

Traditional Chinese Music Goes Global: Encoding and Digital Audience Reception in Black Myth: Wukong

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Abstract

Video games can circulate culturally specific music widely, but positive audience response does not by itself show how that music is interpreted. This study examines the encoding and English-language online reception of traditional Chinese musical material in *Black Myth: Wukong*. The encoding analysis draws on identifiable official soundtrack and production sources. The reception analysis uses 225 source-traceable analytic records purposively retained from 42 public Reddit and Steam discussion threads dated between 18 August 2024 and 19 August 2025. To reduce searchability and avoid retaining user identities, the dataset stores anonymized paraphrases rather than verbatim comments; each record is linked to its public thread URL and source metadata. One decoding-position code and eight non-exclusive thematic codes were applied. Dominant readings accounted for 151 records (67.1%), negotiated readings for 60 (26.7%), and oppositional readings for 14 (6.2%). Track identification was the most frequent theme ($n = 110$), followed by emotional appreciation ($n = 56$), access and distribution ($n = 44$), and historical contextualization ($n = 37$). Cultural-learning discourse appeared in 17 records, while no record met the conservative criterion for exoticizing language. The results show that online reception frequently involved naming, locating, and contextualizing musical material rather than affective evaluation alone. Because the corpus is purposive, Reddit-heavy, and coded by one researcher, the findings describe the selected discourse and do not estimate platform populations or causal effects.

Keywords

video game music, encoding-decoding, online reception, traditional Chinese music, cultural communication

1. Introduction

Cultural products travel across linguistic and historical boundaries more easily than the interpretive conventions that originally made them meaningful. Hall's [1] encoding-decoding model treats communication as a contingent relation between production and reception rather than as the automatic transfer of a stable message. Reception aesthetics similarly emphasizes that audiences interpret unfamiliar works through prior horizons of expectation [2]. For cultural products designed for transnational circulation, the central question is therefore not only whether audiences approve of a work, but what forms of interpretation accompany that approval.

Video games intensify this problem because music, image, narrative, and player action are encountered together over extended periods. Game music does not merely decorate play. It can organize emotion, mark spaces and characters, connect a new production to earlier media memories, and make culturally specific

material legible within familiar genre structures [3,4]. Chinese games have increasingly been discussed as vehicles for cultural identity and international communication [5], yet research often concentrates on narrative adaptation, visual symbolism, or aggregate audience sentiment rather than on the interpretive work directed at music [6-9].

Black Myth: Wukong provides a useful case because its soundtrack combines newly composed material with traditional instruments, chant-based adaptation, and reworked music associated with the 1986 television adaptation of *Journey to the West*. The official soundtrack selection contains 67 downloadable tracks, while several high-profile pieces remain accessible in the in-game music library because of copyright restrictions [10]. Production materials further document the use of suona, sanxian, adapted Buddhist chant, orchestral recording, and the reimagining of established television themes [11,12]. These materials make it possible to connect documented production choices with the kinds of questions and evaluations that appear in public English-language discussion.

Previous reception research on the game demonstrates the availability of large online corpora and the usefulness of sentiment and network analysis [13]. However, volume and polarity do not remove the need for source-level verification or for distinctions among forms of response. A positive post may express emotional pleasure, identify a historical reference, ask for the name of an instrument, or complain that a soundtrack cannot be downloaded. These are analytically different acts even when their overall evaluation is favorable. Musical exoticism also warns that appreciative language can simplify cultural difference into a generalized aesthetic category [14-16], but such a claim must be based on observable discourse rather than inferred from unfamiliarity alone.

The present study addresses two linked questions. First, which traditional or historically recognizable musical resources are documented in the soundtrack's production materials? Second, how do traceable English-language public discussion entries position and interpret that music? Rather than estimating the attitudes of a player population, the study describes a small, purposively selected discourse corpus. Its contribution is substantive and methodological: it identifies recurring reception practices around appreciation, contextualization, track identification, learning, and access, while making every reception-side observation auditable through a source URL and analytic identifier.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative-dominant, two-sided case design. The encoding side examined documented soundtrack-production materials. The reception side used qualitative content analysis [17] with descriptive counts to classify interpretive positions and thematic practices in public online discussion. The two components were connected by focusing on the same object: traditional and historically recognizable musical material in *Black Myth: Wukong*. No inferential tests were used because the reception corpus was purposive rather than probability-based.

2.2 Case and Scope

Black Myth: Wukong was selected because it achieved substantial international circulation and because its soundtrack visibly incorporates traditional instruments, chant-based material, and reworked music associated with *Journey to the West*. The analysis is restricted to music and soundtrack access. Visual design, gameplay difficulty, and narrative interpretation were excluded unless an entry explicitly connected them to music.

2.3 Encoding-side Materials

Encoding evidence was restricted to identifiable public sources: the official Steam soundtrack page published by Game Science; production footage and a documentary released by 8082Audio, the studio credited with major parts of the game's audio production; and published *China Daily* reports and interviews. The sources were accessed on 31 July 2026. Claims were retained only when a source directly documented the musical element, recording process, adaptation, or production strategy. The study did not infer the cultural meaning of every track from instrumentation alone.

2.4 Reception Corpus Construction

A source-level corpus was assembled manually from publicly accessible Reddit and Steam discussion pages. Searches combined the game title with the terms “soundtrack,” “OST,” “music,” “song,” “chant,” “instrument,” “Celestial Symphony,” “Rebirth Mantra,” and named chapter or trailer cues. The search and screening log is supplied in Supplementary Table S4. Relevant English-language opening posts and replies were purposively retained when they directly addressed soundtrack evaluation, track identification, cultural or historical context, traditional instruments or chant, or access to the music. Duplicate records, entries shorter than five words, non-English material, and technical sound-bug discussions unrelated to the music itself were excluded.

The final corpus contains 225 analytic records from 42 unique public threads: 201 records from 34 Reddit threads and 24 records from eight Steam threads. The source dates range from 18 August 2024 to 19 August 2025. YouTube was excluded to keep the corpus within threaded discussion forums that share a consistent opening-post-and-reply structure, and because YouTube comment reception of the game had already been examined in prior work [13]. To reduce the possibility of reverse-identifying individual users through search engines, usernames were not retained and the supplementary dataset stores short anonymized paraphrases rather than verbatim quotations. Each record nevertheless includes an analytic ID, platform, thread ID, thread date, thread title, thread-level URL, retrieval date, and coding results. Direct comment permalinks were not retained; the supplement should therefore be understood as a source-traceable analytic record rather than a verbatim archive.

2.5 Coding Procedure

The unit of analysis was one relevant discussion contribution, either an opening post or a reply. Each record received one decoding-position code. A dominant reading accepted, recognized, or endorsed the music or its cultural-musical framing without a substantive reservation. A negotiated reading combined acceptance with information seeking, access criticism, qualification, or reinterpretation. An oppositional reading explicitly rejected the value, effectiveness, or relevance of the soundtrack. Questions about a track name, genre, history, availability, or delivery were coded as negotiated when the request or reservation changed the interpretive position rather than merely supplying factual context.

Eight thematic codes were applied on a non-exclusive basis, drawing on thematic analysis [18]: emotional appreciation, historical contextualization, track identification, comparative evaluation, access and distribution, cultural learning, identity and memory, and exoticizing language. Supplementary Table S1 provides operational definitions and decision rules. The first author conducted a rule-assisted first pass to flag potentially relevant words and phrases, followed by a complete manual review of all 225 records and a second whole-corpus consistency check. Because the corpus was coded by one researcher, no intercoder-reliability coefficient is reported. The audit trail permits readers to inspect every retained paraphrase, source thread, and code assignment.

2.6 Analysis

Frequencies were calculated for the three decoding positions and eight thematic codes. Theme co-occurrence counts were calculated at the record level. Counts are descriptive summaries of this purposively selected discourse corpus and are not estimates of Reddit, Steam, or player populations. Automated sentiment analysis and inferential platform tests were not used because the research question concerns interpretive practices and because the platform distribution is strongly imbalanced.

3. Results

3.1 Corpus Composition and Auditability

The reception corpus comprised 225 source-traceable analytic records from 42 unique public discussion threads. Reddit contributed 201 records from 34 threads, and Steam contributed 24 records from eight threads. Each record has a thread-level URL and source metadata in Supplementary Table S2. The dataset also marks every excerpt as an anonymized paraphrase rather than a verbatim quotation. The corpus is purposive and

Reddit-heavy. The platform totals are therefore reported as corpus composition rather than as evidence of platform effects.

Table 1: Composition of the traceable reception corpus.

Platform	Records	Source-date range	Sampling unit
Reddit	201	2024-08-19 to 2025-08-19	Relevant opening posts and replies from 34 threads
Steam	24	2024-08-18 to 2025-06-24	Relevant opening posts and replies from 8 threads
Total	225	2024-08-18 to 2025-08-19	225 analytic records from 42 source threads

3.2 Documented Encoding Strategies

The source review identified five defensible encoding strategies. The official soundtrack page establishes the scale and current distribution format of the soundtrack. Production sources document specific recording and adaptation practices rather than requiring the analysis to infer them from listening alone.

Table 2: Encoding claims and their documentary evidence.

Documented strategy	Realization in the soundtrack	Analytic relevance
Large-scale original soundtrack	Official selection of 67 downloadable tracks; several licensed pieces remain in the in-game library	Establishes the soundtrack as an extensive designed object and links distribution constraints to reception.
Reimagining established Journey to the West themes	“Celestial Symphony” and “Where Lies the Path Ahead?” were reworked for the game	Connects the new game to television memory and recognizable musical heritage.
Adaptation of Buddhist chant	Production footage identifies “I Also Want to Be a Destined One” as an adaptation of the Rebirth Mantra	Creates a point at which players can recognize, question, or seek the source of chant-based material.
Recording of traditional instruments	Dedicated production footage documents suona recording; the producer also described the use of sanxian	Shows that traditional timbres were recorded as production components rather than described only as audience impressions.
Blending traditional and contemporary techniques	The studio describes combining traditional musical resources with modern composition, orchestration, and production technology	Provides a documented basis for analyzing comments about continuity, remake, modernization, and cultural recognition.

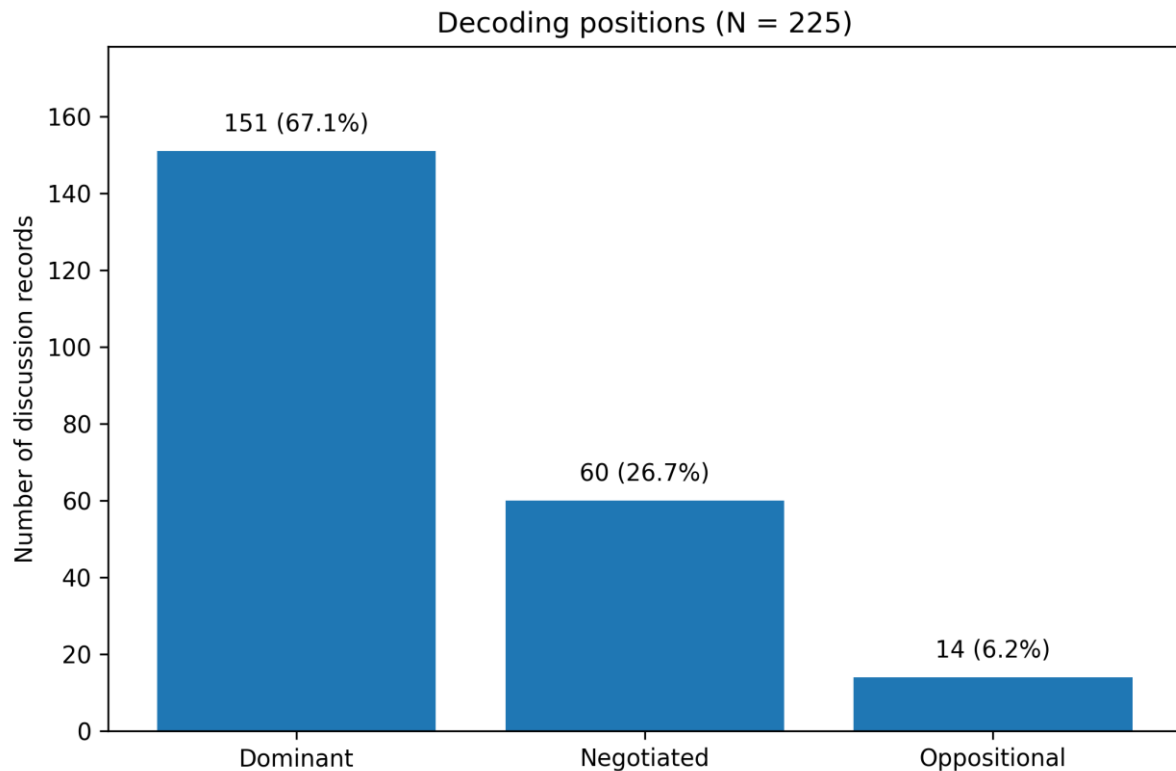
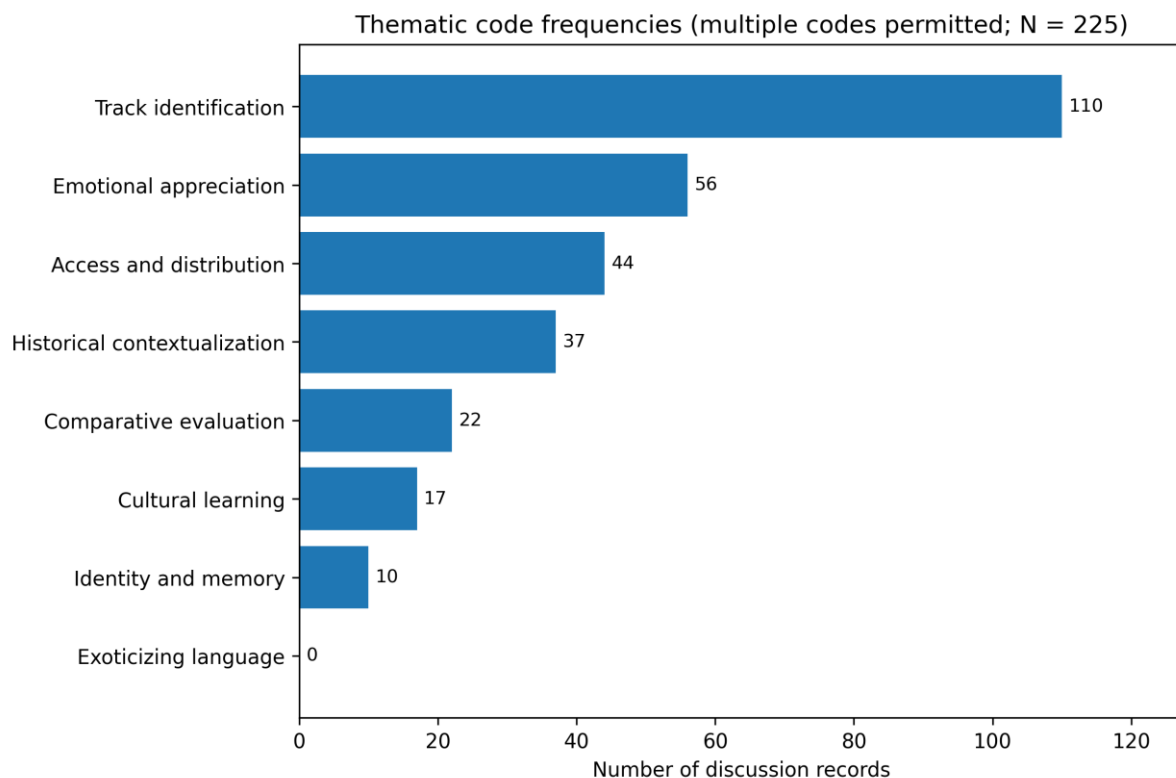
3.3 Decoding Positions

Dominant readings were the most frequent position, accounting for 151 of 225 records (67.1%). Negotiated readings accounted for 60 records (26.7%), and oppositional readings for 14 (6.2%). Dominant records included strong praise, repeated listening, recognition of named tracks, and direct contextual explanations that accepted the music’s cultural framing without reservation. Negotiated records frequently combined appreciation with a request for a track name, genre, cultural background, downloadable file, or streaming release. Oppositional records were comparatively uncommon and most often rejected the value of a soundtrack edition or criticized the inability to access the music outside the game rather than rejecting traditional Chinese musical material itself.

These distributions describe the selected records only. The Reddit and Steam samples differ greatly in size and were obtained purposively from music-related threads, so no inferential platform comparison was conducted. Figure 1 presents the overall decoding-position counts and percentages.

3.4 Thematic Structure

Track identification was the most frequent theme, occurring in 110 records (48.9%). Emotional appreciation appeared in 56 records (24.9%), access and distribution in 44 (19.6%), and historical contextualization in 37 (16.4%). Comparative evaluation occurred in 22 records (9.8%), cultural learning in 17 (7.6%), and identity and memory in 10 (4.4%). No record met the conservative operational criterion for exoticizing language. Because thematic codes were non-exclusive, the frequencies sum to more than the corpus size.

Figure 1: Decoding positions in the 225-record discussion corpus.*Figure 2: Frequency of thematic codes in the 225-record corpus; multiple codes were permitted.*

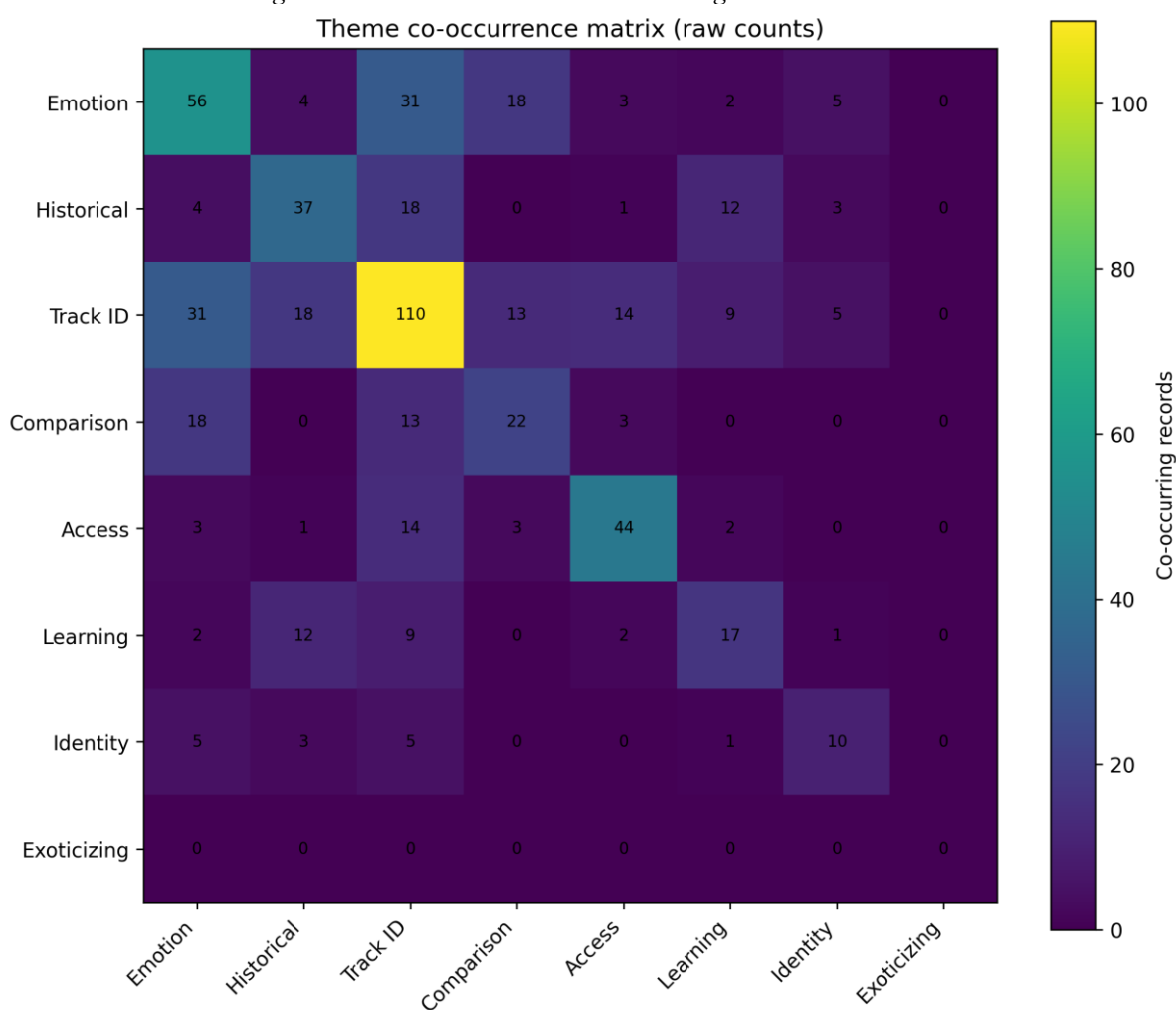
The co-occurrence pattern shows how different forms of reception were combined. Emotional appreciation co-occurred with track identification in 31 records and with comparative evaluation in 18. Historical contextualization co-occurred with track identification in 18 records and with cultural learning in 12. Track identification co-occurred with access and distribution in 14 records, indicating that the desire to name a

musical passage was often connected to the ability to find, stream, or download it. These raw counts are displayed in Figure 3 and are not significance tests.

3.5 Boundaries of Interpretation

No retained record met the conservative exoticizing-language criterion. This absence cannot establish that exoticizing discourse is absent from the wider audience; it may reflect the search terms, source selection, paraphrasing procedure, or strict decision rule. More directly observable evidence of cultural engagement appeared in 17 cultural-learning records, including requests for information about chant, instruments, genre, historical sources, or the 1986 Journey to the West television adaptation. The analysis therefore focuses on observable information seeking rather than inferring an unobserved psychological barrier to learning.

Figure 3: Theme co-occurrence matrix using raw record counts.



4. Discussion

4.1 Reception as Negotiated Interpretive Work

Dominant readings formed the largest category in the corpus, but dominance should not be equated with deep cultural understanding. Some records expressed sustained emotional approval, whereas others accepted or supplied a track identification or contextual explanation without further reflection. Negotiated readings were also substantial and commonly joined appreciation with requests for names, histories, genres, or access. Hall's [1] framework remains useful because it distinguishes acceptance, qualification, and rejection without reducing reception to a positive-negative continuum.

This result qualifies approaches that equate positive polarity with successful cultural transmission. Sentiment can describe evaluative tone, but it does not distinguish enjoyment from track recognition, historical contextualization, or cultural learning. The present study therefore does not claim that positive reception is unrelated to understanding. It shows that more specific indicators—such as identifying a chant, naming an instrument, connecting a cue to an earlier adaptation, or seeking further information—are needed before claims about interpretive engagement can be made.

4.2 Historical Recognition and Information Seeking

Historical contextualization appeared in 37 records, emotional appreciation in 56, and explicit cultural-learning discourse in 17. Some users connected the soundtrack to the 1986 *Journey to the West* television adaptation, asked about Buddhist chant or traditional instruments, or sought music in related regional styles. Others expressed nostalgia or linked the game to established Wukong memories. These patterns show that affective appreciation, historical recognition, and information seeking can overlap, although the corpus cannot determine whether online questions led to sustained learning outside the thread.

The encoding-side sources help explain why such responses were possible. The production did not rely solely on undifferentiated “Chinese-style” atmosphere. It reworked recognizable television themes, adapted chant material, recorded traditional instruments, and combined these resources with contemporary production. Such choices create multiple entry points: memory for audiences who know earlier adaptations, timbral novelty for unfamiliar listeners, and searchable identifiers for users who seek more information.

4.3 Access and Distribution as Part of Reception

Access and distribution appeared in 44 records. Users asked where to find particular tracks, whether the soundtrack was available on Spotify or as downloadable files, why a deluxe edition required the game to remain open, and whether copyright restrictions explained missing pieces. These posts are part of reception because they document what audiences can do after hearing the music: identify it, replay it, compare versions, or seek related material.

For cultural communication, access conditions can affect what audiences are able to do after an initial encounter. Searchable track titles, translated liner notes, credits, instrument names, and clear file access can convert momentary appreciation into opportunities for further inquiry. This is a practical design implication rather than evidence that access automatically produces cultural learning.

4.4 Methodological Implications

Source-level documentation demonstrates both its value and its limits. The 225-record audit trail ties every analytic record to a public thread, source date, retrieval date, and code assignment. At the same time, the use of anonymized paraphrases and thread-level rather than comment-level permalinks means that the supplement is not a verbatim archive. Larger studies should preserve institutionally approved raw records and stable comment identifiers at the time of collection, while respecting platform terms and the searchability risks of public quotations. Platform should not be inferred from these data. Reddit supplied 201 records and Steam 24, and the threads were selected because they contained music-related discourse. Any difference between the two platforms would therefore be confounded with sampling volume, thread topic, visibility, and retrieval conditions. Platform counts are retained only to describe the corpus.

4.5 Limitations

The reception corpus is purposive, English-language, and strongly weighted toward Reddit. Although 225 records provide substantial thematic coverage, they do not constitute a random or representative sample and cannot estimate the prevalence of interpretations among players or non-posting audiences.

The unit of analysis includes both opening posts and selected replies from 42 public threads. The supplementary text is paraphrased to reduce searchability, and direct comment permalinks, usernames, voting behavior, deleted material, private groups, and user histories were not retained. Thread-level URLs improve source traceability but do not provide the same auditability as an archived verbatim corpus with stable comment identifiers.

The analysis was conducted by one coder using a rule-assisted first pass followed by two manual reviews. The detailed codebook and full audit trail improve transparency, but they do not substitute for independent coding. Future work should use multiple trained coders and report agreement on a clearly defined sample.

Source pages may change or disappear. URLs and retrieval dates are supplied, but long-term preservation would require an institutionally approved archive consistent with platform terms and research ethics. The platform imbalance also prevents valid platform comparison.

The encoding analysis relies on production documentation and does not include acoustic feature analysis. It identifies documented instruments, adaptations, and production choices rather than measuring musical structure directly.

5. Conclusion

This study examined documented soundtrack design and 225 source-traceable analytic records of English-language public discussion about traditional Chinese music in *Black Myth: Wukong*. Production materials document the reworking of *Journey to the West* themes, chant adaptation, traditional instruments, and contemporary scoring practices. In the reception corpus, dominant readings were most frequent, but the most common thematic activity was track identification. Emotional appreciation, soundtrack access, historical contextualization, and explicit cultural-learning questions also appeared.

The evidence supports a cautious conclusion. Positive response alone is not a sufficient measure of cultural understanding, but online reception can contain observable forms of engagement beyond approval, including naming tracks, identifying instruments or chants, connecting music to earlier media, and seeking cultural context. The corpus does not support claims about population prevalence, platform effects, or the causal consequences of exoticizing discourse. Future research should combine larger prospectively archived corpora, stable comment identifiers, multiple coders, multilingual sampling, and direct measures of learning.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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