, helping the translator balance the cultural specificity of the source language with the comprehensibility of the target language. Using Relevance Theory as a framework, this study analyzes the contextual effects of

translating religious metaphors in games and assesses whether the translated texts meet the standard of optimal relevance.

2.2. Toury's Metaphor Translation Strategies

Gideon Toury [3], a pioneer of Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS), emphasized the cultural dependency of translation norms. His strategies for metaphor translation include: 1) metaphor into same metaphor, retaining the structure of the source metaphor; 2) metaphor into different metaphor, replacing it with an equivalent metaphor in the target language; 3) metaphor into non-metaphor, converting it into a paraphrase; and 4) metaphor into zero, omitting the metaphor altogether. These strategies are based on a target-oriented principle, adapting to the context of the translated text. This study will employ these strategy categories to classify the translation of religious metaphors in the game and evaluate their effectiveness in conjunction with Relevance Theory.

3. Literature Review

Current research on using Relevance Theory to guide metaphor translation is already substantial. For instance, Tao Chenping [4], using Jenner's English translation of *Journey to the West* as an example, analyzed the translation of the culture-loaded word “玄” (mysterious). The study found that dynamic inference, context adaptation, and metaphor processing interact to collectively facilitate effective meaning transmission. This indicates that Relevance Theory can provide a theoretical explanation for language phenomena rich in cultural load, such as religious metaphors, helping translators strike a balance between the characteristics of the source culture and the acceptability for target language readers.

Meanwhile, video games, as an emerging medium for cultural transmission, are gradually gaining scholarly attention. Meng Ziyun and Deng Guiying [5] pointed out that *Genshin Impact* achieves cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture through character and scene symbols. Sun Ping and Li Yufei [6] analyzed the visual metaphors in the *Black Myth: Wukong* animation Visions, arguing that they effectively convey Chinese philosophical wisdom. Wang Ziding [7] explored the role of *Black Myth: Wukong* in cultural heritage and innovation from a cross-cultural communication perspective.

However, existing research predominantly focuses on game narratives, visual imagery, and cultural symbols, paying insufficient attention to the translation of in-game dialogue. As a game adapted from *Journey to the West*, *Black Myth: Wukong* contains a plethora of religious metaphors, which are precisely what encapsulate the extensive and profound Chinese culture and Buddhist classics. Therefore, within the highly interactive context of gaming, how to achieve optimal relevance in translating these religious metaphors—ensuring both the operational experience for overseas players and the effective transmission of the unique charm of Chinese culture—possesses significant research value and meaning.

4. Research Design

4.1. Research Object and Data

The object of this study is the Chinese-English parallel corpus of dialogue lines containing religious metaphors from Chapter One of *Black Myth: Wukong*. This chapter was selected because its narrative is self-contained and thematically rich—it encompasses Buddhist notions of causality and liberation, Taoist magical instruments and practices, as well as Confucian moral references. As such, it effectively represents the main types of religious metaphors found throughout the game. Examples of relevant expressions include “贪根不拔，苦树常在” “尘缘已断，金海尽干” “超度” “轮回” and “定身术”. These metaphors carry philosophical connotations within the narrative, reflecting Buddhist ideas about desire, karma, and samsara, as well as Taoist and Confucian concepts related to salvation, ethics, and cosmic balance. From the player’s perspective, Chapter One also carries strong representativeness, as it introduces the game’s spiritual worldview and sets the tone for players’ cognitive and emotional engagement. The explicit use of religious metaphors at this stage helps shape players’ understanding of the game’s philosophical themes, making it a meaningful and analyzable starting point.

The corpus was retrieved in March 2025 and processed using Wamatrix7.0 for concordance searches and frequency statistics, with a total token count of approximately 2531. In this study, a religious metaphor is operationally defined as any linguistic expression involving Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian doctrines, terminology, symbolic artifacts, or classical allusions that conveys religious philosophy or cultural meaning through non-literal expression. The categorization follows these criteria: expressions referring to Buddhist doctrines (e.g., samsara, deliverance, desire) are classified as Buddhist metaphors; those involving Taoist techniques, artifacts, or immortal beliefs are categorized as Taoist metaphors; and those reflecting Confucian ethics or classical allusions are identified as Confucian metaphors.

Through corpus retrieval and manual identification, a total of thirty religious metaphorical expressions were identified, among which seven highly representative examples—covering Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian categories—were selected as the core samples for in-depth analysis. Although limited in number, these examples effectively illustrate the primary translation approaches adopted for religious metaphors in the game’s text.

4.2. Research Methods

This study adopts a methodology primarily based on qualitative analysis, supplemented by quantitative statistics. First, utilizing corpus retrieval tools and metaphor identification procedures (MIPVU, Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit), religious metaphorical expressions were identified within the parallel texts. This process mainly involved the following steps: 1) Reading through the text to grasp the general meaning; 2) Identifying lexical units within the text; 3) Determining the meaning of the lexical unit within its specific context and

investigating whether the unit has a more basic meaning in other contexts; ④ If a more basic meaning exists in other contexts, the lexical unit is marked as metaphorical. Secondly, drawing on Toury's metaphor translation strategies, the translated texts are categorized into four types [8]. Finally, using Relevance Theory as a framework, the contextual effects of the translations are analyzed. Specifically, the analysis examines, from the perspectives of explicature and implicature, how the translator reduces the cognitive effort required by the target audience and enhances their comprehension of the religious metaphors. This process helps reveal the relationship between different translation strategies and the achievement of optimal relevance.

4.3. Research Significance and Limitations

Through the aforementioned design, this research can not only reveal how religious metaphors are handled in game translation but also explore the applicability of Relevance Theory in evaluating translation effectiveness. This holds practical value for understanding the cross-cultural communication of indigenous Chinese cultural elements within games. However, this study also has limitations: firstly, the data scope is limited to Chapter One and may not fully represent all religious metaphors present in the entire game; secondly, the analysis is primarily qualitative, with statistical results serving only as supplementary references, making it difficult to derive universal patterns. Future research could expand to include the full game's corpus and incorporate player feedback to further verify the communicative effectiveness of the translations from the perspective of reception.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Categories of Religious Metaphors

Through a systematic retrieval and analysis of the bilingual dialogue (Chinese-English) in Chapter One of *Black Myth: Wukong*, the study identified that the religious metaphors in the Chinese lines primarily fall into three major categories: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as shown in **Table 1**. Buddhist metaphors involve concepts such as “超度” (salvation/releasing souls from suffering), “轮回” (samsara/transmigration), and “贪欲” (desire/greed), reflecting the philosophies of karma and liberation. Taoist metaphors focus on imagery like “法术” (magic arts) and “葫芦” (gourd), conveying a sense of mystery and practicality.

Table 1. Categorization and frequency of Chinese religious metaphors in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Chapter One).

Metaphor Category	Count
Buddhist Metaphors	15
Taoist Metaphors	9
Confucian Metaphors	6
Total	30

Confucian metaphors mainly consist of allusions like “负荆请罪” (proffer a birch and ask for a punishment/to offer a humble apology), conveying themes of repentance and ethical implications. The statistical results of the translation strategies applied to the corresponding English translations are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Frequency of translation strategies for religious metaphors in *Black Myth: Wukong* (Chapter One).

Translation Strategy	Count
Metaphor into the Same Metaphor	4
Metaphor into a Different Metaphor	9
Metaphor into Non-Metaphor	10
Metaphor into Zero	7

5.2. Analysis of Religious Metaphor Translation

This section utilizes examples from the dialogue in Chapter One of *Black Myth: Wukong*, applying Relevance Theory and Toury’s metaphor translation strategies to analyze the translation process of religious metaphors. A total of thirty instances of religious metaphors were identified, among which seven highly representative examples—covering Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian categories—were selected as the core samples for in-depth analysis. It explores the explicatures and implicatures, speaker intentions, and contextual effects, assessing whether the translations achieve optimal relevance. The analytical steps involve inferring the speaker’s intention and communicative purpose, interpreting the explicatures and implicatures of the source text, and finally evaluating the cognitive effort required and the contextual effects achieved by the translation.

5.2.1. Metaphor into the Same Metaphor

This strategy tends to preserve the imagery and structure of the original metaphor. It is suitable for metaphors that are relatively easily understood across cultures and can effectively convey the original philosophical concept. Preserving the metaphor allows English readers to grasp both the literal meaning and the deeper connotation with ease. However, if readers are unfamiliar with Chinese culture, understanding might require support from the game’s context. This strategy was used relatively infrequently in the corpus.

Example 1:

Source Text: 贪根不拔，苦树常在

Translated Text: The root of greed ever fosters the stem of suffering

The source text uses the “root-tree” metaphor to express the Buddhist teaching that desire leads to suffering. The surface meaning is “if greed is not eliminated, suffering persists,” but the deeper implication conveys the Buddhist concept of the cycle of cause and effect (karma). The translation preserves the “root-stem” imagery, translating “贪根” as “root of greed” and “苦树” as “stem of suffering.” Within a Christian context, the phrase “root of evils” (or often “love of money is

the root of all evil”) exists, literally meaning “the fundamental cause of evils,” commonly used to refer to the underlying reason for sin, problems, or misfortunes. English readers are familiar with “root” denoting a cause, making the relationship between greed and suffering easily understandable, thus achieving the effect of minimal processing effort.

5.2.2. Metaphor into a Different Metaphor

This strategy replaces the original metaphor with one more familiar within the target (English) culture, adapting to the cognitive context of the English-speaking audience and reducing the difficulty of player comprehension, often resulting in better effectiveness. This is particularly suitable for the fast-paced, interactive demands of gaming. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, this strategy adjusts the explicature to ensure target readers can quickly infer the intended implicature, achieving optimal relevance. However, replacement may lead to a dilution of the original religious specificity, potentially blurring the religious attributes of the metaphor in the English translation. Relying on the game’s plot or visual elements may be necessary to provide contextual support and reinforce the religious meaning.

Example 2:

Source Text: 不能装天却可度人，荡去痴念，早入轮回

Translated Text: This gourd, though humble, may save the lost, banish their obsessions, and guide them

The communicative intention of the source text is to express the salvific function of the Taoist ritual tool, the “gourd,” informing players how to use this game item, while also implying the elimination of “ignorance” (one of the Three Poisons in Buddhism: greed, hatred, delusion) and the philosophy of liberation through samsara. The explicature is: although the gourd cannot “hold the sky” (symbolizing limitless power), it can “save people” (“度人”), eliminate “ignorant thoughts” (“痴念”), and help them enter “samsara” (“轮回”). The implicature, however, lies in the fusion of the Taoist ritual object with the Buddhist concept of samsara, emphasizing the religious significance of salvation, which requires players to infer based on the cultural background of Journey to the West.

The translation replaces “度人” (save people/conduct salvation) with “save the lost,” and simplifies “轮回” (enter samsara) into “guide them,” introducing a metaphor of salvation more akin to concepts in Christianity (e.g., “save souls”). From the perspective of Relevance Theory, this replacement adjusts the explicature to align with the cognitive context of Western readers. “Save the lost” and “guide them” are associated with religious salvation and guidance in English culture. English readers can quickly infer the function of the gourd (saving souls) and its gameplay utility (item effect) with minimal cognitive effort, thereby achieving significant contextual effects. However, the simplification of “轮回” (samsara) into “guide them” weakens the distinct Buddhist characteristic of cyclical rebirth, losing part of the implicature. English readers might associate “save” and “guide” with Christian salvation of souls rather than the unique concepts of the Taoist ritual tool or Buddhist samsara, leading to a shift in

cultural connotation. While “gourd” retains the imagery of the Taoist tool, the Christian connotations of “save” and “guide” might cause readers to misinterpret it as a Christian metaphor. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the translation achieves the communicative intention (instructing the player) but the contextual effect of the implicature is limited due to the weakening of religious specificity.

5.2.3. Metaphor into Non-Metaphor

This strategy involves paraphrasing the metaphor into literal language, making the implicit meaning explicit. It is suitable for metaphors with strong religious connotations, as it can significantly reduce the cognitive effort required by target readers and enhance contextual effects, making it particularly applicable to the fast-paced narrative needs of games. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, this translation simplifies the surface meaning, allowing players to quickly grasp the speaker’s intention, but it may sacrifice the religious depth of the original metaphor. In such cases, the game’s plot or supplementary notes can provide cultural context to reinforce optimal relevance.

Example 3:

Source Text: 若不披上这件衣裳，众生又怎知我尘缘已断，金海尽干

Translated Text: Bereft of that kasaya, how shall they show the world their ties are cut, and their lust is quelled?

The source text uses the metaphor of “衣裳” (robes, specifically the kasaya) along with “尘缘” (earthly ties/attachments) and “金海” (golden sea, implying worldly desires like wealth or lust) to symbolize Buddhist liberation. The communicative intention is to satirize the hypocrisy of monks using the kasaya to 掩盖 (mask/conceal) their lingering desires. The explicature is that the kasaya is an external sign that a monk has severed “earthly ties” and dried up the “golden sea” of desire. The implicature is a critique of the superficial pursuit of liberation, requiring players to infer meaning based on Buddhist culture and the context of Journey to the West.

The translation explains “尘缘” as “ties are cut” and “金海” as “lust is quelled,” while using the transliteration “kasaya” to retain the cultural specificity of the monk’s robe. From a Relevance Theory perspective, this combination of explanation and transliteration balances clarity with the cognitive background of English players. Words like “ties” and “lust” are associated with worldly desires and moral restraint in English, allowing players to quickly understand the kasaya’s symbolic function without deep Buddhist knowledge. The translation clearly conveys the Buddhist context through “kasaya” and expresses the opposition between liberation and desire through “ties are cut” and “lust is quelled.” This achieves optimal relevance by meeting the game’s fast-paced narrative needs while preserving cultural flavor through transliteration. Providing an in-game cultural note for “kasaya” (e.g., “Buddhist robe symbolizing detachment”) could further deepen player understanding of the Buddhist concept of liberation.

5.2.4. Metaphor into Zero

This strategy omits the source metaphor, converting it into plain language or ignoring the metaphorical element altogether. It significantly reduces the cognitive effort for the target reader and enhances contextual effects, making it particularly suitable for the fast-paced narrative of games where prioritizing the communicative intention is key. From a Relevance Theory perspective, this strategy simplifies the explicature to ensure readers quickly grasp the core message, but it often leads to the loss of the implicature. To compensate for the diminished religious connotation, the translation must rely on the game's plot, visual elements, or notes to provide contextual support and achieve optimal relevance.

Example 4:

Source Text: 那些葬身火海的僧众，化为孤魂野鬼，在这黑风山间游荡。是我！亲手将他们超度

Translated Text: All those monks consumed by the fire, turned to wandering ghosts, roaming in Black Wind Mountain. It was I, who granted them eternal repose!

The source text uses the metaphor “火海” (sea of fire) to imply the suffering caused by desire and “超度” (release souls from suffering) to imply the philosophy of karmic retribution and salvation. The translation omits the “sea of fire” metaphor, rendering it as “consumed by the fire,” and paraphrases “超度” as “granted them eternal repose.” This approach effectively reduces player cognitive effort and suits the game's fast pace. However, the metaphorical depth of “sea of fire” is lost. “Eternal repose” carries strong connotations of Christian “eternal rest” rather than the Buddhist concept of release from the cycle of suffering (超度).

The phrase “sea of fire” in English can convey a vast, all-consuming imagery, echoing the metaphor's implication of endless suffering caused by desire. Compared to the literal description “consumed by the fire,” “sea of fire” would better preserve the original's figurative expression, allowing players to sense the metaphorical philosophical depth. For the concept of “超度” using a gloss (e.g., a note explaining its Buddhist meaning of release from samsara) could help players unfamiliar with Buddhism understand its significance.

6. Conclusions

This study, utilizing the bilingual dialogue from Chapter One of *Black Myth: Wukong* as its corpus and employing Relevance Theory alongside Toury's metaphor translation strategies, has examined the translation methods of religious metaphors and their contextual effects. The findings indicate that religious metaphors undergo diverse treatment in translation, including preservation, replacement, paraphrasing, and omission. Each strategy offers distinct advantages in reducing the audience's cognitive effort and achieving optimal relevance, yet they also involve varying degrees of cultural information retention.

Specifically, translating a metaphor into the same metaphor best preserves the original Buddhist or Taoist connotations but may raise the barrier to comprehension

within the target culture. Translating a metaphor into a different metaphor reduces comprehension difficulty by aligning with familiar Western religious frameworks but risks diluting the original religious specificity. Translating a metaphor into non-metaphor allows abstract philosophical concepts to be conveyed directly, suiting fast-paced gaming scenarios, but weakens the figurative expression. Translating a metaphor into zero is optimal for efficiency but results in a significant loss of religious connotation.

Overall, translators handling religious metaphors must strike a balance between “communicative effectiveness” and “cultural transmission.” Therefore, game translation should flexibly adopt multiple strategies based on the audience’s cognitive environment and cultural background. It must balance the clarity of information delivery and the fluency of the gaming experience while striving to preserve the cultural significance carried by the religious metaphors. For concepts with high cultural load, supplements such as transliteration, glosses, or multi-modal elements (e.g., cutscenes, item descriptions) can be employed to enhance cross-cultural understanding.

In summary, the translation of religious metaphors in *Black Myth: Wukong* demonstrates a constant negotiation between cultural representation and communicative adaptation. How translators can maximize contextual effects while minimizing the loss of cultural connotations remains a crucial question requiring ongoing attention in both game translation research and practice.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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