

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

# *Black Myth*, Digital Soft Power and Counter-National Narratives in China

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## Key Points

- Due to technological blockades from Western countries, China is shifting its focus from traditional hard-tech-dominated 5G infrastructure, spearheaded by companies such as Huawei, to harnessing digital soft power as digital cultural diplomacy and a new way of promoting its Digital Silk Road (DSR). The DSR is the technology arm of China's global infrastructure investment strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative.
- China has been exporting digital cultural products that function as non-state actors, including video games such as *Black Myth: Wukong*, which incorporates Chinese localized narratives, mythologies and traditional cultures. In doing so, China is positioning non-state actors as agents of national influence, aiming to reshape its global image and establish itself as a cultural powerhouse.
- Chinese video game players are using *Black Myth* as a platform to amplify grassroots voices, express resistance and provide outlets for counter-national narratives. Through playful resistance in gameplay and social media posts, they challenge and critique China's current social problems. This phenomenon complicates the predominant mainstream media narratives about the implications of the country's digital soft power expansion.

# Introduction

Within the international digital culture scene, the most talked about topic online in August 2024 was undoubtedly the Chinese video game *Black Myth: Wukong*.<sup>1</sup> Developed by the Chinese studio Game Science, *Black Myth: Wukong* captured the global gaming community's attention with its fresh approach and is celebrated as a milestone in Chinese gaming. As China's first domestically designed AAA game,<sup>2</sup> it quickly set records with 2.3 million concurrent players within two days of release and 4.5 million copies sold in the first 24 hours (Wang 2024). This ambitious fusion of traditional Chinese culture and cutting-edge game design introduced Chinese mythology, a religious universe and authentic landscapes to a global audience (Butler 2024). Its success even promoted tourism by drawing visitors to real-world temples and architectural sites that were digitally scanned into the game (ibid.)

*Black Myth* was adapted from *Journey to the West*, one of the most famous and frequently adapted classic Chinese works, written in the sixteenth century. Wukong, also known as the Monkey King, was a beloved character for Chinese people, especially Chairman Mao, who admired Wukong for his rebellious and defiant character, and he also acted as a role model for the socialist class revolution during times of cultural revolution (Barmé 2017). At the beginning of the game, Wukong uncovers the secrets of the Celestial Court, refuses to conform and surrender, and ultimately chooses to die. The player, called *Tianmingren* (the destined person), assumes the role of a descendant of Wukong and must defeat the five Monster Kings (the bosses) and collect the five relics of Wukong's body scattered in the hands of the Monster Kings to resurrect the original Wukong.

1 See *Global Times* (2024), Romano (2024), Regan (2024) and Leplâtre and Defer (2024).

2 See Le (2024). "AAA game" often refers to a video game that is produced by a large and well-established game studio, typically with a big budget, high production values and extensive marketing campaign.

Various monsters, immortals, the Buddha and bodhisattvas, as well as the ruling powers of the deities, either help or hinder the destined person in levelling up within the game.

Analyses of *Black Myth: Wukong* in the media reveal diverse perspectives. Western mainstream interpretations often focus on the socio-political aspects of the gaming experience, such as accusations of misogyny within the development team, and censorship in the game related to feminism and political discourse, including COVID-19 (Butler 2024; Wakabayashi and Fu 2024; Davidson and Lin 2024; Hernandez 2024). However, such discourse fails to recognize a macro perspective — China’s digital expansion, or digital soft power in the global arena. Soft power, as defined by Joseph S. Nye (2004), refers to a nation’s ability to shape global perceptions of them through culture, values and policies, rather than military and economic strength. The Chinese government places great emphasis on soft power, as evidenced by the fact that despite its motif of anti-authority, and anti-idol, this game was significantly backed and promoted by the local government and by state-backed companies such as Tencent.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, current public discourses associated with the game also failed to capture more nuanced realities, voices and mentalities within Chinese society, including public opinion and authentic grassroots voices at the micro level. This is why some Western critics, from public media such as *The Diplomat*, misjudged the game as one with apolitical sensibilities.<sup>4</sup> This paper shows that, on the contrary, *Black Myth* is deeply rooted in the Chinese traditional character of resistance and an unyielding attitude toward the existing oppressive order. This reality comes to life through its plotlines, which are based on the original novel and enriched with religious, social and political metaphors.

Such misjudgement often contributes to skewed perceptions of China and can lead to flawed digital governance policies related to China. These policies may potentially lose sight of the strategic role of Chinese digital expansion in shaping both domestic and international digital environments and, ultimately, in influencing broader geopolitical and economic strategies. Hence, rather than celebrating the commercial or economic success of China’s first blockbuster game, this paper aims to provide Canadian policy makers with a clear understanding of the status quo of China’s digital cultural diplomacy and its reception, specifically with respect to its digital soft power campaign as reflected in digital cultural products. The analysis also offers insights into authentic grassroots voices on socio-political governance in China, informed by their engagement with *Black Myth: Wukong*.

This paper draws on literature exploring China’s digital soft power and qualitative studies on digital video games and their social/political implications. It examines data collected through digital ethnography (Hine 2000) from major online platforms such as YouTube, Bilibili<sup>5</sup> and Steam,<sup>6</sup> using discourse analysis (Smithson 2022) to uncover emerging interpretive patterns related to the game. Ultimately, this paper hopes to address gaps in Canada’s digital governance related to the Indo-Pacific Strategy by

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3 See Ma (2024).

4 See Allen (2024).

5 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bilibili>.

6 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steam\\_\(service\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steam_(service)).

enhancing the understanding of China's digital soft power and the underlying tensions between grassroots counter-narratives and state-driven propaganda.

## China's Digital Soft Power and Video Games

Under President Xi Jinping, China has shifted its focus to enhancing its international image through cultural exports as diplomatic tools, alongside its traditional economic and military power. A key component of this strategy is the DSR, launched as part of the 2015 BRI, which aims to expand China's digital influence by supporting exporters such as Huawei and 5G infrastructure. Scholars highlight how the BRI incorporates digital platforms and media as tools for cultural diplomacy, emphasizing the DSR's role in aligning China's digital strategy with Xi's vision for global leadership (Shen 2018; Schneider 2019). In this context, some of mainland China's insider news agencies, intellectuals and critics describe the success of initiatives such as *Black Myth: Wukong* as part of China's broader soft power and cultural export policy. The game has been lauded for telling China's story with world-class quality (Xinhua News 2024). It is also seen as an important milestone in the global expansion of Chinese culture (*Yangcheng Evening News* 2024) and is marked as the beginning of a new era for China's cultural soft power, with the game industry now playing a central role in this expansion (Allen 2024).

China's government has direct control over the video game industry, overseeing its development and release (Brinkhof 2024). Despite once tightening restrictions on video games and labelling them as spiritual opium in 2021 (Austin, Harbord and Sloan 2022), the government has generally supported the growth of game industries with Chinese national characteristics, such as traditional Chinese cultural elements, values and narratives to serve domestic audiences. In examining popular Chinese *propogames* — video games embedded with state-sponsored content — such as *Kangzhan Online* (War of Resistance Against Japan Online), scholars have argued that these Chinese video games employ both declarative and non-declarative elements to deceive, persuade and indoctrinate citizens (Chew and Wang 2021). Additionally, they have illustrated how China has strategically developed *propogames* as a form of digitalized soft propaganda to promote nationalism (ibid.). These games are intricately linked to the state's digital authoritarian agenda (ibid.).

Scholars argue that current Chinese diplomacy is increasingly shaped by digital soft power, such as video games, particularly e-sports, which are viewed as non-state actors (Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023). This notion refers to the growing influence and power of technology companies, rather than national power, in shaping global standards, civil society social movements and political influence by participating in de facto digital governance across borders and counties (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021). These video games acting as non-state actors, endorsed by the Chinese government, have long been taken as a hidden national strategy (Wong and Meng-Lewis 2023), transformed into either unilateral or multilateral diplomatic and economic platforms and assuming the role of a defender of China's national pride and an agent of soft power. Scholars have pointed out that China has leveraged its digital soft power as a powerful resource in pursuit of the ascendance of its international status

and a favourable image among foreign politics and countries (ibid.). They have further highlighted that these efforts have proved to be effective in countering the stereotype of China by exhibiting a culture of Chinese characteristics (ibid.).

Prior to *Black Myth: Wukong*, the Chinese video game industry was already on the rise, with many highly regarded competitive games, such as e-sports, emerging on the global stage in recent years. However, the *Black Myth* video game marks a significant transition from producing consumption-driven games, aiming for pure entertainment and revenue generation, to creating culturally rich and globally impactful products (*The Economist* 2024). Since August 2024, a large number of Western YouTubers have created video content explaining the main characters, bosses and, more importantly, the relationships between *Journey to the West* and its Buddhist philosophy as reflected in *Black Myth: Wukong*. Some of these YouTubers' series on the game's storylines, characters and scenes have garnered millions of views. One of the most representative channels is @Williamsweeb, whose YouTube series episodes explaining the game have also been shared on Chinese social media. @Williamsweeb's explanations have elicited gratitude from many Western, and even Chinese, players, who appreciate his efforts to deepen their understanding of Chinese religion and culture while clarifying misunderstandings of the story. The YouTuber represents many Westerners who have deeply immersed themselves in Chinese culture, mythology and religion through China's digital cultural export — video games.

Aligning with the above analysis, *Black Myth: Wukong* is currently functioning as a non-state actor, which includes the users, stakeholders (for example, the developers and investors) and the game platform itself. However, there is no indication that the parent company, Game Science, intended for the game to hold significant soft cultural value, and serve as a non-state actor that contributes to China's DSR. So far, the game has generated over US\$1 billion in revenue in two months, propelling Game Science to the ranks of top-tier game companies and surpassing industry giants such as Ubisoft and Sony, largely due to its large domestic market valued at approximately US\$43 billion with 668 million gamers (Feng, Jiang and Deng 2024). Its popularity also stems from *Black Myth: Wukong*'s cultural value based on localized narratives and oriental philosophy, representing an intentional national strategy to promote Chinese culture as a product for global transmission that can receive widespread international interest.

## The Countervailing Narrative and Playful Resistance of the Digital Chinese Grassroots Communities

While public digital media reports and analyses dominate the public discourse, including those by Western YouTubers that contribute to explanations of the game and its role in China's soft power and nationalism, they unanimously fail to reflect the rebellious sentiments subtly woven into the game's narrative and its social implications for current Chinese society. Filled with sharp political satire and allusions to Chinese history and contemporary society, *Black Myth: Wukong* has great potential for ideological

critique and reinterpretation. The discussions at the national level overlook how disconnected the rhetoric of the state, as well as domestic and international public media, is from the genuine voices of the game's primary consumers — the Chinese grassroots communities. Moreover, they fail to recognize the deep polarization between China's glorified propagandistic image and the distressing opinions of its domestic and diasporic public. Analysts should not ignore the collective public opinion of the Chinese grassroots voices in dissenting and resisting the state machine, as embodied by many of the characters' lines in the game. These lines, along with the collective reinterpretation discourse among the Chinese digital masses, openly challenge the ideological indoctrination imposed by the Chinese government on its people. Ignorance of people's public opinions has been shown to have profound political consequences, much like Donald Trump's successful election in 2024 has proven that there is an incredibly huge gap between people's real voices and the mainstream public media narratives (Stetler 2024). Relying largely on statistics-based, macro-level analysis for governmental decisions may sometimes be too biased and may miss the people's genuine voices, thus leading to potentially flawed strategic judgements at the national or international level.

One notable case is that of @dogsama, a gaming content creator in Bilibili, who posted a series of episodes of videos containing a reinterpretation of the *Black Myth* that has drawn more than one million views since September 2024, excluding additional views on @dogsama's YouTube account. @dogsama's reinterpretation of the *Black Myth: Wukong* storyline has been widely praised by viewers as offering some of the deepest insights into the game, establishing him as a key opinion leader on the platform. @dogsama commented that *Black Myth: Wukong* features both an overt and a covert plotline, noting that the overt narrative — to ascend as a new Victorious Buddha of War who complies with the ruling deities' will — undermines the hidden themes the developers intended for players to explore: obtaining the final relic, freeing the mind and inheriting Wukong's rebellious spirit and past life memories. Throughout his interpretation, @dogsama both explicitly and implicitly draws parallels between the ruling deities and the ruling class of contemporary China, claiming that the grassroots characters in the game — and, by extension, in contemporary Chinese society — are nothing more than cattle and horses that offer donations to the ruling class.

He further argues that the most intriguing aspect of *Black Myth: Wukong* is not the outcome of the player's choices in the game, but rather how players perceive and act upon these themes in the real world. @dogsama emphasizes that the two central forces in the game — the immortal deities, embodying the acknowledgment of innate inequality, materialism and oppression, and the resistance force, valuing equality and resistance to the ruling class — are competing for China's next generation. @dogsama views the entire game as a metaphorical call from Wukong for every player in China to carry forward his rebellious spirit and unite against social inequality. In response to @dogsama's reinterpretation, thousands of viewers have engaged in discussions uncovering the ideological subtexts transmitted by the game since the episodes were updated in early September 2024. Some highly liked posts comment that the development team is using the skin of *Black Myth: Wukong* to tell the story of contemporary China and the monsters fighting against immortals and Buddhas are exactly like the battle between different social classes in the real world. Some posts reflect a pessimistic sentiment toward the current social situation, claiming that Chinese people's right to speak, redistribution and oversight are all deprived by the government,

sharing the belief that the descendants of the powerful and the rich are still the powerful and the rich, while the cattle and horses are still the cattle and horses. Others responded to @dogsama's call for real-world action, claiming they do not need to fight with the ruling class; they just need to no longer obey them.

Several key concepts help explain the widespread digital discourse seen in @dogsama's analysis. One of these is *procedural rhetoric*, a concept used in video game analysis to describe how games convey ideas and influence players' perspectives through their systems, rules and interactions, rather than solely relying on language or imagery (Bogost 2006). Procedural rhetoric enables games to communicate ideological perspectives by immersing players in simulations of social conditions and inviting them to confront these scenarios through gameplay.

Video games can thus function as a significant conduit to exert wide influence on certain political ideologies and beliefs and can even become a significant platform to engage with the public on certain political agendas (ibid.). According to Ian Bogost, no video games, whether commercial or not, are free from public political discourse reinforced by the game's procedural reaction as part of the play experience (ibid.). He also emphasizes that video games have become a salient discussion medium of political problems and calls on critics to interpret the implicit conceptual and ideological frameworks behind games. Scholars on digital religions have also pointed out that gaming can provide indoctrination into certain beliefs and behaviours (Grieve and Campbell 2014), a natural result of the game's procedural rhetoric. In the case of *Black Myth: Wukong*, the political standpoint embedded in the game's procedural rhetoric is transparent and intentional — it calls on players to reflect on contemporary China's real-world social issues. Further, there is considerable evidence that the development team is highly critical of China's ruling power and the regime.<sup>7</sup> The deep reflections on Chinese society, sparked by the game's procedural rhetoric, have already become a social reality that quietly resonates with the grassroots communities living in China.

By uncovering themes in *Black Myth: Wukong*, China's domestic social media influencers and their audiences engage in a form of *playful resistance*, namely a type of social debate that uses gameplay to address contentious political dynamics (Huang and Liu 2021). This playful resistance is not limited to the game itself and extends into various digital cultural reproductions and discourses surrounding it. This strategy reflects a broader pattern in which grassroots communities frequently leverage digital media to voice both direct and indirect critiques of social issues in contemporary Chinese society. @dogsama's video content, player/viewer bullet comments, posts and the hundreds of thousands of likes from viewers all reveal the widespread distress, anger and despair among millennials in China. These sentiments are reflected in social movements such as “lying flat” (Bandurski 2021; Zhu 2024), which calls on young workers and professionals to opt out of workplace stress (akin to “quiet quitting” in the West) and to also reject consumerism. These negative feelings are increasingly expressed through fierce critiques on social media about serious social issues such as social immobility, class stratification, the state's strict ideological control and internet censorship, highlighting the grassroots communities' yearning for ideological freedom and social democracy, as well as a desire for change among a population that feels oppressed.

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<sup>7</sup> See @whyoutouzhele (2024).



Buddhist religious teachings and Chinese traditional cultures embedded in the game provide a framework for fostering collective effervescence. This can create a sense of cultural affinity, immersion and sympathy, sparking a powerful imagination of collective memory. In this way, the game sends a message calling for actual social activism.

## Conclusion

*Black Myth: Wukong* inspires numerous boundary-pushing reflections that complicate both the prevailing public media's narrative of China's pride in exporting digital soft power and its perceived digital expansion. Further, it reveals another dimension of non-state actors that serves not the country's agenda, as previously shown in e-sport games, but the people — China's digital grassroots communities and the global Chinese diaspora. In this sense, the game as a non-state actor platform helps to form like-minded communities, prompting individuals to reflect on the deeper Chinese socio-political issues revealed through its narrative, thereby exerting a social impact that shapes public opinion and potentially brings about future social action.

Studying the video game *Black Myth* demonstrates that digital cultures and humanities can function as a significant window into the understanding of society in a digital era, moving beyond simple yes-or-no questions and presenting a more layered, dynamic and nuanced social context. Studies of digital cultural phenomena can offer decision makers a fuller picture because the country's digital mass and common people often do not speak with a monolithic voice that aligns with the government's grand narrative, in this case China's digital soft power and national pride. As a result, the studies of digital culture, popular digital discourses and digital communities are important in understanding a country's true social dynamics.

## Recommendations

China experts at CIGI such as Alex He<sup>8</sup> have contributed their insights into China's economic statistics, technological innovation and military power at a macro level. However, so far, research on China's increasingly expanding digital cultural influence and its implications for Canada in terms of its digital governance on the global stage remains significantly understudied. With Trump's return to the White House in 2025, the already ongoing cold war between China and the United States will inevitably escalate and intensify. Canada has one of the closest partnerships with the United States and will have to grapple with how to navigate the dialogue with China — especially concerning its digital expansion through digital platforms such as TikTok<sup>9</sup> and WeChat.<sup>10</sup>

- **Recommendation 1:** Government and research stakeholders should invest in efforts to study China's soft power campaign, transnational digital cultural expansion strategies, and the related socio-cultural and political phenomena to better understand the diverse values, priorities and realities from a bottom-up, grassroots perspective, both within mainland China and among the diasporic Chinese community in Canada. This would offer a unique lens to assess China's digital soft

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.cigionline.org/people/alex-he/](http://www.cigionline.org/people/alex-he/).

<sup>9</sup> See Tunney (2024).

<sup>10</sup> See Raycraft (2023).

power and its influence on global digital culture, providing Canada with a stronger foundation for making informed assumptions, predictions and strategic adjustments in global technological competition, cultural exchange and political dialogue. Canada, as an important participant in global digital governance, should proactively and preemptively initiate and lead global digital governance dialogues with digital powers such as China.

- **Recommendation 2:** To enhance learning and awareness about Chinese cultural soft power, it would be beneficial for the Government of Canada to partner with organizations and hold multi-stakeholder dialogues and workshops for better understanding of the methodologies associated with analyzing China. Some examples of this exist, such as at the University of Toronto's McLuhan Centre. More of these fora ought to be planned throughout Canada to aid in pulling from a geographically dispersed expert environment.
- **Recommendation 3:** Public media and national propaganda rhetoric are increasingly disconnected from the genuine voices of the Chinese grassroots communities. This disconnect is largely because dimensions of studies of humanities subjects and socio-cultural analysis from a micro perspective are currently, for the most part, missing from the perspective of policy makers. Policy researchers should incorporate perspectives from the social sciences and humanities to gather first-hand data from digital communities. These methods provide a more informed, evidence-based approach to addressing issues in digital governance and key political and social concerns.

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## About the Author

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