

Viewpoint

‘Welcome the Destined One!’ – Examining the Influence of *Black Myth: Wukong* on Cultural Heritage Sites

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Abstract

The video game *Black Myth: Wukong* ignited the public's interest in the cultural heritage sites featured in the game scenes. Players entered into a virtual game world of Chinese traditional mythologies contextualized in an imagined landscape — the design of which drew inspiration from real-world heritage sites. By examining an exhibition of the game and the status quo of two heritage sites in Shanxi, this article captures and reflects upon the game's impact on the sites' engagement with their contemporary audiences. It finds that while the game greatly promoted the sites to a broader audience group, it also reshaped the cultural functions of the sites, as they have now become viral travel destinations.

Keywords: heritage appropriation, mythology and heritage, video game exhibition, interactive storytelling, heritage tourism

Introduction

On 21 November 2024, *Black Myth: Wukong* - a video game that pays homage to, and expands on, the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* - was awarded the 'Ultimate Game of the Year' and 'Best Visual Design' at the 2024 Golden Joystick Awards.¹ The storyline of the game is a creative adaptation and continuation of the Chinese classic novel and mythologies. Bearing a remarkable likeness to Wukong, a rebellious heroic figure in the well-known novel *Journey to the West*, the player avatar in the game is referred to as 'The Destined One'. Players are endowed with a mission to resurrect Wukong's spirit by collecting his six senses during their adventurous journey. Upon its release, the game generated a widespread response from both international video game players and a broader public in China, owing to the profound cultural sentiments they shared upon the mythological themes and the classic novel embedded in the game's narrative.²

As an innovative form of digital storytelling enhanced by its exquisite visual design and profound narrative depth, the game drew its players into a world of Chinese traditional mythologies contextualized in an imagined landscape that drew inspiration from real heritage sites. This article examines how *Black Myth: Wukong* blurred the boundaries between the real and the virtual worlds and how the game's popularity reshaped the cultural and physical contexts of the relevant historic sites.

Black Myth: Wukong Art Exhibition - Delving into the game

The *Black Myth: Wukong Art Exhibition* was held from 10 April 2025 to 25 July 2025 at the China Academy of Art Art Museum (CAA Art Museum), Hangzhou. The museum is affiliated to China Academy of Art (the first art academy in China to offer complete academic programs) which is also the alma mater of the game's art director, Qi Yang.³ The exhibition was a phenomenal success, attracting over 100,000 visits in less than one month.⁴ In the exhibition visitors were invited to explore the central theme and storyline of *Black Myth: Wukong* through an immersive experience, and could also learn the behind-the-scenes story of the game's development on both cultural and technical levels (Figure 1).

In the field of game studies, a range of research focuses on the expressive power of video games as a new form of communicative media with aesthetic properties (Kirkpatrick 2011). Aligning with this strand of thought, the developer of *Black Myth*, Game Science, was guided by a mission to produce an emotionally compelling, interactive gameplay experience supported by outstanding visual presentation: an idea well embodied in the exhibition.⁵ As the curator Jiang Xu stated in the preface of the exhibition, the exhibition was like ‘a giant factory of game creation’ within which audiences could wander and embark on ‘a journey into the game itself, confronting the mythical imagination of the *Black Myth*’.



Figure 1. Crowds of visitors taking photographs of the life-size statue of ‘The Destined One’

The exhibition spanned four floors and was divided into seven main sections. The themes of the first section ‘Shattering the Void/破顽空’ and the second section ‘Upholding All Beings/载群生’ revolved around The Destined One (the player avatar in the game) and the rivalries, allies, and mentors that the player avatar encountered during their adventures.⁶ The highlights of the third and the fourth sections ‘Unveiling Virtue and Vice/明邪正’ and ‘Liberating from Fetters/开尘锁’ on the second floor were the life-sized recreations of the most notable battlegrounds in the game which gave the audiences a chance to feel the texture of the mythical world in the physical exhibition space. Moving on to the third floor, the sections ‘Treading on Clouds/踏云光’, ‘Encountering the Dao/会元龙’ were dedicated to displaying artistic depictions of the novel *Journey to the West* from the past to the present, following the curators’ intention to highlight the social role of *Black Myth* in transmitting and revitalizing the classic. In the last section, ‘Wrestling for Triumph/赌输赢’, on the lower ground floor, visitors could watch a collection of trailers and a highlight reel of *Black Myth* in Dolby Cinema, and try playing the game in the Game Trial Area.

The exhibition employed a combination of physical objects and digital display techniques to vividly demonstrate the technological innovations embedded in the game. For example, after the second exhibition section, there was an area where visitors could learn how the game’s cut-scene animations were created. Visitors could browse through compendiums containing sketches of the character, the storyboard, and the cinematography which illustrated the animation design process (Figure 2), before watching the final production of these animations on a screen in front of the reading area (Figure 3). The exhibition also combined digital installations that integrated sound and light with physical replicas to create an immersive atmosphere of the game scenes. For instance, in the third section ‘Unveiling

Virtue and Vice', the soundtrack used for the game's second chapter *Yellow Sand, Desolate Dusk* was played in the main hall of the gallery where visitors encountered a three-meter-high model of Bodhisattva Lingji's head and a panorama of the Headless Monk's chanting scene (Figure 4). This created an immersive sonic environment within the physical exhibition space that drew visitors into scenes that could only be experienced on screen when playing the game.



Figure 2. Visitors browsing the sketches of storyboard and cinematography in the compendiums onsite



Figure 3. Visitors watching the final production of the cut scenes in the game



Figure 4. Replica of the Headless Monk's chanting scene from the game's Chapter 2 Yellow Sand, Desolate Dusk

The exhibition also explored the rich cultural foundation that underpins game design by introducing real-world prototypes of the architectures and sculptures that appear in the game settings. At the entrance of the fourth section, 'Liberating from Fetters', there was a selective display of resin models of some of the historic sites featured in the game, such as the Imperial Edict Gate of Lu Garden, the Sarīra Pagoda of Qixia Temple, and the Master Minghui's Stupa. In the compendiums located beside these models, visitors could find photographs of these historic constructions in their real-life setting, shown in parallel with digitally recreated images of these in game scenes. Inside the main hall of the fourth section, a large gamepad-controlled screen projecting the final battle of the game's third chapter was placed at the center of the dimly lit exhibition space, surrounded by exquisitely made replicas of the suspended sculptures from Shuilu Temple which were used as prototypes for the design of the battlefield (Figure 5). The integrative use of exhibits in multimedia formats significantly enhanced visitors' engagement, while also further blurring the boundaries between the virtual and real worlds.



Figure 5. The gamepad-controlled screen surrounded by replicas of sculptures

Like most single-player games, players of *Black Myth* need to explore the labyrinth in the virtual game world and fulfil the quest on their own (Aponte et al. 2009; Focillon 1992; Ndalianis 2004). However, this exhibition engaged a broader community of people interested in the game, inviting participatory interpretations from both players and non-players alike. In the physical public space of the exhibition visitors could physically delve into the game world through interacting with objects like the replicas of a Keeper's Shrine and a Meditation Spot (Figure 6); and they were also given the chance to closely examine and take photographs of models of characters from the game (Figure 7).⁷ Actively engaging with the exhibits (e.g., meditating on the cushion in front of a screen that synchronizes the meditation of the Destined One in the game), visitors effectively became part of the exhibition itself. The curator aimed to 'pioneer a new paradigm for art gallery displays' that liberates exhibitions from academic confinement, breaks language barriers in visitor experiences, and brings continuous vitality to the re-display of the traditions.⁸ Thus, with this active participation by visitors the exhibition can be seen as demonstrating what the curator and game designers intended to achieve: to infuse traditional culture with the youthful vitality of contemporary generations.⁹



Figure 6. Visitors getting real-life experience of the Meditation Spots in the gallery



Figure 7. Visitors taking photographs of the models in the gallery

Impact of *Black Myth: Wukong* on Heritage Sites

Prior to the *Black Myth: Wukong Art Exhibition* becoming a natural 'pilgrimage site' for its players and a wider interested public, there had already been a significant enhancement in the visibility of the historic sites that were lesser known by the public before their adapted images were reintroduced as part of the game world. Mesmerized by the vividly crafted scenes and intriguing plotlines in *Black Myth*, the public and players were motivated to explore and learn more about the historic sites whose artworks and architectures had been featured and incorporated into the game's fictional universe. Echoing this trend, the local tourism bureaus often use the slogan 'Welcome the Destined One/恭迎天命人', a quote from an earth god in the game, to invite *Black Myth* fans to visit the sites. In the following sections, I examine two sites in Shanxi province whose artworks were created to serve religious purposes. Since the autumn of 2024, when the game went viral, they have been given a new identity as the 'filming location of *Black Myth*'.¹⁰

The Yuhuang Temple

The Yuhuang Temple, now also known as the Yuhuang Painted Sculptures and Mural Museum, is a Daoist temple located in Jincheng, a city in Shanxi Province. It is a three-courtyard temple that was originally constructed in the Sui Dynasty (581-619CE), renovated in the North Song Dynasty, and had experienced constant refurbishment and expansion in the Jin, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (Wang 2012). Since 1988 the Yuhuang Temple has been listed among the third batch of major historical and cultural sites protected at the national level in China and is highly valued as the Daoist temple with the highest number of Song and Yuan dynasties painted sculptures in China.¹¹

The essence of Daoist mythology and cosmology is well reflected in the gods and deities worshipped in the halls and the ways they are arranged as constituents of the temple complex.¹² The main hall in the temple's backyard worships the statue of the Jade Emperor/ Yuhuang—the sovereign of the celestial realm (Figure 8). Flanking the main hall, the left and right auxiliary halls mainly worship the governors of the Three Enclosures/三垣 and the Four Sages/四圣, respectively. Further down the hierarchy, in the East and West wings of the backyard, the halls for the Twelve Horary Branches/十二辰, the Thirteen Luminaries/十三曜星, and the Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions/二十八星宿 lay out symmetrically along the central axis. In Daoist religious belief, these celestial deities and spirits are governed by the Jade Emperor and play critical roles in maintaining the cosmic system's operations.



Figure 8. The exterior of the main hall and the auxiliary halls

Seventeen of the sculptures in the Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions hall were featured in *Black Myth*, but were re-contextualized in game scenes that bear little resemblance to the original heritage site (Figure 9). When visiting the real sculpture group onsite, one can see them positioned on raised platforms along the south, west, and north walls of the hall, arranged in a concave formation that semi-encloses the central space.¹³ The sculpture group features Jiaomujiao, the first spirit of the seven Eastern lunar mansions, positioned in the centre, with subsequent sculptures arranged sequentially to the left and right in an alternating order (Figures 10.1-2). The sculptures of the twenty-eight characters are systematically balanced in terms of gender, age (youth and old), and the emotional states of joy, anger, ease, and tense, embodying the essence of Daoist aesthetics that pursue the balance and the dynamic unity of opposing forces (Chen 2025).



Figure 9. The sculptures of Lunar mansions in the Cave of the Immortals in the game (on the right and left side of the player avatar)



Figure 10.1 The Lunar Mansions sculptures in Yuhuang Temple



Figure 10.2 Visitors appreciating the sculptures through the barrier

When visiting the Yuhuang Temple, it is hard to neglect the impact that the game *Black Myth* has on the physical and cultural environments of the Yuhuang Temple. On the way to the temple complex visitors will have already encountered the advertising boards titled ‘Travel in Ze county with Wukong’ on one side of the stairs that led to the temple forecourt; as well as images of the Destined One in the game used to decorate a line of stalls that sell the souvenirs of the twenty-eight lunar mansions on the forecourt (Figure 11).¹⁴



Figure 11. The stalls that sell the cultural creative products of the twenty-eight lunar mansion sculptures at the forecourt

Inside the temple complex, the twenty-eight lunar mansions hall has become a trendy tourist destination although they are not the main god of this temple complex. During the peak visiting period, a maximum of ten visitors are allowed to enter the hall every twenty minutes to mitigate over-tourism, resulting in a long queue of visitors waiting outside the entrance at the peak visiting time. Thus, it can be seen that the success of the game gives rise to the site's visibility, reputation, and economic development. Yet the enrichment in the site's cultural identity has transformed the cultural contexts and rituals of experiencing the Yuhuang Temple as a Daoist site. After the release of *Black Myth*, the temple has now become a pilgrimage site that receives reverence from two divergent communities: aside from being a religious site, it is also regarded as one of the cultural shrines for visitors who seek to find traces of the fictional game world and form a deeper connection to it in the real world.

The Guanyin Temple

The Guanyin Temple in Changzhi County is another filming location of *Black Myth*. The temple is a two-yard complex built from 1581 to 1583 during the Ming Dynasty. It was created to worship Bodhisattva Guanyin as its primary deity. Moving on to modern and contemporary China, the rich historical and artistic value of its painted sculptures has begun to garner scholarly attention, especially in the field of Ming sculpture studies since the late 20th century (Wei 2012; Huang and Sun 2018). Its historic value has been further acknowledged at the national level when, in 2001, the temple was enlisted among the fifth batch of major historical and cultural sites protected at the national level.

Addressing the deep connection between the Guanyin Temple and *Black Myth: Wukong* has become a strategy adopted by the local tourism bureau to promote the site since October 2024.¹⁵ An increasing number of visitors were drawn to the site by news and promotional articles that highlighted the Guanyin Temple as one of the filming locations. On the way to the temple, one can find posters, advertising boards, and installations placed near and at the gate of the site to draw visitors' attention (Figure 12.1-2). The game's popularity provides visitors with an incentive to explore and appreciate the artworks in this remote temple, and to gain an experience that is both culturally profound and aesthetically rich.



Figure 12.1 The visitor booth with a poster that has 'Black Myth' as its title, following texts that say 'Visit the historic architectures in Changzhi with Wukong'



Figure 12.2 An advertising board that shows a photograph of its suspended sculptures merged with an image of *The Destined One from Black Myth*

The most unique feature of the sculptures in the Guanyin temple is that they embody the gods, deities, and great teachers from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, reflecting the harmonization and unity of the three religions and teachings in China. Suspended on the ceiling above the statue of Bodhisattva Guanyin that sits at the centre of the lotus-based main altar, one can find the sculpture of Shakyamuni, as the highest god in Buddhism, at the middle; flanked by the sculptures of Laozi, one of the Three Pure Ones/Sanjing in Daoism, on its left; and Confucius, the highest teacher in Confucianism, on its right (Figure 13).¹⁶ Above the canopies of the Bodhisattvas Puxian and Wenshu, on the right and left sides of Guanyin on the main altar, one can find suspended sculptures of the Buddha with his disciple, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhist celestial deities; and the Jade Emperor surrounded by Daoist celestial sovereigns and deities.



Figure 13. The sculptures of Confucius, Shakyamuni, and Laozi (from left to right)

The natural light that casts upon the statues and sculptures adds an extra touch of delight to the visitors' experience onsite. Since the main hall is hidden behind a pavilion, there are only a couple of hours during which daylight is bright enough to slightly illuminate the suspended sculptures and statues inside the hall.¹⁷ During this time the reflected sunshine from the yard can peer through the door, projecting subtle streams of light onto the golden gild of the

Eighteen Arhats, the Twenty-Four Heavenly Deities, and the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment (Figure 14). Being in the hall surrounded by the sculptures and statues of the divine, it is easy for visitors to be visually captivated by the splendid artworks. In this physical space visitors are immersed in an atmosphere of divine revelry, where they can appreciate the dynamic gestures and vivid facial expressions of the statues and sculptures, which demonstrate the skilled craftsmanship.



Figure 14. Reflection of lights shining on the statues and sculptures on the North and South walls

Yet, owing to the site's popularity since the game *Black Myth: Wukong* went viral, there is a growing concern over the surge in visitor numbers that exceeds the relevant sites' capacity, resulting in the elevation of cultural relic protection measures. 'The new preservation measures will bring a pause to the social and religious activities that once took place,' one of the guards who worked in the temple mentioned during our conversation, 'the opera stage was still in use during the Spring Festival's temple fair last year, but it is said that such activities would be constrained. The act of burning incense during the worshipping activities is also recently restricted since the level of preservation has risen.' (Figure 15)¹⁸

In a similar case, the Culture and Tourism Bureau of Xi County issued 'A Letter for the Destined Ones that Come to Xiaoxitian Temple' on 3 October 2024, responding to visitors' disruptive behaviour and escalating complaints about the strictly implemented visitor traffic and crowd control regulations. The letter appeals to the public's understanding and accommodation of the policies due to the temple's limited capacity: over ten thousand tourists visit the site daily, yet the main hall of the temple covers only 169 square metres, allowing standing room for a maximum of forty people.¹⁹ The challenge faced by the heritage site is real: its new identity as the projected image of the virtual game world has brought it fame, but it has also unexpectedly overburdened the site's physical and cultural environments.



Figure 15. Several unlit incense sticks placed on the covered platform in the temple

Conclusion

The article demonstrates the reverberations of the dynamic interplay between the virtual game world and the physical world, resulting in cultural and physical transformations at historic sites. While the first exhibition showed how images of real heritage sites and architectures infused the game with rich cultural and historical elements, reviewing the status quo of the historic sites after *Black Myth: Wukong* adds more critical reflections upon how the virtual game world, in turn, has breathed new life into the cultural relics through engaging a wider group of contemporary audiences. Meanwhile, it is equally pivotal to underscore the importance of implementing a more sustainable development strategy to promote the historic sites amid this temporary surge of public attention, so that they can continue to inspire and resonate with future generations. This will require efforts made by heritage and cultural tourism specialists, local policymakers, and the public to find a balance between preserving the sites' physical and cultural integrity and the trend of commercialization.

Notes

- 1 Matt Gardner, "Black Myth: Wukong" Wins 2024 Game Of The Year At Golden Joysticks', Forbes 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattgardner/2024/11/21/black-myth-wukong-named-2024-game-of-the-year-at-golden-joysticks/>, accessed 5 June 2025
- 2 Jiang Li, 'Black Myth: Wukong Wins Ultimate Game of the Year; Cultural Experience Seen as a Key Factor', Global Times 2024. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202411/1323586.shtml#:~:text=China's%20first%20AAA%20game%2C%20Black,and%20%22Best%20Art%20Direction.%22>, accessed 10 May 2025.
- 3 China Academy of Art, 'Introduction', China Academy of Art. <https://en.caa.edu.cn/about/introduction>, accessed 25 October 2025.
- 4 Yilin Ye, '黑神话：悟空"主题艺术展开近一月吸引超10万人次参观 [The Black Myth: Wukong Art Exhibition Has Attracted Over 100,000 Visitors in Just One Month]', Zhejiang Daily 2025. https://www.zsjw.gov.cn/toutiao/202505/t20250505_23427361.shtml, accessed 5 June 2025.

- 5 Game Science, '游戏科学名字的由来 [How Game Science Got Its Name]', Game Science. <https://www.gamesci.com.cn/about.html>, accessed 21 May 2025.
- 6 The exhibition was bilingual featuring text in both Chinese and English.
- 7 Both the Keeper's Shrines and the Meditation Spots serve important functions in the game from which the players can restore and gain skill points.
- 8 Quote from the preface of the exhibition written by the curator Jiang Xu, displayed on the wall near the reception desk of CAA Art Museum.
- 9 CAAM, 'Black Myth: Wukong Art Exhibition Opens at the China Academy of Art Museum', CAAM 2025. <https://caam.caa.edu.cn/news/202504/84497.html>, accessed 20 April 2025.
- 10 Statistics have shown that Shanxi was among the provinces in China whose heritage sites were most frequently featured in the game *Black Myth*. See: Hui Zhou, '借力《黑神话：悟空》出圈，山西能否接住这波天的流量？ [With Black Myth: Wukong Going Viral, Can Shanxi Utilise This Overwhelming Surge of Attention]', 21jingji 2024. <https://www.21jingji.com/article/20240821/herald/8976e20f602f2abbf260d0e7b58380e4.html>, accessed 10 April 2025.
- 11 National Cultural Heritage Administration, 'State Council Announcement Regarding the Third Batch of National Key Cultural Heritage Sites', The Chinese Government Network 2014 https://www.gov.cn/guoqing/2014-07/21/content_2721163.html, accessed 20 April 2025.
- 12 As a traditional religion and philosophy originated in China, Daoism advocates for harmony between humans and nature, upholding the idea that humans should observe and revere the principles of natural laws as well as the patterns of celestial movements (Chen 1996).
- 13 These sculptures in the group feature the spirits that personified the twenty-eight celestial regions in Chinese mythology whose name consists of three components from concepts commonly used in traditional Chinese culture: one from the Four Celestial Regions (i.e., Azure Loong, White Tiger, Vermilion Bird, Black Warrior), one from the Five Elements (i.e., iron, wood, water, fire, earth), and one from the twelve zodiac animal sign.
- 14 These cultural souvenirs (e.g., postcards, magnets, and bookmarks) were also the star products in the Yuhuang Temple's official souvenir shop.
- 15 Fang Dong and Jie Dong, '观音堂火爆出圈 各地游客打卡参观 [Guanyin Temple Goes Viral as Tourists Flock from Across the Country to Visit]', Luzhou News 2024. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2S-V0vCHzAqrE2xRWLC4xA>, accessed 15 April 2025.
- 16 Bodhisattva Guanyin is one of the most influential deities in both Buddhism and Daoism in China.
- 17 When I visited the Guanyin temple in December, the best time to visit the Guanyin Temple was from half past one to three o'clock in the afternoon as the hall could be slightly illuminated by daylight.
- 18 It is noteworthy that this article was written after the author's first visit to the temple in December 2024. Since the local tourism boom in Shanxi is quite sudden, regulations on conserving and sustainably promoting local cultural heritage sites have been changing up to the present day. For example, when revisiting the site in July 2025, the author learned from the guard that a digital exhibition project was underway near the main hall, which could help divert visitor flow. As a result, the traditional folk activities at the temple were preserved and are likely to continue. (The original conversation was in Chinese and then translated by the author into English).

- ¹⁹ Culture and Tourism Bureau of Xi County, '隰县文旅局再致信小西天天命人[The Culture and Tourism Bureau of Xi County Issued Another Letter to "the Destined Ones" at Xiaoxi Tian]', Xinhuanet 2024. <http://sx.news.cn/20241003/63be32f19e7f4d4d8e84bfd3b8057fda/c.html>, accessed 10 April 2025.

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