

FROM JOURNEY TO THE WEST TO BLACK MYTH: WUKONG

The Haunted Ghost and Gaming Politics in China

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Abstract

This article offers a theoretical reading of the political allegory expressed in *Black Myth: Wukong*. It argues that the reincarnated Destined One can be viewed as the returned ghost, which represents the trauma that has been left unresolved and lurks deep in the collective memory of contemporary Chinese society. This ghostly figure transgresses and appears in the medium of the game, helping players remain engaged and fascinated in the process of exploring unknown stories through the digital representations in the game. In doing so, the game aims to intervene and release issues such as personal and collective trauma in China in the form of an allegory.

Keywords

authoritarian politics, *Black Myth: Wukong*, Chinese game studies, gaming politics, haunted video game

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INTRODUCTION

Journey to the West has attracted a lot of attention since its release, both as a literary text and as a scholarly analysis derived from its text.² Recently, the video game *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science 2024), inspired by *Journey to the West* and even based on the classic work itself, has regained the attention of avid video game players around the world. The story of this game tells how, after Sun Wukong is killed because of the Heavenly Court's suspicion, the Destined One undergoes various trials in an attempt to bring him back to life. It is structured into six chapters, each centered on a distinct location. The story is divided into six chapters, each centered on a different location. All the characters and plotlines hint at the growing tension between the Buddhist deities of Lingshan and the Taoist deities of the Heavenly Court. But in essence, it is a story about resistance and suppression. According to the data given by *The National Game Sales* chart, *Black Myth: Wukong's* total revenues had exceeded US\$867 million on 5 September 2024 (roughly RMB 6.155 billion). The explosion of *Black Myth: Wukong* is not only due to its excellent production and mind-blowing plot (Hu 1–43; Zhang and Zeng 1–19), but its inheritance of the spirit of *Journey to the West* is also an important reason for its success. One fan hit the nail on the head in the comments section, “I’ve.... Now I finally see a glimmer of hope that I can go back to my own country’s Otherworld as a Monkey” (Xv & Wu 1). This passionate comment not only points to *Black Myth: Wukong's* evocation of the stories of demon slaying rooted in Chinese gamers’ memories of TV dramas and novels, but also hints at the brave image of Sun Wukong, who dares to face the Gods and Buddhas in defiance of injustice.

Attention to this rebellious figure has appeared extensively in scholarly histories of the text and meaning of *Journey to the West* since its inception. The earliest focus on the rebellious image of Sun Wukong³ can be traced back to Pu Songling’s chapter “The Great Sage, Heaven’s Equal” in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Pu 2013). The chapter implies the author’s admiration for Sun Wukong’s willingness to bend and rebel spirit in the form of a story. In modern times, especially after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), under the influence of the Communist Party of China’s view of class history (*Jieji Shiguan*),⁴ the study of *Journey to the West* has inevitably taken on a stronger ideological flavor and has been closely linked to politics. One notable view is the analysis of the Sun Wukong as an image representative of peasant revolt. This viewpoint is mainly concentrated in You Guo En’s *History of Chinese literature (Zhongguo Wenxue Shi)* (You 2002). A strong argument in this article upholding these views is the original Sun Wukong’s treacherous remark, uttered during the great disturbance in the Heavenly Palace, that is, “The emperor takes turns to be the emperor, and next year it will be me (皇帝轮流做·明年到我家, original Chinese; *Journey to the West*, ch. 7; my translation.)”. With the completion of the Third Plenary Session

of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, which corrected the ideological front,⁵ the study of *Journey to the West* was liberated from the confined and politically orientated cultural environment of the Cultural Revolution, and a number of new, arguably shocking, ideas have been reintroduced. Zhu Tong (1979 87) argues that Sun Wukong was neither a hero of the peasant revolt nor a traitor who “surrendered,” but a “citizen hero in mythological garb,” thus setting off a wave of research and discussion on *The Journey to the West*. After the reform and opening-up, many scholars further develop the argument of Sun Wukong as the image of rebellion, using it as the basis for the critique of the Ming Dynasty, as implied by the work *Journey to the West*.⁶ Zhu Hong-bo (“Re-evaluate the Topic of “Revolt”, 248) contends that, although the article rejects reading Sun Wukong as a figure of peasant revolt, it nonetheless affirms *The Journey to the West*'s own attempt to challenge orthodoxy and to establish a new social and cultural order through the concepts of “disenthronement” and “crowning.”

The spirit of rebellion and critique of politics in *Journey to the West* carries over into game *Black Myth: Wukong*. From the dialogue between Sun Wukong and Yang Jian⁷ at the beginning of the game, we can follow this sense of argument. Sun Wukong, who wanted to “live a life of freedom,” wanted to kill “every henchman of Heavenly Palace” after he refused to take the position of Buddha on Heaven Palace and Leiyin Temple (*Black Myth: Wukong*). Some scholars believe that the theme of resistance in *Journey to the West* and the image of Sun Wukong's uprising are based on the social reality of the Ming Dynasty.⁸ For example, Zhou Penghua (2016) points out in his article that *Journey to the West* is “a combination of the zeitgeist of defiance of imperial power, denial of hierarchical concepts, and the pursuit of freedom of individuality, with the traditional theme of exposing the decadence and darkness of feudalism and extolling the good qualities of the people” (120). Leaving aside the question of whether these articles are correct or incorrect about how *Journey to the West* testifies to the backwardness of Ming society, the point here is that, as also suggested by J. C. Falardeau (1967), literary expression may take the form of acceptance, outcry, revolt, sublimation, or mythology. Whatever its (*Journey to the West*) register, its significance can be gauged only by relating it to a given society. If the rebellion in *Journey to the West* was meant to criticize the politics and institutions of feudal society at that time, and if that corrupt and backward feudal system has long since disappeared, then how should Wukong's rebellion be understood today, and how is this spirit of rebellion experienced by players in the gameplay?

Linda Hutcheon (2012) argues that “[p]art of this pleasure[adaptation]. . . , comes simply from repetition with variation” (4). In other words, the adapted work gives the audience a sense of familiarity and comfort by repeating the storyline and theme of the original work, which is also the origin of the rebellious spirit represented

by the image of “Destined One” (adapted from the image of Sun Wukong) in the game. In addition, as a creative process, adaptation involves reinterpreting and recreating the original work. It is this process of recreation that allows the original work, which criticized the politics and system of the feudal society of its time, to be revived in the modern era. As Hutcheon explains, quoting Priscilla Galloway, the adapter’s task is to preserve stories that deserve to be known but may not be able to speak directly to a new audience through creative “resurrection” (8). *Black Myth: Wukong’s* adaptation of *Journey to the West* allows the rebellious spirit to be revived in the contemporary era. The game mechanics enable players to transform the criticism of feudalism into a metaphor for contemporary power structures through localized actions, allowing them to reinterpret the rebellious spirit during the process of decryption.

This article argues that the reincarnated Destined One can be viewed as the returned ghost, which represents the trauma that has been left unresolved and lurks deep in the collective memory, coming back from the past and haunting the players of today. In other words, the narrative of the game is wrapped in personal and collective trauma, which is then received by the player and re-decoded through the game’s digital representation. In fact, the digital representation of the Destined One’s story in *Black Myth: Wukong* helps the player to stay engaged and fascinated while exploring the unknown story, especially the design of the game space, which helps the game to intervene in the form of allegory with apt interventions on issues such as individual and collective trauma of the Chinese people. As Espen Aarseth (2001) points out, the representation of space in video games is an “allegory.” They superficially attempt to reproduce real space, but in fact rely on differences from real space to achieve the playability of the game. Although *Black Myth: Wukong* appears, in its visual and narrative presentation, to be an open-world game, its underlying structure more closely resembles a closed maze. Players can only move by clicking on predetermined hotspots, a restriction that renders the game space noticeably fragmented and constrained. Rather than diminishing immersion, this spatial design compresses the player’s range of action and directs their attention toward specific environmental details—details that are crucial for piecing together the motivations behind the Destined One’s rebellion. According to Henry Jenkins (2004), this technique of dispersing and concealing narrative information within environmental minutiae constitutes “embedded narrative.” It compels players to actively collect and interpret clues during exploration, generating micro-narratives imbued with a sense of personal participation.

However, such “active” exploration is not entirely free; it is guided by carefully crafted narrative prompts. In other words, through the arrangement of rules and environmental design, the game’s creators preconfigure the path and rhythm by which players obtain information, steering them toward the reception and

internalization of particular themes and perspectives. In his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, Ian Bogost introduced the concept of “procedural rhetoric,” arguing that game is “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions” (*Persuasive Games* xi), and therefore have strongly rhetorical, can read as “deliberate expressions of particular perspectives” (Bogost, ‘The Rhetoric of Video Games’ 119). In this sense, games can be read as deliberate expressions of specific positions. In *Black Myth: Wukong*, this rhetorical quality is manifested in the fact that players are not passive spectators to the Destined One’s rebellion; rather, they enact a symbolic practice of resistance by controlling the protagonist to break free from the Celestial Court’s constraints and intervene in a predetermined fate. In *Black Myth: Wukong*, this strongly rhetorical strategy is manifested in the fact that players are not passive spectators to the Destined One’s rebellion; rather, they enact a symbolic practice of resistance by controlling the protagonist to break free from the Celestial Court’s constraints and intervene in a predetermined fate. This is exactly what the game designers intended. In sum, this article argues that *Black Myth: Wukong* can be interpreted from the dual perspectives of hauntology (unsolved trauma reappearing in space) and gaming politics (interactive mechanisms as practices of resistance). Its spatial design is not only a vehicle for narrative, but also a field for critiquing power and reconstructing identity.

The research method used in this article is mainly textual analysis. More specifically, the use of textual analysis means that the authors analyze the representation of the game, such as specific elements, particular characters (e.g., Elder Jinchi), and the narrative presentation (e.g., how the Destiny One is given the function of a ghost and fulfills his revenge). In order to connect the analysis of games with broader cultural politics, the textual analysis used in this thesis is not limited to a focus on how texts are produced (structural analysis) and where they come from (historical criticism), but also on how games are interpreted and accepted as they are played by players, that is, how the codes set by the game are decoded by the players. As Roland Barthes puts it, textual analysis aims to address not simply how [a text] is made, “but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates—by what coded paths it goes off” (*The struggle with the angel: textual analysis of Genesis 22–23*). However, the process of textual analysis of games requires repeated chewing on specific fragments until the meaning hidden behind their representation is revealed. Although the basis for this behavior is to place a specific fragment in the context of the entire text, so that the meaning of the specific fragment is analyzed within the context of the whole text, this behavior still destroys the unity or integrity of the text, thus fragmenting it. As Barthes argues that fragmentation is an act of “manhandling the text, interrupting that undermines its ‘naturalness’” (*S/Z: An Essay* 15).

In fact, Barthes' statement points out the limitations of text analysis when studying games. Due to the differences between media, the mechanics and structure of games, as well as the experience they give players, also play a crucial role in the process of conveying meaning. As Bogost (2008) argues, games persuade players through their systems, processes, rules, and procedures—meaning is conveyed as players engage with and internalize particular viewpoints through interaction (117–39). This perspective not only extends Barthes' critique but also underscores that a game's significance arises not solely from its narrative text, but also from the ways in which its mechanics and spatial design shape the player's interpretation and perception. Tanya Krzywinska and Barry Atkins, discussing the textual approach to game analysis, also consider play as playing a game is a necessary step in understanding that game as experience (3). This means that the analysis of the game must be based on the actual experience of the player, not just by watching the game. Therefore, to compensate for the shortcomings of textual analysis, this article, inspired by Diane Carr, chooses to analyze the game from the perspective of the player as the analyst. This means that the basis of this article's analysis of *Black Myth: Wukong* is based on our first-hand gaming experience as a player, and like most other players, the analysis focuses on the scenes and experiences that have made a significant impression while playing the game. Diane Carr refers to this as "selective omission" (715) when carrying out text analysis. This supplement to the deficiencies of the textual analysis is justified in view of our cultural background as authentic Chinese citizens and our subjective experience as game players.

FROM THE BUDDHA TO THE HAUNTED GHOST: THE HORROR OF *BLACK MYTH: WUKONG*

As a literary work about gods and demons, *Journey to the West* portrays a world in which demons, Gods, Buddhas, and other kinds of strange creatures coexist. In previous studies, the demons in this fictional world have never been treated as unusual creatures, a viewpoint that is very close to that of the study of fairy tales under Western literary theory. Hu Shi (1988) was the first to notice the childlike nature of *Journey to the West* and subsequently developed it into an important approach to the study of *Journey to the West*, the game theory (*youxi shuo* 游戏说) (923). However, the "unusual creatures" undergo an essential change in the *Black Myth: Wukong*, i.e., they become terrifying, such as the portrayal of Elder Jinchi. In the classic literary work, the portrayal of the Elder Jinchi focuses on his ornate dress to emphasize his greedy nature. Despite the fact that this elder has far

exceeded the maximum lifespan a human can achieve, he still appears to the reader as a human figure:

A Vairocana miter on his head
 Topped with a gleaming cat's eye jewel.
 On his body a gown of brocade,
 Edged with gold-mounted kingfisher feather.
 A pair of monkish shoes studded with the Eight Treasure.
 A walking stick inlaid with clouds and stars.
 A face covered with wrinkles, like the Old Goddess of Mount Li;
 A pair of purblind eyes, like the Dragon King of the Eastern Sea.
 His mouth can't keep out the wind as his teeth have gone;
 His back is bent because his muscles are stiff. (Wu 301)

By the time of *Black Myth: Wukong*, Elder Jinchi's image struggles to maintain even a basic human form, with a disproportionately large head compared to his body studded with thin, metal-like objects used in place of human hair, a black object flowing out of nowhere covered most of the face from the top of the head. In fact, the most terrifying feature of Elder Jinchi is the pig- or rat-like tail on the back of his body. These features switch up the unusual nature of the figure.

Noël Carroll distinguishes in his article between monsters in horror stories and those in the world of fairy tales, arguing that in works of horror, human beings perceive the monsters they encounter to be abnormal and a disturbance of the natural order. If Elder Jinchi's inhuman traits prove his abnormality, the player learns even more about the character's interference with the mundane order and violation of morality in the subsequent plot information, which further deepens the player's fear towards him. In the subsequent portraits, the terrifying image of Elder Jinchi receives some explanation: "In his frustration, the Black Wind King (Black Bear Guai) used the mantra to try and bring back to life the old monk he used to practice with, but the soul of the monk did not return to the stitched corpse. Instead, it fused with the gold, silver, and copper coins the monk had buried in life, forming a maddened golem. It wandered and disturbed the mountain garrison day after day" (*Black Myth: Wukong*). In other words, Elder Jinchi's greed explains why he had a long, thick pig's tail after his resurrection (the pig's likeness represents greed in Buddhism). The already dead Elder Jinchi becomes a ghost resurrected because of greed and loses his human characteristics by becoming involved with matter, a state that, in Jacques Derrida's words, is "neither soul nor body, one or the other" (5). He interferes with the boundaries between the mundane and undead worlds, making the boundaries between the two realms unstable, i.e., interfering with the natural order and, ultimately, terror. Indeed, the emotional response to them evoked by this likeness by the player is further evidence of the horror involved. It evokes a

questioning of human's ontological and animistic nature, causing the noble human being to be infested with disgusting creatures, and therefore eliciting an impure and sickening emotional response. This feeling is also one of the characteristics of horror emphasized by Noël Carroll. The combination of the previous abnormal, disturbing monsters to the natural order gives these game characters an aura of horror.

If these characters merely prove that *Black Myth: Wukong* is not a fictional world filled with monsters regarded as usual creatures, the uncanny feeling that pervades the game confirms the horrific nature of the game. First proposed by Sigmund Freud, the uncanny suggests that:

The experience of the uncanny occurs when repressed infantile complexes are once again awakened by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been transcended seem to be confirmed once again an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression. (80)

Freud argues that the uncanny arises when something once familiar reappears in an unsettling or repressed form. For majority of Chinese players, the visual imagination of *Journey to the West* is largely shaped by the influential 1986 television adaptation directed by Yang Jie. This familiar heroic image forms a stable narrative expectation for audiences who grew up with the story. Although there have been many versions of *Journey to the West* since then, some of the basic elements of *Journey to the West* are still repeated, such as the all-powerful Sun Wukong, cool spell fighting, etc. No child has not fantasized about being Sun Wukong and possessing all of his skills to eliminate demons and promote justice in his childhood. However, *Black Myth: Wukong* deliberately disrupts this familiar structure. The omnipotent Sun Wukong in the player's memory is declared dead at the beginning, and the demons that were once subdued by Sun Wukong reoccupy their territories and transform these territories into demonic images. In other words, the player's childhood experience of Sun Wukong is turned upside down at this moment, and the demons that Sun Wukong defeated from the undead world of the player's memories reappear in the world of the living, and the monsters that the player remembers as terrifying are revealed to the player from the depths of their repressed memories and strike fear into them, and this is the reason for the uncanny feeling that pervades *Black Myth: Wukong*. According to Freud's theory, this return of the familiar in a disturbing guise produces the uncanny. On the other hand, the graphics of the game's setting enhance this feeling. When the Guanyin Temple appears in front of the player, this sensation overlaps with the haunted house that Barry Curtis describes in *Dark Places: The Haunted House in Film*: "The haunted house is instantly recognizable" (Curtis 31).

As the Destined One, controlled by the player, passes through the dense forest and looks out from the cliffs at the Guanyin Temple, the dilapidated structure—imbued with an ancient quality—emerges as a site where clues to the truth of Sun Wukong’s demise are preserved and where time appears frozen. The secrets it holds draw players to explore it simultaneously. When players enter this place after completing the hidden side quest to defeat Elder Jinchi in *Black Myth: Wukong*, the sunlight that once filtered through the trees disappears and is replaced by an eerie scene that reveals the haunted state of this forgotten place: overgrown courtyards, trees withered by time, and a temple that appears to have devoured all traces of life. Even more striking is the fact that the monsters that the player has seen along the way (who, as stated above, are merely ordinary creatures of the fictional world) have now all been replaced by skeletons with ghostly features.

Darren Hudson Hick follows Noël Carroll’s trajectory towards defining horror, arguing that “something qualifies as a work of horror if and only if it centrally and demonstrably aims at provoking one or more of a particular set of negative affects” (140). *Black Myth: Wukong* is just such a work of horror, and although the game is set in a fictional world full of monsters, the fact that these monsters, and the game itself, evoke a horrific, impurity, and sickening emotional response from the player attests to the horrific nature of the game.

In this world of horror, the player takes on the role of The Destined One, who becomes a vengeful ghost, although this ghost is distinct from the translucent, ethereal souls traditionally associated with it. Lisa Morton, in her book *Ghosts: A Haunted History*, critically notes that “belief in ghosts seems to be nearly universal, but the shape the undead spirit takes varies according to the particular society’s collective imagination” (120). When combined with *Black Myth: Wukong*, although the Chinese belief in ghosts remains that of translucent and ethereal spirits, an examination of the function that the Destined One assumes in the game reveals the fact that he exists as a ghost. Firstly, a consensus is that the prerequisite for the creation of a ghost must be death, and this is told to the player from the beginning of *Black Myth: Wukong*. Secondly, an important function that the ghost takes on is to seek revenge on those who have harmed it, possibly even innocent people around the world (Morton 13). The function of vengeance is also undisputed in the plot of *Black Wukong*. As the reincarnation of Sun Wukong’s soul, the Destined One cannot truly be a flesh-and-blood being; just as its name suggests, it takes on its innate use from the moment of its appearance, avenging and ultimately sacrificing itself for Sun Wukong and carrying Sun Wukong’s soul in its own body. More importantly, the function assumed by the Destined One interferes with the absolute boundaries between past, present, and future: it brings the truth of the past, which has been repressed and rejected, back into the present time, and the behavior of the present redefines the future (a future in which Sun Wukong is dead

and all those who harmed him are at peace). This is what Derrida emphasizes when describing the role of ghosts, whose phenomena continue to shape reality: “The past refuses to pass away, the future refuses to come” (193).

From Sun Wukong as a Buddha to the haunted ghost, the economic and cultural context of an adaptation also affects the form and content of the adaptation (Hutcheon 30–31). In other words, the horrorization of Elder Jinchi and the entire game is not just to increase the thriller effect of the game. The deeper reason for making the entire game terrifying is to evoke a haunted atmosphere through horror images, thereby conveying a deeper cultural and political critique. Hence, the *Black Myth: Wukong* can be explored in depth from the perspective of ghost studies, which reveals its underlying political and ideological connections.

In his study of Hollywood horror films, Robin Wood (2002) points out that hauntings can be seen as a return to what has been repressed. On the surface, the truth of Sun Wukong’s death and the power struggle behind it are something that has been repressed and banished to the margins. However, it would be an oversimplification to focus on the text itself and ignore the role of the specific text in social reality. As Linnie Blake (2008) astutely observes in commenting on the intersection of trauma studies and horror film criticism: “The general and sub-general conventions of the horror film allow for the decoding of traumatic memories that have been encoded by shocking historical events in the cultural, social, psychological, and political lives of the nation’s inhabitants” (5). In other words, *Black Myth: Wukong*’s use of the horror mode demonstrates the traumatic memories that are currently repressed in Chinese society. Indeed, an examination of the position of the community in which Sun Wukong and the Destined One are situated would yield even more revealing results. The entire game mechanism of *Black Myth: Wukong* is to reveal truths obscured by mainstream discourse through the perspective of the Destined One and by guiding the players.

Throughout this process of revelation, the community of demons to which Sun Wukong and the Destined One belong has been repressed and rejected, and in some instances even unrecognized, by these mainstream institutions of power. These marginalized groups are constantly stifled and suppressed, but they can oppose and resist the political hegemony of a fractured and traumatized nation through the manifestation of terror. Avery F. Gordon links the phenomenon of haunting to sociology, stating that because haunting is an abuse of systems of power to make itself known and its effects felt in everyday life, it is a way of making itself known and its effects felt. *Black Myth: Wukong* represents this very approach, reminding the player that repressed or unaddressed social violence is manifesting itself through the haunting of groups that have long been on the margins of society

and sidelined by systems of power, and letting us know that what has been covered up is very much alive and present.

BUDDHAS, IMMORTALS, AND MONSTERS: THE HORROR UNDER THE INSTITUTION

The subtlety in *Black Myth*'s game design is the use of fragmentation to help the player collect all the clues and ultimately complete the realization of the game's worldview. In the process, the player comes to perceive how the world operates, ultimately encountering a world shaped by an authoritarian political atmosphere that serves as a critique of real-world politics.

Bob Altemeyer's three-part description of authoritarian behavior will help us understand how *Black Myth* shapes an authoritarian world. Authoritarians submit to authority, and they favor convention. They may act aggressively against certain groups of people who question authority, are seen as unconventional, or both (Altemeyer). Ostensibly, the origin of the *Black Myth: Wukong* comes from the fact that the two authorities, the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land, initiated a siege against Sun Wukong, who was made Buddha and remained oblivious to his status as a demon, and ultimately killed Sun Wukong and distributed the Six senses that were formed from his death to many of the demons who participated in the siege.

The Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land are the two authoritarian institutions in the world of *Black Myth: Wukong*. Although they are ostensibly part of different organizations, they both rule the world and serve the same interests through violent means. As a rebellion against the authoritarians, Sun Wukong's demonic origin, his questioning of authority, and even his unconventionality, caused by not being in the same boat as the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land, all doomed him to be eliminated by the authoritarians. In terms of the ending, the demons participate in the siege of Sun Wukong out of obedience to the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land, even hoping to use this opportunity to become part of the authority. However, the plot then proves that their demonic origins can still be used as an excuse for the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land to exterminate them, and in this sense, none of these demons are exploited or tempted by the two authorities, the Celestial Court and the Buddhism, to participate in the battle, and to receive the benefits at the end of the battle and to guard the benefits. From these clues, it appears that three interconnected power systems in *Black Myth: Wukong*—the Celestial Court, the Western Pure Land, and

the loosely knit Demon World composed of various demons—are structured such that the first two rule over the third through violence and intrigue.

To further strengthen the theme of the game's rebellion against authoritarianism, when Sun Wukong dies, *Black Myth: Wukong* revives Sun Wukong's rebellious spirit from a contemporary perspective through the recoding of the game space. "The most compelling amusement park attractions build upon stories or genre traditions already well-known to visitors, allowing them to enter physically into spaces they have visited many times before in their fantasies," which calls "evocative space" (Jenkins 6). For example, the majestic palace of the celestial court or the chaotic abyss of hell in *Black Myth: Wukong* not only retain the visual symbols (repetition) of the original *Journey to the West*, but also reconstruct the metaphor of power oppression through dark art design (variation). When exploring these spaces, players need to break free from the constraints of the traditional celestial court as the Destined One, and its actions are a rebellion against authority.

As a faith born locally in China, the Celestial Court is a tightly knit system of Gods and Immortals like the Chinese feudal kingship, representing the social elite that rules all things in the world. As can be seen from the fact that they united with the Western Pure Land and coerced the monsters to organize a siege against the rebellious Sun Wukong, the purpose of the Celestial Court system is to maintain stability within their own system by any means necessary and to prevent the theft of power by disturbed elements. As Reece Goodall (2020) points out that authoritarian leaders have absolute power over the victims of the story. At the end of *The Journey to the West*, Sun Wukong has become an internal part of the ruling class of considerable stature and is quite powerful in terms of his actions in causing havoc in the Celestial Court, but he is still killed by the authoritarians in the *Black Myth: Wukong's* story, proving that the Celestial Court as a leader is able to regain control over the power structures and utilize them to eliminate the threat. In the dialogue between Sun Wukong and Yang Jian, Sun Wukong reveals that all he wants is to "live a few days at large" (*Black Myth: Wukong*), and the information revealed by the game makers in the *Black Myth: Wukong* lines proves the only solution for authoritarianism to deal with the opposition, as pointed out by Matthew C MacWilliams, "[d]ictatorial leaders don't compromise; they rule" (43) to most commentators, unlikely. In *The Rise of Trump: America's Authoritarian Spring*, Matthew MacWilliams argues that Trump's rapid rise through a bewildered Republican Party hierarchy is no anomaly; rather, MacWilliams argues, it is the most recent expression of a long-standing theme in American political life, the tendency and temptation to an ascriptive politics—a political view that builds its basic case on ascribing to any relatively disempowered group (whether defined by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, or other identifying category). This has the effect of further demonstrating the violence under the

dictatorial politics of the Celestial Court, thus instilling fear of the system in the player.

Secondly, unlike the Celestial Court, which is in the public eye, the Western Pure Land, which seems to have the image of being indifferent to the world, is in fact deeply involved in the encirclement of Sun Wukong and continues to compete with the Celestial Court for the beliefs of the world. The study of the Buddhist-Daoist rivalry in *Journey to the West* has a long history, and Li Guming (1985) describes the political rivalry between the two religions. In the *Black Myth: Wukong*, the rivalry for faith becomes a struggle for the privilege of immortality. The plot of *Black Myth: Wukong* shows that immortality is not an innate power or ability of the gods; the gods still need cultivation or some special items to maintain their immortality. Specifically, in the animation at the beginning of the game, Sun Wukong hit the nail on the head when he responded to Yang Jian's accusation that he had given up the position of the Buddha, which is one that many people have been begging for, by pointing out, "Immortality? For that word, all realms and beings have ruined themselves" (*Black Myth: Wukong*, n.d.), when entering the game, Sun Wukong's Portraits (similar to a character log, providing players with information that is not available in the main game) records the last words said by Sun Wukong - immortality, cannot be long. From this, it is clear that the immortality of the Gods and Buddhas comes with a caveat, a price, and that this price will destroy the entire world. In her analysis of the rise of authoritarianism in the United States, Amanda Taub points out that one of the usual tactics of authoritarianism has been to seek out a strongman leader to preserve the status quo, which they perceive to be under threat and to establish order in what they perceive to be an increasingly unfamiliar world (Taub, Amanda). Reece Goodall (2020) further argues that authoritarian leaders exploit the myth of a "better" past without the social problems affecting the present, and suggests that their power can help the country return to an idealized past.

From this perspective, the promise of immortality by the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land is the creation of an idealized myth that is used to cajole all those who are struggling in the present society to help them achieve their goals and eliminate all the disturbing elements. However, behind this promise lies the exploitation of the marginalized or the lower classes, as the wealth of society does not come out of thin air but is inevitably taken from the exploited to fulfil the promises made by the authoritarian rulers. Just as *Black Myth: Wukong* players argue in *Douban*, a famous Chinese online database and Social networking service

The entire game is set in a world where the Trailokya and the four lands have been commodified by the Heavenly Court. Agents of the masters of the gods and Buddhas, and their minions are everywhere. The Eastern is no different from the Western Pure

Land, both treat the living beings of the lower realms as disposable, and order is used as a tool to discipline ordinary people. The revolt of the commoners is only just beginning to take shape.

From the subsequent episodes, it is learned that the Gods can prolong their lives and enhance their powers by refining demons and substances with the essence of the world into elixirs. Simply put, these plots demonstrate the oppression that exists everywhere in this game.

Throughout the entirety of *Black Myth: Wukong*, demons have played key roles in moving the plot forward and helping the game's characters grow. If the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land represent the authoritative bodies that practice oppression, then these demons are the oppressed, whose pasts were rejected by the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land until the emergence of the Destined One, when these repressed afflictions reemerged into the fabric of the existing order. These demons fall into two categories: the former are those who aided the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land in suppressing Sun Wukong and received certain benefits—such as the Black Bear Guai and the Yellow Wind Sage—yet the rewards promised by these gods and Buddhas ultimately led to their suffering and deaths, rendering them, in a sense, sacrificial figures; the latter, by contrast, are the demons who assist the Destined One in his growth. While both play different roles in the game, their settings point to the same function. Specifically, the Bull King, like the Sun Wukong, is one of the most powerful of the demons, but unlike Sun Wukong's fortune (or misfortune), he has existed his whole life as a demonized and marginalized Other, becoming a whetstone for Tang Sanzang on his way to retrieve the Buddhist scriptures after failing to cause havoc in the Palace of Heaven together with Sun Wukong after becoming a friend with Sun Wukong. His lover is killed, his wife's treasures are taken, and he is counted by the Celestial Court to give birth to a son who does not belong to him. The son is then delivered to the authority that is suppressing him. Then later on, he participated in the siege of Sun Wukong and took credit for it, but the end was still disastrous. It is not until the appearance of the Destined One that the player is able to recreate the oppressed life of Bull King through familiarizing with the plot. Carefully designed gameplay is presented in desolate, chilling scenes, and for those familiar with *Journey to the West*, an uncanny atmosphere pervades the game and creates a strong reaction of fear and loathing in a supernatural framework.

The immersive horror experience also wins over the player, as the Destined One bearing the player's point of view advances through shadowy scenes, constantly defeating the enemies set up by the game in order to find the truth that has been hidden from them. In *Black Myth: Wukong*, destroyed temples, broken chains, or stone tablets engraved with oaths of resistance become clues for players to piece

together the motives of the rebels. The fragmented narrative in the environment, which was originally a criticism of the feudal system, is transformed into a metaphor for contemporary power structures, allowing players to complete a reinterpretation of the rebel spirit in the process of decryption. As indicated in Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella's discourse on subjectivity in the world of digital games, "the user must be positioned as a subject' in order to 'experience the digital environment' through which 'the virtual world enters into the consciousness of the individual' becomes possible" (4). Chia-rong Wu (2022), in his article "From Detention to Devotion: Historical Horror and Gaming Politics in the Digital Gaming World in Taiwan," explains that "the emergence of a virtual world into one's consciousness is made possible" (52). He further points out the overlap formed between the player and the "I" subject of the game. Thus, the revelation of the plot by the Destined One becomes the player's personal experience of the past memories of Bull King, and these experiences of the past memories complement the player's experience as a real subject as a way of adapting himself to the "I-subject" in the game, with the end result being that the Destined One as a ghost guides the player to unveil the repressed past and to create empathy for it.

GAMING POLITICS IN *BLACK MYTH: WUKONG*

The more important function of *Black Myth: Wukong* is to provide a critique of the political hegemony of contemporary China. According to Trent Hergenrader (2016), "games can and should be critiqued on the level of language and in their representations of people, places, and things," thus making each game a "polysemic text capable of sustaining a number of different types of readings" (30–31). The spirit of resistance stirred up in the game occurs simultaneously in both the latitude of the game's virtual and real worlds. Since ancient times, Sun Wukong's rebellious spirit has been a key source of his being regarded as a hero, and it is no different in the case of the *Black Myth: Wukong*. But this self-centered spirit has never conformed to the demands of the dominant ideologies that have prevailed in China. This is especially true of the series of propaganda infrastructures launched to reach a society-wide consensus following Xi Jinping's introduction of the Chinese Dream, including the introduction of socialist core values.⁹ This set of values emphasizes the sacrifice of individualism and freedom under the collective interest, arguing that this consensus builds on freedom, then, necessitates the placement of limitations upon personal freedom when it infringes on the (collective) rights of society to progress, with the trajectory of that progression delimited by the CCP (Gow). The concept distinguishes itself from Western freedoms, individual freedoms are limited by collective freedoms, and the extent of that limitation is determined by the CCP;

as well as dedication under the level of citizen, which is explained as a system of social networks linking people together in multiple ways, with different, but clear, moral demands being made on each individual in each particular situation (Gow). These concepts emphasize the need for individual interests to give way to collective interests in a society under the CCP, even sacrificing individual interests for the long-term development of society when appropriate.

However, despite the Socialist Core Values and the fact that they have become part of the broader narrative of the Chinese Dream, the rebellious spirit revealed by the *Black Myth: Wukong* is still widely accepted by the younger generation, especially in the decades following the Reform and Opening-up. When the immense benefits of the market economy have placed the individual in the naked temptation of wealth and status, it is difficult for the new generation of young people, who have gained from the hands of capital, to genuinely sacrifice their individual interests to secure. This promotion of values, which they see as hegemony imposed by the state on the individual, has given rise to a quest for individualistic and self-expressive values. Shan Wei and Chen Juan point out that this individualism has given people a sense of autonomy and has led to a questioning of authority, doctrine and hierarchy. If the tendency towards this kind of individualism remained insignificant during the economic upswing, when individuals aligned themselves with the goals and interests of social development and national economic development; when the economy went downward and classes became increasingly entrenched, individualism and rebellion against authority became the antithesis of state discourse that propagated the collective good.

Due to the Chinese Communist Party's long-standing policy of tightly controlling public opinion and speech, some cathartic discourses can never appear in the public arena. This has resulted in young people being unable to find a proper place for their dissatisfaction with current policies and decision makers. Some scholars, such as Minxin Pei, argue that contemporary China has implemented the strictest media censorship in the post-Mao era (Pei). Some criticisms of politics and discussions of politically sensitive topics are deleted soon after they are posted on public social media platforms. For example, Xiaoping Wu and Richard Fitzgerald argue that *Weibo* has become susceptible to being monitored by censorship mechanisms after examining the discussions that arose on public social platforms (*Weibo*) in the wake of the Tianjin explosions in 2015, and the behavior of these discussions that were deleted by officials. Nonetheless, expression continues to proliferate, even under significant state control. These suppressed discourses when recoded and decoded, continue to engage in political critique in a creative way.

The notion of everyday resistance, introduced by James Scott in 1986, may help us to better understand how recoded language continues to play a participatory

role in politics. Everyday resistance used to describe peasant resistance, that is, resistance that is “everyday resistance is informal, often covert, and concerned largely with immediate, de facto gains” (Scott 31). In today’s networked and digitalized world, Scott’s everyday resistance has been extended to include the study of digital resistance, focusing on how groups sharing a social identity can oppose the dominant force in their everyday use of the Internet. The recoded political words, whilst still having their original political meanings, have been recoded to produce a sense of absurdity that converts direct resistance into covert resistance and emphasizes the emotional catharsis these words bring. In the past decade, as the CCP has tightened its control over online culture, some scholars examine the rise of cyber buzzwords on the Chinese internet, viewing them as an alternative form of resistance that reflects netizens’ dissatisfaction with official discourse. In the face of censorship, netizens turn to entertainment discourse as a substitute for political discussion, using the internet’s mechanisms of communication and dissemination to break the official monopoly on discourse. These mechanisms mediate not only between official and alternative narratives, but also foster connections among citizens themselves (Meng, 2011). Subsequently, Peidong Yang, Lijun Tang, and Xuan Wang analyses the emergence of “Diaosi”¹⁰ culture on the Chinese internet around 2010 by introducing James C. Scott’s concept of “infrapolitics.”¹¹ In their article, they argue that “Diaosi’ achieved widespread popularity...because the sociopolitical critique it offers is hidden in self-mockery and transformed into other cultural valences” (212). Wendy Su similarly reveals how the culture of “lying flat”¹² expresses contemporary Chinese youth’s critique of social injustice and the process of negotiating with state and market forces (137–38) a buzzword and the associated trendy lifestyle surfaced in mainland China amidst the ruling Party’s month-long extravagant celebration of its 100th anniversary. This buzzword and the associated lifestyle quickly became a ‘doctrine-ism’ that was particularly phenomenal amidst the overwhelming official discourse of patriotism and national rejuvenation. This buzzword is “lie Flat” (tangping). These discussions of youth subcultures on the Internet in contemporary China reveal a shared characteristic: that is, the dissatisfaction of contemporary Chinese netizens with policies and realities—due to the suppression of official censorship—tends to transform young people’s emotional dissatisfaction into recoded online culture to resist official discourses and ideologies in a more covert way.

As with the recoding of language, *Black Myth: Wukong* is a platform for recoding messages of political resistance, demonstrating how criticism of the current system can be conveyed through humor, irony, and metaphor in the face of strict censorship. These recoded languages and symbols are understood through shared cultural contexts and collective memories. For example, a notable example of recoding that conveys criticism of the current system is the alternative humorous and popular term for the *Black Myth: Wukong*, the “Black Malou.” The word “Malou”

itself, as a dialect of the Chinese region of Guangdong and Guangxi, is a reference to monkeys, and after it exploded on the Internet in 2023, the term was used to refer to the less privileged, less appreciated, hard-working young employees of large companies, and to express discontent in a humor and self-deprecating way (“[Malou]吗喽,” n.d.). Due to the similarity in appearance of the *Black Myth: Wukong*’s the Destined One and, more importantly, the fact that one of the game’s endings is that the Destined One is put back on his circlet and subdued by the Celestial Court and the Western Pure Land, netizens have used the term “Black Malou” in place of the *Black Myth: Wukong*. Thus, through the term “Black Malou,” netizens incorporate their dissatisfaction with social injustice, workplace pressure, and institutional constraints into entertainment and cultural symbols. The term “Black Malou” is also a metaphorical revolt against the power structure. As these forms of expression do not directly target the existing regime on the surface, they can, to a certain extent, avoid the immediate suppression of the censorship system, however, they still play an important role in covert resistance.

On the other hand, *Black Myth: Wukong*, as a video game, is a part of popular culture, and one of the distinctive features of popular culture is that it deconstructs serious mainstream culture through its entertaining nature, and the humorous attributes that come with its own entertainment defy the dominant cultural and political hegemony in this process of deconstruction. Just as John Fiske points out in his influential work on the struggle between popular culture and ideology, popular culture is “a culture of conflict” that “involves a struggle to make social meaning” acceptable to “the subordinate” rather than to the “dominant ideology” (Fiske 1-2). That is to say, these widespread popular cultures, in their disorienting entertainment attributes, humorously defy the dominant ideology and recreate it by deconstructing this serious culture. In Fiske’s discussion at the time, popular culture in a broad sense included cultural commodities such as television, music, fashion, and video game halls. With the development of the Internet, however, the traditional video game lounge has been replaced by video games, but its function as popular culture, temporarily free from the constraints of the real world, still exists and continues to expand with the expansion of the virtual space opened up by the Internet. In this sense, the mythical but haunted virtual world created by the *Black Myth: Wukong* isolates the real world, but the similarities between the game world and the real-world system led to the fact that the game world’s counterattacks against authoritarianism and political hegemony will also become a dialogue against the real political system. For Leandro Augusto Borges Lima, video games are “a highly political medium” that not only “allow for the articulation of political content” but also “question hegemonic ideas through stories and mechanisms” and are “capable of mobilizing the public for action” (342–343). Games thus extend the political realm of popular culture, contributing to everyday dialogue in the real world.

The game mechanics in *Black Myth: Wukong* construct an allegorical framework that invites players to contemplate resistance to authoritarianism, though this engagement remains within the realm of symbolic interaction rather than direct activism, it still provides players with an emotional outlet. What makes *Black Myth: Wukong* different is that the game makers have crafted several different versions of the ending. If the player explores the main story as it was designed to be explored and lacks the initiative to find the ending that is filled with so many hints, then the Destined One will end up re-bringing his confinement, losing the spirit of Sun Wukong's rebellion and continuing to be a puppet of the Gods and Buddhas. In this ending, the game suggests that the player never becomes Sun Wukong, the "Big Brother" George Orwell described, but always plays the role of the manipulated "little man," destined to be unable to escape from the control of power. This ending conveys a profound political metaphor, that is, under an authoritarian system, even if an individual undergoes resistance and struggle, he or she may still be reabsorbed and domesticated by the system in the end. Through this elaborate narrative structure, the game emphasizes the limitations and powerlessness of individual resistance in the face of strong external power. *Black Myth: Wukong's* alternative ending offers another possibility to the player, that is, through the player's autonomy to break the constraints of the game's set narrative conventions and explore more hidden clues, the Destined One, in turn, can find an ending that symbolizes true freedom.

CONCLUSION

It is undoubtedly one-sided to assume that the success of *Black Myth: Wukong* is due to its well-crafted gameplay; it is the game's reinterpretation of the rebellious spirit of *Journey to the West* and its deeper social metaphors that are the key to the game's success. Through symbolic game mechanics and clever game narrative structure, *Black Myth: Wukong* shapes a haunted world. From the rebellious spirit of Sun Wukong to the characterization of the Destined One as a "vengeful ghost," to the revelation of authoritarian institutions in the game world, the ghosts that haunt this world are linked to the collective memory and anxiety of nation that have been repressed, and invite the player to directly engage with repressed memories of the past and present. Through active participation in this game, the player confronts and resolves these horrific memories of realpolitik connections as they complete the game's missions. At the same time, the process of playing establishes an important connection with the authoritarianism and social injustice that exist in reality. As a medium for the expression of political resistance in popular culture, each player's

play and cognitive processes contribute to the transmission of political effects from the game world to the real world, ultimately realizing a dialogue between the player and the real world and further urging the player to react to authoritarian politics.

Notes

1. The author is Wu Chengen, created in the middle of the Ming Dynasty, one of the four great classics of China, the book tells the story of Tang Sanzang and his apprentices Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing, who went to the West to learn Scriptures, showing the ancient theme of punishing evil and promoting good, and the representative work of reviving Buddha and destroying Tao.
2. *Journey to the West* is a Ming-dynasty vernacular novel that took shape in the mid-to-late sixteenth century. In the early twentieth century, especially from the May Fourth era to the founding of the PRC, *Journey to the West* studies underwent a clear “modern turn.” Lu Xun’s *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* and Hu Shi’s *A Textual Criticism of A Journal to the West* introduced new scholarly methods and theoretical resources to reassess the novel’s value, standards of evaluation, and critical positioning. In the post-reform and opening-up period, scholarship has increasingly shifted toward more diverse and in-depth approaches, further exploring the work’s philosophical, religious, and cultural implications, for example, Hong-bo Zhu’s “Re-evaluate the Topic of ‘Revolt’ in ‘Journey to the West’——With Rancière and Bakhtin’s *Theory of Literature and Politics* as reference.” In Western scholarship, Glen Dudbridge has systematically traced the narrative traditions and “predecessor” forms that preceded the formation of *Journey to the West*, and his work is widely regarded as a classic point of departure for Western scholarship on the novel’s origins and textual history.
3. Sun Wukong is a monkey born from a stone who acquires supernatural powers through Taoist practices. After rebelling against heaven, he is imprisoned under a mountain by the Buddha. Five hundred years later, he accompanies the monk Tang Sanzang riding on the White Dragon Horse and two other disciples, Zhu Bai jie and Sha Heshang, on a journey to obtain Buddhist sutras, known as the West or Western Paradise, where Buddha and his followers dwell.
4. All the terms in the text except those related to *Black Myth: Wukong* are our translations. The terms related to *Black Myth: Wukong* are the official translations of the game.
5. The Third Plenary Session broke through the severe constraints of dogmatism and the cult of personality in the Party’s guiding ideology. It emphasized “practice is the sole criterion for testing truth” as a fundamental principle of the Party’s ideological line, thereby reestablishing the Marxist principle of seeking truth from facts.
6. The words in quotation marks in the sentence are our translations.
7. Yang Jian is a maternal nephew of the Jade Emperor and a warrior deity. In *Black Myth*, Yang Jian, as the main general, participated in the campaign against Sun Wukong, which led to the death of Sun Wukong.
8. The Ming Dynasty (23 January 1368–25 April 1644) was one of the dynasties in Chinese history.
9. In 1989, Deng Xiaoping identified education as the biggest failure of the 1980s reforms, especially ideological and political education. In 2012, the establishment of a system of “core socialist values” was proposed, a set of official interpretations of socialist ideology with Chinese characteristics.

10. Diaosi (Chinese: 屌丝; *Pinyin: Diǎo Sī*; lit. “dick hair”) is a Chinese internet buzzword, often used in a sarcastic and self-deprecating manner, that refers to a young male of mediocre appearance and social standing.
11. Scott uses the term “infrapolitics,” which is understood as particular sets of tactics of resistance adopted by the subordinate group, see more details in Scott’s book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*.
12. Lying flat (Chinese: 躺平; *Pinyin: Tǎngping*) is a Chinese internet buzzword that describes a personal rejection of societal pressures to overwork and over-achieve and escaping from involution (*Neijuan* 内卷).

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