Black Myth: Wukong and China's Soft Power Expansion

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SYNOPSIS

The release of Black Myth: Wukong by Game Science marks a key moment in China's soft power growth. The video game achieved remarkable commercial success, selling over 10 million copies in three days and generating US$1.1 billion in revenue. It exemplifies how video games can serve as effective tools for cultural diplomacy, signalling a shift in China's soft power strategy.

COMMENTARY

Released on August 20, 2024, *Black Myth: Wukong* has become a significant milestone for China's gaming industry and digital soft power. Praised for its stunning graphics, engaging gameplay, and authentic portrayal of Chinese mythology, the game has gained international acclaim, showcasing the potential of culturally significant video games as tools of influence. Blending traditional mythology with advanced technology, it represents China's major entry into the global gaming market.

However, despite its commercial success and cultural visibility, the game faces challenges due to strict government regulations and oversight, which impact creative freedom and market access. This commentary explores the prospects and limitations of China's digital soft power ambitions, assessing how *Black Myth: Wukong* fits into broader cultural diplomacy efforts and whether the Chinese gaming industry can overcome censorship and global market hurdles.

E-Sports, Global Reception, and Cultural Impact

Black Myth: Wukong has helped to transform global perceptions of Chinese culture, drawing from the classic *Journey to the West* – a Chinese novel published in the 16th century during the Ming Dynasty. It showcases Chinese folklore to international

audiences with captivating visuals and high-quality production, highlighting China's ability to produce AAA-quality games.

This success has boosted domestic and international sales, with sales of PlayStation 5 – a video game console – in China doubling before the game's release, reflecting strong local interest. The game's cultural authenticity appeals to players seeking fresh narratives beyond typical Western fantasy and sci-fi themes.

Black Myth: Wukong, primarily a single-player role-playing game (RPG), has sparked discussions about its potential in e-sports. Although it lacks a dedicated multiplayer mode, its dynamic combat and skill-based mechanics appeal to speedrunners and modded PvP formats, hinting at possible competitive adaptations.

China has a strong foothold in the global e-sports scene, especially with titles like *League of Legends Pro League* (LPL), *Honor of Kings*, and *Dota 2*. The LPL features top teams, while *Honor of Kings* is a leading mobile e-sport. If Chinese developers explore action RPG e-sports, they could further enhance China's gaming dominance and attract international audiences.

Regulatory constraints on gaming, especially those pertaining to youth participation and state regulation, could hinder the sustained development of e-sports talent. Additionally, Western scepticism regarding digital products developed in China, driven by apprehensions about data privacy and governmental control, presents a significant obstacle to China's ambitions to influence the global e-sports landscape.

China's Soft Power Strategy in the Digital Age

China has historically used economic diplomacy, media outreach, and cultural initiatives as key elements of its soft power strategy. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded China's influence through major infrastructure investments, while media platforms like CGTN, TikTok, and WeChat promote its cultural narratives globally.

However, these strategies face growing challenges. Confucius Institutes have been closed in several countries due to concerns over their political implications, and the BRI is criticised for creating debt dependency, harming China's international reputation.

China's expanding presence in digital technology raises concerns about data privacy and surveillance. Restrictions on TikTok by the US and European nations highlight the difficulties Chinese platforms face in gaining international acceptance. Similarly, Chinese video games like Black Myth: Wukong may encounter regulatory hurdles and potential bans in Western markets.

Unlocking China's Cultural Power

China faces challenges but has significant advantages in leveraging its cultural and technological assets to engage global audiences in the digital age. Its rich cultural heritage enhances its soft power, particularly in gaming and digital entertainment. Unlike many nations that rely on contemporary narratives, China has a wealth of mythology, history, and philosophy that remains largely untapped in global media. This

allows Chinese developers to create unique narratives that stand out from Western and Japanese storytelling.

A prime example is *Black Myth: Wukong*, inspired by the classic *Journey to the West*, which highlights Chinese mythology through the Monkey King's quest for enlightenment. Other narratives, like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Investiture of the Gods*, offer compelling tales of battles and philosophical themes that provide for exciting games. These stories reflect China's philosophical traditions – Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism – providing a moral framework that contrasts with Western individualism.

China's historical context also enriches strategy and role-playing games, as seen in *Total War: Three Kingdoms*. Chinese developers are well-positioned to craft original narratives rooted in their history and mythology, establishing a unique presence in the global gaming market and enhancing China's soft power.

China is the leading gaming market globally, home to major players like Tencent and NetEase, which have the resources to create competitive games. Chinese e-sports teams excel in international competitions, especially in mobile gaming, giving China significant influence in the industry. The country is also advancing in AI-driven game development, cloud gaming, and mobile technology, bolstered by investments in 5G infrastructure.

Unlike many Western companies, China excels in cross-platform integration, with games like *Honor of Kings* expanding into music, merchandise, and theme parks. Titles like *Black Myth: Wukong* may similarly branch into film, television, and virtual reality. Despite regulatory challenges, China's recognition of gaming as a soft power tool and supportive policies may strengthen its global gaming leadership.

Challenges and Controversies

China's growing influence in digital entertainment has raised concerns about potential ideological impacts from Chinese gaming and media platforms in Western markets. TikTok has faced restrictions due to data security worries, and similar scrutiny may extend to Chinese video games. If regulators view Chinese developers as state instruments, titles like *Black Myth: Wukong* could face distribution hurdles, content censorship, or exclusion from Western markets.

China's strict gaming regulations, including content restrictions and youth gaming limits, challenge the global ambitions of its gaming industry. Developers must avoid politically sensitive topics, limiting their creative scope and potentially leading to perceptions of state control that could deter Western consumers. Self-censorship may further stifle creativity, putting Chinese games at a disadvantage compared to their Western and Japanese peers.

In response, some Chinese companies are adopting branding strategies to distance themselves from the government. For example, *Xiaohongshu* (Little Red Book) has rebranded as "Red Note" internationally. Similar strategies may be crucial for Chinese game developers aiming to expand globally while navigating political sensitivities.

Strategies for China's Global Gaming Influence

Black Myth: Wukong offers China a chance to enhance its global digital entertainment presence. To maintain this momentum, China must improve market accessibility, support creative independence, and promote transmedia initiatives while addressing regulatory challenges and fostering local innovation. Engaging with international regulators on data privacy and content standards is crucial for breaking into foreign markets like the US, Europe, and India.

Adopting alternative branding and publishing strategies can help mitigate the political sensitivities of Chinese games. Collaborating with independent publishers or establishing international subsidiaries for neutral branding could effectively navigate geopolitical issues and build consumer trust, similar to *Xiaohongshu's* rebranding as "Red Note."

Supporting independent game developers in China can drive innovation and reduce state influence in the digital entertainment industry. A decentralised gaming landscape may enhance global competitiveness and create games that appeal to international audiences, distinguishing them from state-sponsored media.

China's leadership in e-sports offers a chance to promote culturally significant titles like *Black Myth: Wukong*. By hosting international e-sports tournaments for Chinese-developed games, the country can boost its gaming industry's global visibility and engage international gamers. The success of Tencent's *Honor of Kings* suggests that adapting *Black Myth: Wukong* into a competitive multiplayer format could sustain its popularity post-launch.

Additionally, *Black Myth: Wukong* has the potential to evolve into a cross-media franchise, enhancing China's cultural soft power through films, TV series, and interactive experiences. Similar to Western franchises like *The Witcher*, this transmedia approach could introduce Chinese mythology to a wider audience, strengthening China's position in the global creative sector and improving its cultural exports in digital entertainment.

Conclusion

Black Myth: Wukong represents a turning point in China's approach to soft power, highlighting video games as powerful tools for cultural diplomacy. The game underscores China's creative and technical potential while fostering global interest in its cultural heritage.

However, China's digital soft power ambitions must navigate geopolitical scrutiny, as seen in TikTok's challenges and *Xiaohongshu's* rebranding strategy. Meanwhile, the rise of e-sports provides a unique avenue for China to expand its influence further, leveraging its dominance in competitive gaming.

By strategically investing in e-sports, enhancing global game distribution, and ensuring content resonates beyond political and cultural barriers, China can solidify its position as a leader in digital entertainment. Through innovation, storytelling, and strategic

global partnerships, *Black Myth: Wukong* may not just be a successful game but a symbol of China's growing role in the cultural and digital spheres worldwide.

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