

The English Localization of Chinese Wuxia Games: The Case of Tale of Wuxia

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ABSTRACT

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This article explores the approaches to localizing Chinese wuxia video games into English via a comprehensive analysis of the English localization of Tale of Wuxia from three dimensions: technical, linguistic, and cultural. To this end, a corpus containing in-game screenshots captured from the two versions of the actual game was built by the researcher. The data was qualitatively and descriptively analyzed to present findings and implications. It was revealed that the English localization of the game was unsuccessful in the following three dimensions. Technical issues involved text overflow and mishandled variables. Linguistic issues were mainly reflected in substandard translation of character names, culture-specific items, and martial moves, and style inconsistency. We highlighted and discussed cultural adaptation as well with in-game examples. By advocating domestication as the primary localization strategy, this paper proposes translation techniques such as transcreation, paraphrasing, and omission for localizing common components in Chinese wuxia games. This study is hoped to contribute to current research on the English localization of Chinese wuxia games and provide a reference for Chinese wuxia game developers and localizers.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies that contribute to addressing the issues in localizing Chinese wuxia games into English via a case study of Tale of Wuxia from a comprehensive perspective, including technical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions, and offers valuable insights for Chinese wuxia game developers and localizers.

1. Introduction

Video games are interactive multimedia entertainment products composed of texts, images, and sound (Mangiron, 2007). Video games, now providing entertainment for

over two billion gamers of all ages all over the world, are considered to be one of the fastest-evolving media that have even conquered mainstream culture (Czech, 2013). In recent years, China has emerged as the largest digital game market in the world in terms of player numbers, trailing only the United States for revenue (Wijman, 2022). This massive gamer community has spurred a thriving expansion of game development, with many Chinese games consistently ranking at the top of the global most-played charts. For instance, perhaps the most well-known Chinese game to date in the global arena that arouses Western interest is Genshin Impact developed by Mihoyo in 2020. Chinese video games have become widespread and popular domestically, prompting a demand for localized versions in the global market, driven both by potential profit and cultural interest (Al-Batineh, 2023). Hence, more and more Chinese developers have also set their eyes on the prize by localizing their titles into English, the lingua franca, venturing to join the global arena for more return on investment (ROI).

This going-out campaign has also drawn Chinese wuxia games, a unique and indigenous genre adapted from Chinese wuxia fiction, to demonstrate their distinctively oriental charm. The word wuxia [martial heroes] indicates qualities of knighthood and heroism in ancient China (Teo, 2009). Originally considered a genre of Chinese fiction depicting martial artists in ancient China traveling the land to right wrongs with their power of martial arts, wuxia, since the 1980s, has been perfectly incorporated into video games featuring rich narrative, vivid graphics, evocative characters, dazzling martial arts, and appealing gameplay (Aroni, 2025). Rich in Chinese cultural references, wuxia games have been, in most cases, developed only to target the domestic market, with the developers assuming that Chinese gamers would understand the cultural references, in-jokes, and insinuations without any explanations necessary. This misperception poses challenges to the English localization of Chinese wuxia titles.

Video game localization entails not only the translation of in-game texts but also language encoding, image modification, transfer of variables, and cultural adaptation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). In view of this, several scholars have generally discussed technical, linguistic, and cultural issues in video game localization (Bernal-Merino, 2007, 2015; Czech, 2013; Mangiron, 2018; O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). However, scant academic attention has been paid to localizing Chinese games into English, particularly the specific genre of wuxia.

To fill this gap, this paper aims to scrutinize the English localization of Tale of Wuxia from technical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions and present major issues descriptively via a case study. Drawing from the drawbacks of this unsuccessful endeavor, this paper attempts to shed light on the challenges confronted by localizers in localizing the shared components in Chinese wuxia games for the English-speaking audience. By proposing localization strategies and translation techniques, this paper offers insights for Chinese wuxia game developers and localizers who seek to make their products competitive and intriguing in the global market.

2. Literature Review

A few scholars have focused on localizing video games into English regarding the technical, linguistic, and cultural issues that emerge in the process. O'Hagan and Mangiron (2004) employed the case study of localized Final Fantasy installments to discuss how the Japanese game was adapted for the English-speaking community in terms of space restrictions, language, and culture, including dubbing and rewriting of

scripts. They stressed that localization quality is subject to the early concept of internationalization before game development. [Mangiron and O'Hagan \(2006\)](#) emphasized that it is significant to preserve the original game experience with examples selected from the Final Fantasy series, the best-selling PlayStation franchise, to pinpoint the linguistic and cultural challenges in the process of localization. A significant concept they proposed was the 'transcreation', which has been applied to video game localization as an effective strategy to trade less faithfulness for more gameplay. They argued that transcreation, as a 'necessary and productive concept', allows the translators to have 'quasi-absolute freedom' while dealing with various constraints. [Bernal-Merino \(2007\)](#) delved deeper to discuss two critical issues in video game localization: text fragmentation and variables. He contended that text fragmentation would lead to disorganized data that makes it difficult for translators to know the context, while variables must be presented in the localized text that is correctly phrased. Through a practical lens, [O'Hagan and Mangiron \(2013\)](#) reviewed issues such as space constraints, variables, and cultural adaptations and elaborated on the solutions to address these issues accordingly. Except for localizing video games into English, [Al-Batineh \(2021\)](#) used a multiple-case study to discuss the technical, linguistic, and cultural issues while localizing video games into Arabic, such as the Arabic script, variables, subtitling conventions, terminology, acronyms, proper names, and NPC (non-player character) titles. Cultural issues, including how to deal with nudity, profanity, and alcohol, were also examined in his study, as he argued that Arab culture is conservative compared to that of the West.

In terms of cultural reception in video game localization, [Mangiron et al. \(2014\)](#) argued that it is important to carry out cultural adaptation in helping develop an affective link between the target player and the localized game. She argued that full cultural adaptation and rewriting are not necessary if the cultural elements in the localized version raise neither understanding problems nor culturally sensitive issues. She believed that references to the source culture can provide an exotic and appealing taste of the original culture for the target players because modern gamers are likely to be expecting some exotic cultural flavor. In the specific context of the Chinese game market, [Dong and Mangiron \(2018\)](#) addressed the specific issues of cultural transfer in localizing video games into the Chinese market, such as variable formats and game mechanics. They also touched upon other issues such as gaming habits and censorship. They highlighted the significance of cultural adaptation in localizing video games into Chinese and presented a number of examples to demonstrate how cultural adaptation may have an impact on the commercial performance of a foreign title in the Chinese gaming market.

However, compared to the aforementioned significant studies conducted by the international community, studies on video game localization in China have gathered limited attention from a few researchers. These studies either discuss translation of game titles ([Zhou & Yang, 2020](#); [Wang, 2017](#)) or focus solely on linguistic transfer of in-game texts from English into Chinese ([Li, 2018](#); [Du, 2022](#); [Li et al., 2023](#)), leaving technical and cultural issues underexplored and the wuxia genre unexamined. To fill this gap, the current study adopts a case study to comprehensively discuss technical, linguistic, and cultural issues in localizing Chinese wuxia games into English.

3. Research Methods

3.1. The Case

Tale of Wuxia, developed by Phoenix Games and Heluo Studio and released in 2015, is a Chinese RPG (role-playing game) taking inspiration directly from Jin Yong's wuxia fiction. As a sequel reminiscent of Heroes of Jin Yong released almost 20 years ago, the game features unique wuxia culture and distinctive Chinese cultural symbols. The game narrates a nonlinear story of a young hero whose choices and actions bear the possibility to change the whole *wulin* (martial world) and lead to multiple endings. The game features two modes: simulation of character development and exploration of a martial world with the main storyline and a number of side quests advancing through in-game time flow (Cao et al., 2025). The simulation system entails lifelike elements and events, including socializing, hunting, fishing, gardening, or grinding days and nights to build up character attributes. The exploration part allows players to assume the protagonist roaming freely within the game world, exploring locations, meeting other characters, learning abilities, completing quests, and fighting villains. The game features a great variety of elements, such as talents, martial arts, combat, attributes, etc., each with unique features to convey Chinese wuxia culture in its own way. The game was partially localized into English without dubbing and released on the digital storefront Steam as the forerunner of wuxia games to be localized and distributed in the English community. However, the localized version was received unfavorably among Western gamers in terms of its deficient localization quality despite the fact that the original Chinese version was a domestic hit. More than half of the 1700 negative reviews on Steam complain that the substandard English localization distracts them from immersion and stops their suspension of disbelief (Chandler & Deming, 2011).

The game was selected as the case study because, although it achieved splendid commercial performance at home and was rewarded as a rebirth of Chinese classic wuxia games with its exquisitely culture-embedded content, it was strongly criticized for its English localization by the English-speaking gamers and reviewers who claimed that the below-par localization was the most influential factor for its failure on the global market.

Moreover, as a representative and narrative-driven RPG, the game features an elaborate storyline composed of a large volume of text (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2004) and offers nearly all the components a wuxia fan expects to find in a wuxia game, such as well-designed character development (Holleman, 2018), diverse martial arts, and engaging gameplay, which, in turn, with its flop, is bound to offer more generalizable implications for enhancing the overall localization quality of Chinese video games abundant with wuxia elements.

3.2. The method

The present study used a qualitative and descriptive approach to examining localization issues in the English version of Tale of Wuxia. After purchasing the game from the Steam Store and playing both the Chinese (original) and English versions, the researcher was able to collect data by navigating all English in-game translatable assets, such as UI, menus, screen instructions, story dialogues, and inventory tabs. Over 200 screenshots were taken from both the Chinese and English versions. The researcher selected these

screenshots of texts and visuals based on their relevance to localization analysis and gaming experience.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases. First, the researcher categorized the captured screenshots containing localization issues into the three aspects, namely technical, linguistic, and cultural. Issues that overlapped in two or more dimensions were classified into the dimension that was most impacted. Second, the researcher analyzed the categorized data to reveal the reason why the English localization was deemed unsuccessful. By 'unsuccessful', this paper denotes the extent to which the English localization is technically unfunctional, linguistically inconsistent, and culturally unacceptable. In other words, it is the extent to which the localized version failed to deliver the original 'look and feel' (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006) to Western players. The data analysis was conducted from the perspective of the skopos theory, which argues that the skopos, or primary purpose, of video game localization is to produce a localized version that makes players in the target culture feel original, familiar, and affinitive (Mangiron, 2021).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Technical Dimension

The most conspicuous and disturbing technical issue of the localized Tale of Wuxia was the text overflow. Text overflow refers to the expansion of text that exceeds the space limit on the screen when localizing a video game into other languages due to different syntactic structures. Similar to that of software, localizing video games entails both text translation and software programming, where the localizer needs to place the translated text strings within the assigned space (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). It is therefore challenging to localize a game given that the target text must not exceed the tight space constraints of the source text, which had been preset if the game developers did not consider internationalization prior to development. In particular, Chinese, a space-compact language, would expand about 40% in space after being translated into English, because one single character in Chinese can refer to a concept or an object that can only be described in two or more words in a Western language (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Therefore, the translated English texts would normally occupy more space than the Chinese language in the localized version, especially with UI elements and culture-embedded words such as names of characters, factions, locations, gears, items, and martial arts. For instance, the three 8-character Chinese commands on the player's Tactics interface in the original version were rendered into English as Friend Invitation, Use Items, and Change Internal Style, all requiring more space. Such transfer led to missing letters on the screen, causing the players to be unable to tell what the option actually is and undermining the enjoyment of the combat system. Another example in the localized version is the character panel of different attributes in versatile skills. The text overflow of the English translation compelled the programmer to use acronyms and inconsistent font sizes that make the players difficult to read. Such issues of text overflow are pervasive in many tabs and screens of the localized version, leading to shrunk font sizes that cause the game to be visually unfriendly and illegible with Western gamers. To address this technical issue, localizers should be informed of the space limit for certain text strings in advance, especially for UI and menus (Al-Batineh, 2021), and opt for translation techniques such as paraphrasing and omission that highlight simplicity and functionality rather than descriptive purposes. Alternatively, in the development process, developers should create resizable UI elements or drop-down text boxes in

terms of word length or leave enough white space between texts in case of textual expansion and font size adjustment.

The localization of variables was the second most common technical issue revealed by the collected data. Variables are various in-game values that can be altered according to players' different choices and can be utilized in many intricate ways to boost players' immersion by addressing them (Bernal-Merino, 2007, p. 6). Variables pose challenges to localizing Chinese games into English as they correlate to changeable values in the game, such as numbers, time, currency, third-person singular verbs, pronouns, tense, names, etc., that could be rendered differently according to the syntax (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Absent in other types of audiovisual translation, variables influenced by the different syntactical structure between Chinese and English in video games must be rendered with care, because any inappropriate change of such variables could lead to problems in the localized version. A few in-game examples selected are discussed below to highlight this regard.

Time variables often pose a challenge to localizing Chinese wuxia games into English since the time convention adopted by most wuxia games is displayed with an astronomical clock in ancient China, which divides the celestial sphere into twelve sections, each equaling two hours. The localized version retained this time convention without any modification, compelling the Western players to read the time from a sundial filled with untranslated Chinese characters. Unaware of the hour, Western players complained that they felt disoriented and idle in the game without knowing what to do next.

Numerical variables are another concern because ordinal numbers in Chinese and English are different. Set in ancient China, Tale of Wuxia uses Chinese characters instead of Arabic numerals for ordinal numbers such as di yi 第一 [First], di er 第二 [Second], di san 第三 [Third]... While in the localized version, all ordinal numbers were simply converted to No. 1, No. 2, No. 3...without adjusting placement, making the textual visuals look odd and misleading, such as [No.1 page] in page indicators and [No. 3 Turn] in combat screen.

The order of names is also one of the essential variables that cause issues in localizing Chinese wuxia games into English. The order of Chinese and English names is opposite, meaning that localizers should put Chinese surnames behind given names in English. However, in the localized version of the game, character names were simply transferred into pinyin with the Chinese name order preserved, resulting in the wrong order that confused Western gamers and caused cognitive overload. As a role-playing game (RPG), Tale of Wuxia is filled with over a hundred names foreign to Western gamers. Retaining the Chinese name order made it even more impossible and frustrating for Western gamers to tell and remember characters from a wide range of factions, let alone track their threads in the storyline.

Image-text hierarchy was another technical issue deserving attention in the localized version. Image-text hierarchy constituted by art assets, including graphics and images, must be adapted for the localized version (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Divergent from screen translation subtitle norms, where text is always subordinate to image, video game localization allows an image to be modified to match the text (O'Hagan, 2005). Unfortunately, the researcher found a great number of unchanged and untranslated images with Chinese text in the localized version, which makes it difficult for Western

players to solve the in-game puzzles. For instance, in the acupuncture mini-game where players are required to find the correct points on a human body chart, all the points and the body chart are left untranslated and unaltered, which hinders Western players, who are oblivious of traditional Chinese medicine knowledge, from passing the trial and greatly undermines the gaming experience.

In short, when localizing variables and visuals in wuxia games, localizers must always know what function they shall perform and where they may be used so as to avoid grammatical and conventional errors (O'Hagan & Mangiron, 2013). Dealing with variables and visuals that are embedded in the base code requires a thorough internationalization strategy and collaboration between translators and programmers, as it involves both linguistic conversion and software programming.

4.2. Linguistic Dimension

The first critical linguistic issue was the translation of character names. Character names devised by the developers are an essential component in wuxia games, making it no easy task for translators to render and situate them within the constrained amount of space. Besides, localized character names are anticipated to be reused for subsequent serialized titles, thus making it much more important to deal with them properly for the first time (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). It is rather challenging to translate character names into English because not only there are hundreds of characters in a wuxia game, but also sometimes characters bear unique nicknames to distinguish them from their peers. Western gamers complained that, in the localized version of Tale of Wuxia, they were confused and frustrated to see almost all character names simply rendered into pinyin form or inconsistent translations. In light of the concern, the developer should categorize characters into primary, secondary and NPCs based on their relevance and importance in the storyline. This categorization allows the localizers to transfer their names and nicknames with different techniques or even adapt them to what is ultimately approved by the developer (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). This not only enables the localized version to impress Western gamers with the main characters while relieving them from the burden of memorizing minor characters, but also allows the developer to reuse the localized names and nicknames of main characters in their sequels as legacy assets, which ultimately increases both gamer retention and loyalty.

The second linguistic challenge is the transfer of culture-specific items and martial arts. Chinese wuxia games feature a large array of imagined items ranging from legendary weapons to sturdy armor, from healing consumables to cooking ingredients, from rare trinkets that fetch a good price to gifts that deepen the bonding between characters. In addition, as another gem of wuxia games, martial arts and moves (kung fu), a wide variety of abilities or skills that serve as means of combat (Lorge, 2012) are what truly captivate and entertain global gamers. These items and martial arts prevalent in wuxia games not only facilitate the constitution of a virtual reality of enjoyment and thrill but also, in most cases, play a key role in quest completion and story guidance. Naturally, the names of these items and martial arts, invented creatively by the game developers, compel the localizers to translate them with deliberation (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006). Hence, cultural connotations instilled in the names of items and martial arts complicate the English translation, as it is mind-bending for the translators to find precise and concise English equivalents for these alien objects and concepts. For example, in the localized version of Tale of Wuxia, the well-known move [xiang long shi ba zhang] is translated literally into the 'Eighteen Palms of Subduing the Dragon', causing its English

translation to take up about forty characters in space, much more than the ten characters in its source text, resulting in a threefold text expansion that goes beyond the confines of the screen. However, these culture-specific items obscure to Western players can be properly rendered and introduced with a domesticating approach of transcreation (Zhang & O'Hagan, 2019), which serves as the last but not the least resort, as it can draw on the experience from successful localization of Japanese games with extensive use of transcreation techniques such as renaming, omission, and paraphrasing. Given the space limit and gamers' reception, a domesticating approach might be a necessary compromise for better localization quality, even though it occasionally causes a partial loss of culture.

Another critical issue was style consistency. Style consistency, which refers to the uniformity of tone, register, and style throughout the localized texts, remains challenging since there are different characters, factions, religions, ethnic groups, and even dialects in Chinese wuxia games. The localized version of Tale of Wuxia revealed a great number of instances that failed in style consistency, as the original game features diverse characters and factions, some of which even speak their unique dialects or with different tones of voice. This failure is mainly due to blind translation and text fragmentation. Blind translation refers to the translation process where translators deal with in-game texts without knowing the clear context (Dietz, 2006). Many misinterpretations and mistranslations were found in the localized version due to blind translation because the translators were found to be provided with inadequate contextual information such as players' comments, in-game screenshots, open walkthroughs, or visuals. Without background information, the translators were prone to lexical or grammatical ambiguity, resulting in inconsistent and misleading output. Text fragmentation is another key factor that impacts style consistency (Lepre, 2015). As was the case with the localized version of Tale of Wuxia, a story-driven RPG featuring dialogs jumping back and forth on the timeline due to the branching scripts subject to the player's choices, which has a great impact on how texts are translated. It was found that all in-game linguistic assets were extracted and distributed to translators in tables or spreadsheets with fragmented and incoherent segments, which proved to be an unfitting way to tell stories and provide contexts and led to inconsistent style. Hence, it is crucial for the localizers to be furnished with a localization kit (lockit) before the translation process, which organizes all background information in a logical manner to help them eliminate any context-related doubts (Chandler & Deming, 2011). It is also preferable to leave comments or explanations for vague or ambiguous text strings when necessary (Gustafsson, 2007).

4.3. Cultural Dimension

Video game localization focuses on the gamers, as developers endeavor to provide the target gamers with a feeling that they have a similar gameplay experience to that of the original gamers (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006; Fernández Costales, 2014). Today, it is unimaginable for a video game to bear no cultural connotations and influences. Therefore, when localizing a video game, the localizer must be aware of the 'cultural oddities' that could be incomprehensible or disrespectful to the target culture (Dong & Mangiron, 2018). In-game cultural oddities or culturally offensive content may detach players' emotions from the game and disrupt their immersion (Mangiron et al., 2014). In this regard, Chinese wuxia games, generally narrative-driven and culture-rich, demand cultural adaptation to a great extent.

Nonetheless, the localized version of Tale of Wuxia appears to be devoid of cultural consideration, as it was found that the original narrative made no adaptation for Western

gamers, leaving a number of controversial cultural references unaltered and dubiously offensive. For instance, a side quest in the early game relates to a woman asking the player to purchase a tiger's reproductive organ from the local apothecary for her husband to cure his impotence. The ancient Chinese believed that such an organ served as an effective treatment for erectile dysfunction. This folk belief resulted in negative comments from Western gamers that they felt a bit repulsive and irritated because what is accepted in China might be loathed in Western culture. In such a case, rewriting the quest content without changing the reward can be a proper solution. Deleting side quests that have little impact on the main story would be the least favored but necessary procedure for the localizers (Al-Ajarmeh & Al-Adwan, 2022). Moreover, there are a lot of Taoist and Buddhist concepts wrapped in casual conversation between characters in the game, causing the translated text to deliver senseless information for Western gamers. All these culture-loaded and religion-rich dialogues and other sensitive content that potentially have a negative impact on the localized version should be modified to adhere to the cultural norms of Western culture.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzed and discussed the major issues of the English localization of Tale of Wuxia in technical, linguistic, and cultural dimensions. These issues negatively impact the playability, gaming experience, and global sales of the game product. However, this unsuccessful yet pioneering localization attempt could be marked as a milestone and a lesson well learned for Chinese wuxia games going global.

Several implications could be acquired. First, in order to realize smooth internationalization (Chandler & Deming, 2011) that ensures an efficient localization process, Chinese wuxia game developers should think and act globally and keep localization in mind from the early development phase rather than as a whimsical afterthought. Second, drawing on the experience of top-selling Japanese franchises such as the Persona series or the Dragon Quest series may help Chinese wuxia game developers dynamically adjust their localization strategies according to players' feedback and preferences and make their games more 'flavorless' (Mangiron, 2021) and universally acceptable by reducing distant cultural references and targeting the mass over the niche so as to secure a place in the global market first. For instance, Mangiron (2021) discusses how Atlus, the developer of the Persona series, adopted a domestication strategy in the early years of global marketing before shifting to foreignization after Western gamers became well-accustomed or even 'insatiable' later, which provides valuable reference for the path of localizing Chinese wuxia games. Third, in addition to hiring native English speakers for linguistic testing, in-game encyclopedias and journals are also friendly features that acquaint gamers with main characters, items, or concepts, and help players keep track of the storyline. Finally, in this early phase of Chinese cultural transmission in the global game community, domestication (Venuti, 2017) should be adopted as the primary localization approach since it encourages using idiomatic and colloquial language in the target text, the adaptation of cultural elements, and allows for the freedom of recreating new and distinctive cultural references (Mangiron & O'Hagan, 2006), which brings the localized title closer to Western gamers.

However, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, due to space constraints, this paper presented no figures, which could have enhanced the clarity and interpretability of the findings. Second, this study is a single case study, which may affect the generalizability of its findings. A multiple case study encompassing

a broader dataset would enable more robust and comprehensive comparisons across different cases to increase the generalizability of the results.

Despite that China remains one of the leading consumers in the evolving global game market with leaps and bounds, there is scanty research on localizing Chinese wuxia games into English. By exploring this untrodden avenue, this article is hoped to call for more research focusing on the localization of Chinese wuxia games into more languages and cultures. Reception studies on localization quality with empirical evidence are also needed to assess how gamers with different cultural backgrounds receive Chinese wuxia games, which can more precisely relate localization strategies to commercial performance.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve human or animal subjects, and therefore, no ethical approval was needed.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest regarding this study.

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