
The Cross-Cultural Perception and Interpretation of Chinese Cultural Symbols in the MOBA Game *Honor of Kings*

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Abstract

As Chinese digital games expand globally, games have become important spaces for cross-cultural communication. *Honor of Kings* integrates numerous Chinese cultural symbols through its heroes, skins, and narratives. This study explores how these symbols are perceived and interpreted by players from different cultural backgrounds, focusing on Chinese and Japanese players.

Using a qualitative approach, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve players, including six Chinese and six Japanese participants. All interviewees had at least one month of gameplay experience. The analysis draws on Hall's encoding/decoding model, semiotic theory, and cross-cultural communication theory.

The findings indicate that both groups can recognize major Chinese cultural symbols, but their interpretations differ. Chinese players tend to produce dominant or preferred readings based on cultural familiarity and historical knowledge, often accompanied by cultural pride. Japanese players more frequently demonstrate negotiated interpretations, engaging mainly at the aesthetic level and selectively accessing deeper meanings. The study also finds that the game can stimulate interest in Chinese culture, although this varies depending on the player's cultural background and prior knowledge.

Overall, the study highlights how cultural literacy shapes cross-cultural interpretation and suggests that digital games can function as platforms for cultural dissemination across cultures.

Keywords: *Honor of Kings*, digital games, cultural representation, player reception, cross-cultural studies

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, video games have evolved into important media for cultural dissemination, allowing players to encounter and interpret cultural symbols through gameplay. With the rapid expansion of China's game industry into the global market, Chinese games have created new opportunities for the international transmission of Chinese culture. However, how players from different cultural backgrounds understand Chinese cultural symbols, and whether such interpretations influence their attitudes and gaming experience, remains underexplored.

Previous studies suggest that video games function as tools for cultural knowledge acquisition and identity formation (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023), while the interpretation of cultural symbols is strongly shaped by players' cultural backgrounds (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). These findings indicate that cultural meanings in games are not universally received, but are decoded differently across cultural contexts.

As one of China's most influential domestically developed games, *Honor of Kings* provides a representative case for examining cross-cultural transmission. Developed by Tencent's TiMi Studio, the game has achieved international success and incorporates extensive Chinese cultural elements, including historical figures, mythological imagery, and traditional aesthetic symbols. Yet these elements may be interpreted differently by players from diverse cultural backgrounds—for example, the symbolic meaning of the dragon varies significantly between Eastern and Western cultures (Nawata, 2020).

Within this process, the Japanese market offers a particularly meaningful research context. Historical and geographical proximity to China provides Japanese players with partial cultural familiarity, while contemporary Japanese gaming culture also encourages selective aesthetic engagement. This combination of proximity and distance makes Sino-Japanese comparison a valuable lens for examining cross-cultural symbol reception.

Guided by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, this study explores how foreign players—particularly Japanese players—interpret symbolic Chinese cultural elements in *Honor of Kings*, and whether these

interpretations influence their gaming experience. Representative cases such as the hero Ao Yin and Li Bai's skin Sword and Song are analyzed to illustrate how cultural meanings are encoded and decoded across cultural contexts. The researcher's academic background in Japanese studies further supports nuanced cross-cultural analysis.

2. Objectives

- 1) To explore and compare Japanese and Chinese players' perception and interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols presented in *Honor of Kings*.
- 2) To investigate players' exposure to Chinese cultural symbols in the game *Honor of Kings* influences their interest and cognitive understanding of traditional Chinese culture.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Cultural Symbols in Digital Games

Cultural symbols are central to human communication and meaning construction. Drawing on linguistic and anthropological traditions, scholars argue that meaning is socially constructed rather than inherent in objects. In digital games, cultural symbols operate within multimodal systems that include narrative, visual design, sound, and character construction (Mazlan & Roslan, 2025). These symbols acquire meaning through players' interaction with game content and their own cultural backgrounds.

Cultural symbols may take visual, textual, auditory, or narrative forms and often carry culturally specific values, historical memory, and collective identity (Long & He, 2021). In games, such symbols are intentionally embedded to enhance cultural depth and narrative richness. However, their meanings are not fixed; players interpret them differently based on cultural familiarity and symbolic literacy. As a result, cultural symbols function both as tools of cultural transmission and as sites of potential misunderstanding in cross-cultural game contexts.

3.2 Cross-Cultural Communication and Games

Cross-cultural communication theory examines how individuals from different cultural backgrounds construct meaning and interpret messages. Foundational frameworks include Hall's high- and low-context culture model and Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) theory of uncertainty management. These theories highlight how communication styles, values, and contextual reliance shape interpretation.

In digital games, cultural background strongly influences how players understand symbolic content. Research suggests that cultural proximity enhances recognition and comprehension, while cultural distance may lead players to interpret cultural elements primarily as aesthetic features (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). Although China and Japan are both high-context cultures, differences in historical education and media traditions produce distinct interpretive tendencies. This makes the Sino-Japanese context particularly suitable for examining cross-cultural differences in symbolic interpretation in games.

3.3 Reception Theory and Audience Interpretation

Reception theory highlights the active role of audiences in constructing meaning, as illustrated by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which shows that media messages are interpreted differently depending on social and cultural contexts. Applied to digital games, this perspective explains why players from different cultural backgrounds may assign varied meanings or emotional responses to the same cultural symbols, making it a useful framework for analyzing the cross-cultural interpretation of Chinese cultural elements in games (Li & Wu, 2024).

3.4 Barthes' Semiotic Theory and Cultural Myths

Barthes' semiotic theory extends Saussure's sign model by distinguishing denotation, connotation, and myth, emphasizing how culturally shaped meanings become naturalized ideologies. In digital games, symbols such as character design and mythological imagery function as signifiers whose meanings vary across cultural contexts, making Barthes' framework useful for analyzing how Chinese cultural symbols are reinterpreted and mythologized by players from different backgrounds (Ramadany et al., 2024).

3.5 MOBA Games as a Cultural Medium

MOBA games are team-based competitive titles centered on real-time strategy and role differentiation, and have developed into global esports phenomena (Pantouw & Aruan, 2019). Beyond entertainment, their character-driven design and strong social interaction make them effective platforms for embedding cultural symbols and examining cross-cultural communication and symbolic interpretation in digital gaming contexts.

3.6 Related Research on Cross-Cultural Communication in Chinese Games

Recent studies have increasingly examined Chinese games as vehicles for cultural communication. Research on Genshin Impact shows that Chinese cultural symbols can generate emotional resonance and cross-cultural dialogue among global players (Wang, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Studies on Black Myth: Wukong further demonstrate how reimagined traditional imagery supports both cultural dissemination and commercial success (Meng, 2025).

However, scholars also note that cultural symbols may be reinterpreted or misunderstood in cross-cultural contexts, emphasizing the need for adaptive symbolic design (Chen, 2025). Against this background, *Honor of Kings* provides a valuable case for analyzing how Chinese cultural symbols are received and interpreted by players from different cultural backgrounds.

4. Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the study, detailing the research design, data sources, and analytical procedures adopted to address the research questions. It explains how qualitative methods were employed to explore cross-cultural interpretations of Chinese cultural symbols in *Honor of Kings*.

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how Chinese and Japanese players perceive and interpret Chinese cultural symbols in *Honor of Kings*. Instead of focusing on textual or visual analysis of game content, the research emphasizes players' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Japan is selected as the comparative context due to its historical and cultural ties with China, its active overseas player base of *Honor of Kings*, and its position within an East Asian cultural framework that combines familiarity with cultural distance. The researcher's background in Japanese studies further supports effective cross-cultural communication and data collection. By employing purposive sampling and thematic analysis, the study aims to identify patterns and differences in how cultural background shapes the reception and reconstruction of symbolic Chinese cultural elements, prioritizing depth of understanding over statistical generalization.

A qualitative approach is chosen because it enables an in-depth examination of how players construct meaning and emotional responses to culturally embedded symbols in games. The research focuses on subjective interpretation rather than measurement, making semi-structured interviews particularly suitable for capturing nuanced cross-cultural understandings that cannot be easily quantified. Individual interviews are preferred over focus groups to encourage honest reflection, reduce peer influence, and accommodate the geographic and scheduling constraints of cross-national research. This approach supports the comparative analysis of Chinese and Japanese players by providing rich, contextualized data on how cultural familiarity, distance, and prior knowledge influence symbolic interpretation.

4.2 Source of Information

This study targets Chinese and Japanese players of *Honor of Kings*. Using purposive sampling, 12 participants aged between 20 and 52 were recruited, including 6 Chinese and 6 Japanese players, with two of them declining to state their exact age. Two Japanese participants did not disclose their exact age due to cultural sensitivity, but were inferred to fall within the intended age range based on communication and gaming experience.

All participants had at least one month of gameplay experience, ensuring sufficient exposure to in-game cultural symbols. Nationality, age range, and gaming experience were treated as primary selection criteria, as they are directly related to cross-cultural interpretation of symbolic content, while variables such as gender and occupation were considered secondary. The balanced 1:1 ratio between Chinese and Japanese participants supports meaningful cross-cultural comparison.

Participants were recruited through purposive and network-based sampling to ensure relevance and diversity. Chinese participants were recruited through personal contacts and public recruitment posts on Xiaohongshu, while Japanese participants were recruited via X (formerly Twitter), direct invitations, and referrals from Japanese acquaintances. All recruitment, screening, and scheduling were conducted online. Interviews were carried out via platforms such as WeChat and Zoom using voice or written communication, depending on participants' preferences. This approach accommodated geographical distance while ensuring practical accessibility and cultural relevance, aligning with the qualitative aim of gaining in-depth insights rather than statistical generalization.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

This study employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. This format allows participants to freely express personal interpretations and emotional responses while ensuring that core themes related to cultural symbols and research questions are consistently addressed. Interviews were conducted online, each lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The semi-structured design enables flexibility for follow-up questions, making it particularly suitable for exploring culturally embedded meanings and subjective gaming experiences.

4.4 Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and theoretical framework. The instrument focuses on participants' gaming background, recognition and interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols, and the relationship between these symbols and interest in Chinese culture. Interview questions were prepared in both Chinese and Japanese and adjusted linguistically to fit participants' cultural contexts. The flexible structure ensured consistency across interviews while allowing individualized probing to capture nuanced cross-cultural interpretations.

4.5 Data Analysis

The study adopts thematic analysis to examine patterns in how Chinese cultural symbols are recognized and interpreted by players. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, followed by initial coding using both inductive open coding and theory-driven categories informed by reception theory. Codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as recognition accuracy, emotional resonance, symbolic interpretation, and cultural interest. Finally, themes were compared between Chinese and Japanese participants to identify cross-cultural similarities and differences in meaning construction, allowing both expected and emergent interpretations to be captured.

5. Results

This chapter examines similarities and differences in how interviewees interpret Chinese cultural symbols in *Honor of Kings* and how these elements influence their cultural interests, based on coded and comparative analysis of the interview data.

5.1 Overview of Participants and Interview Themes

This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with a total of twelve participants, including six Chinese players and six Japanese players of *Honor of Kings*. The participants were selected to represent different levels of familiarity with the game, while all having prior gameplay experience to ensure meaningful engagement with in-game content.

Table 1 Information of Participants

ID	Nationality	Age	Gender	Game experience
CN1	CHINESE	33	Male	5 years and 3 months
CN2	CHINESE	20	Female	2 months
CN3	CHINESE	32	Male	5 years
CN4	CHINESE	22	Male	6-7 years
CN5	CHINESE	26	Female	8 years
CN6	CHINESE	23	Female	2 years
JP1	JAPANESE	N/A	Male	3 months
JP2	JAPANESE	23	Male	1.5 years
JP3	JAPANESE	N/A	Male	1 year and 2 months
JP4	JAPANESE	52	Male	1 month
JP5	JAPANESE	36	Male	1 month
JP6	JAPANESE	30	Male	2 years

The interviews focused on three main themes derived from the research questions. First, participants were asked about their perception and interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols presented in the game, including character design, skins, and visual aesthetics. This theme aimed to explore how players from different cultural backgrounds recognize and make sense of culturally embedded elements.

Second, participants were asked about their level of interest in Chinese culture as influenced by their gameplay experience. Questions in this section explored whether exposure to cultural symbols in the game encouraged further learning, as well as the extent to which such interest was actively pursued or situationally triggered.

Table 2 Overview of Themes of Interview

Theme	Chinese Participants (CN)	Japanese Participants (JP)
Recognition of Chinese Cultural Symbols	Accurately identify cultural symbols (e.g., Dunhuang-style, Hanfu, classical poetry, and mythological heroes). Demonstrate contextual understanding by linking designs to historical or literary sources.	Recognize major Chinese elements (e.g., Three Kingdoms heroes, traditional costumes) mainly through surface familiarity or prior media exposure. Appreciation focuses on visual Chinese style rather than cultural depth.
Emotional and Attitude Engagement	Strong emotional attachment to culturally embedded skins and heroes. Cultural pride and authenticity are key factors in engagement. Negative reactions arise when historical accuracy is distorted.	Emotional engagement mainly stems from aesthetic appeal, design beauty and gameplay enjoyment. Some sense of “Asian” cultural resonance, but cultural pride is less pronounced.
Understanding of Chinese Cultural Symbols	Generally accurate comprehension of cultural meanings and symbolic connections. Minor misinterpretations, mostly aesthetic.	Limited interpretive depth; understanding often confined to visual impressions. Players with Chinese experience or language knowledge show higher comprehension.
Influence on Cultural Interest and Learning Behavior	High level of curiosity toward related cultural backgrounds. Many actively research myths, poems, and historical figures outside the game.	Mixed responses: some players explore stories, while others prioritize gameplay. Prefer concise or visual explanations if provided in-game.

Based on these themes, the interview data were coded and categorized into two main analytical dimensions: (1) perception and interpretation of Chinese cultural symbols, and (2) cultural interest and engagement. The findings are presented in the following sections with a comparative focus on Chinese and Japanese players.

5.2 Perception and Interpretation of Chinese and Japanese Players

The interviews indicate that Chinese players are able to clearly recognize and interpret Chinese cultural elements embedded in *Honor of Kings*, often linking them to specific historical, artistic, and cultural references. Their interpretations tend to align with the intended meanings encoded by the designers, reflecting a dominant decoding shaped by cultural familiarity and prior knowledge.

For example, one participant explicitly identified culturally specific skins and their symbolic meanings: “For limited skins, there are quite a lot. For example, Luban’s ‘Lion Dance’ and Xi Shi’s ‘Poetry Jiangnan’... Luban’s skin clearly has Chinese New Year elements, and Xi Shi’s clothing reflects ancient Chinese women’s dress.” (CN1)

This demonstrates how visual elements such as costumes and festival motifs are not only recognized but also interpreted within a concrete cultural framework. Similarly, another participant highlighted the authenticity and cultural significance of certain designs: “For example, Yang Yuhuan’s ‘Flying Apsaras’ and Zhen Ji’s ‘Dream of the Garden’ have very obvious Chinese elements, and the design is very thoughtful... I think keeping these elements even in the international version is a form of cultural export.” (CN4)

Such responses indicate that Chinese players tend to approach in-game symbols through a narrative-oriented lens, drawing on shared cultural knowledge to construct meaning. In some cases, players also demonstrated an awareness of the production context behind the designs: “This skin collaborated with the Dunhuang Research Academy, and the costume closely restores the Flying Apsaras style without too much modern modification.” (CN5)

These examples show that Chinese players not only recognize cultural symbols at the surface level but also evaluate their authenticity, historical accuracy, and cultural intention. Their interpretations are often embedded within a broader cultural discourse, where symbolic elements are perceived as meaningful representations rather than decorative features.

In contrast, Japanese players do recognize certain Chinese elements, but their interpretations are often based on partial familiarity or visual impressions rather than deeper cultural knowledge. For instance, one participant stated: “I noticed it because Japanese people are familiar with Romance of the Three Kingdoms, so characters like Zhuge Liang and Guan Yu are well known.” (JP1)

This suggests that recognition is sometimes mediated through shared East Asian cultural texts rather than direct understanding of Chinese cultural contexts. Other participants focused primarily on visual features: “The hairstyles and the curved style of clothing feel different from Japanese kimono... it’s more of an intuitive impression.” (JP2)

Such responses indicate that Japanese players tend to rely on aesthetic perception rather than symbolic interpretation. In some cases, their understanding remains vague or generalized: “I thought there were some Chinese historical figures, and many characters use kanji, but that’s about it.” (JP2)

Even when identifying something as “Chinese,” the explanation is often limited to abstract impressions: “I think it feels Chinese... mainly the face and the color scheme.” (JP5)

Overall, while both groups can recognize the presence of Chinese cultural elements, Chinese players tend to engage in deeper, culturally embedded interpretations, whereas Japanese players more frequently remain at the level of visual recognition or culturally mediated familiarity.

5.3 Players’ Interest in Chinese Culture

The findings further suggest that for Chinese players, *Honor of Kings* often reinforces existing cultural knowledge and stimulates continued cultural engagement. Many participants reported actively seeking additional information about characters, skins, or their cultural backgrounds.

For instance, one participant described actively exploring the meaning behind game content: “Yes, I would look it up on purpose—what the meaning of this skin is, what the design inspiration is, and even why certain lines are used.” (CN1)

Similarly, another participant emphasized a strong sense of initiative in cultural exploration: “If I’m interested and not familiar with the background, I will actively search for it. I’m quite curious and willing to learn more.” (CN4)

These responses indicate that the game can function as a catalyst for deeper cultural engagement, especially among players who already possess an interest in Chinese culture. However, this effect is not uniform and depends on individual background and prior knowledge. For example, one participant noted: “I already understand many of these elements because of my background in art and game design, so I don’t need to look them up again.” (CN5)

At the same time, interest-driven engagement remains important: “It depends on how much I like the character or skin. If I like it a lot, I’m definitely willing to learn more about it.” (CN5)

These findings suggest that while *Honor of Kings* can reinforce and deepen cultural interest among Chinese players, the degree of engagement varies depending on personal motivation, prior knowledge, and emotional attachment to specific in-game content.

In contrast, Japanese players show a more conditional and passive form of cultural engagement. While some participants do develop curiosity, this interest is often triggered by gameplay experience rather than cultural

motivation. For example: “I became curious about Ganjiang and Moye and looked it up... I found it interesting that they were a couple who made swords.” (JP5)

This suggests that interest emerges situationally, often linked to character usage rather than cultural depth. Similarly, another participant reported drawing cultural inferences through indirect observation: “I noticed relationships between characters and wondered if Chinese culture emphasizes human relationships, and then I looked it up.” (JP2)

However, such cases remain relatively limited. In many instances, Japanese players expressed only a mild or potential interest: “If there is an opportunity to learn more, I would be interested.” (JP5)

Overall, while *Honor of Kings* can spark cultural curiosity among Japanese players, this effect tends to be less consistent and more dependent on individual engagement with specific characters or gameplay experiences, in contrast to the more active and culturally grounded exploration observed among Chinese players.

6. Discussion

6.1 *Honor of Kings* and Cross-Cultural Communication

The differences in how Chinese and Japanese players engage with the symbolic content of *Honor of Kings* can be explained through Hall’s distinction between high-context and low-context cultures. As a high-context culture, Chinese communication relies heavily on shared historical knowledge and implicit cultural references, enabling Chinese players to interpret in-game symbols through culturally grounded frameworks and to produce holistic readings closely aligned with intended meanings (Wang, 2024).

Japanese players, although also originating from a relatively high-context cultural environment, generally lacked access to the specific historical and mythological knowledge embedded in Chinese culture. Consequently, their interpretations tended to focus on visually explicit or narratively salient elements, such as character appearance or general story settings, rather than implicit cultural references (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). These findings suggest that cross-cultural interpretation is shaped not only by regional proximity but also by the accessibility of contextual knowledge. While high-context cultural encoding enables rich symbolic expression, its effectiveness is limited when shared background knowledge is absent (Hsu & O’Hagan, 2024).

In this sense, the findings also indicate that in interactive game environments, the effectiveness of high-context communication is further influenced by players’ degree of engagement, as cultural meanings may only become accessible through repeated interaction rather than immediate recognition. *Honor of Kings* illustrates both the strengths and constraints of high-context cultural communication in cross-cultural game contexts, supporting arguments that Chinese games function as vehicles of cultural soft power but require adaptive strategies for international audiences (Xiang & Yuan, 2025).

However, the role of cultural soft power in this context should not be understood as entirely unproblematic. While *Honor of Kings* facilitates the global circulation of Chinese cultural symbols, the process of cultural transmission is shaped by commercial and design considerations.

In order to appeal to a broader international audience, complex cultural symbols may be selectively simplified, aestheticized, or detached from their original historical and social contexts. As observed in this study, many Japanese players primarily engaged with visual and stylistic elements, suggesting that certain cultural meanings may be reduced to aesthetic features during cross-cultural transmission.

This raises the question of whether such representations risk depoliticizing or decontextualizing cultural symbols, transforming them into consumable visual motifs rather than carriers of deeper cultural significance. Therefore, while digital games can serve as effective tools of cultural soft power, their role in cultural communication is shaped by the tension between authenticity, accessibility, and commercial viability.

6.2 *Honor of Kings* and Reception Theory

Hall's encoding/decoding model provides a useful framework for understanding how players from different cultural backgrounds interpret the same symbolic content in *Honor of Kings*. While the game encodes heroes, skins, and narratives with meanings rooted in Chinese history and mythology, these meanings are actively decoded by players based on their cultural positioning (Maharani & Aisyah, 2024).

However, unlike traditional media contexts where decoding is often treated as a relatively discrete interpretive act, the findings of this study suggest that in interactive game environments, decoding becomes an ongoing and dynamic process shaped by gameplay experience.

Chinese participants, supported by stronger cultural literacy and familiarity, tended to produce dominant readings that closely matched the designers' intended meanings and were often accompanied by emotional resonance and cultural pride (Yao et al., 2023).

In contrast, Japanese players more frequently demonstrated negotiated readings. Although familiar references such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* facilitated recognition, engagement often remained at the level of visual appreciation, with deeper symbolic meanings partially reinterpreted or overlooked. This pattern aligns with previous research emphasizing that cultural and educational backgrounds significantly shape how players decode symbolic game content (Shliakhovchuk & Garcia, 2020).

At the same time, the findings indicate that decoding in games may also be interaction-driven. For instance, players' interest in specific cultural elements often emerged through repeated use of certain characters or continued exposure during gameplay, suggesting that meaning is gradually constructed rather than immediately decoded.

Hall's model thus explains why identical symbolic designs can generate divergent meanings and levels of engagement in cross-cultural gameplay contexts (Wang, 2024).

6.3 *Honor of Kings* and Barthes' Semiotic Theory

Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation further clarifies cross-cultural differences in symbolic interpretation. At the denotative level, visual signifiers such as Dunhuang-inspired patterns or Peking Opera motifs were generally recognizable across participants, supporting claims that culturally specific visuals can communicate cultural origin effectively in global digital media (Damayanti, 2024).

At the connotative level, however, interpretations diverged markedly. Chinese players tended to associate these symbols with emotional, historical, and national meanings, whereas Japanese players often perceived them primarily as stylistic or ornamental features. Similar discrepancies have been observed in studies of *Genshin Impact*, where Chinese players attach strong affective meanings to mythological references that international players interpret mainly as aesthetic elements (Timofeeva & Fedurko, 2024). These findings highlight the polysemic nature of cultural symbols and support Barthes' argument that meaning is culturally situated and continuously renegotiated by audiences (Jadou & Al Ghabra, 2021).

6.4 Integrating Theoretical Perspectives on Cross-Cultural Game Communication

Taken together, cross-cultural communication theory, reception theory, and semiotic analysis reveal that symbolic communication in games emerges from the interaction between production intentions and audience interpretation.

Building on these perspectives, the findings of this study suggest that meaning-making in interactive cultural media operates through two complementary pathways: culturally embedded interpretation, which relies on prior knowledge and cultural familiarity, and interaction-driven interpretation, which emerges through gameplay experience and repeated engagement.

While *Honor of Kings* successfully transmits recognizable Chinese cultural symbols across borders, the depth and accuracy of interpretation depend largely on players' cultural literacy, prior exposure, and interpretive resources.

This refined perspective highlights that in interactive media contexts, cultural communication is not only encoded and decoded but also progressively constructed through player interaction. By adopting a multi-theoretical approach, this study highlights both the potential and the limitations of digital games as vehicles for cross-cultural cultural dissemination.

6.5 Limitations

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sample size is relatively small, consisting of twelve participants. While this is consistent with qualitative research aiming for in-depth insights, the findings may not be fully generalizable to the broader player population.

Second, there is a gender imbalance among the participants, particularly within the Japanese group, where all interviewees were male. This may limit the diversity of perspectives, as gender differences could influence both game experience and cultural interpretation.

Third, the study relied on participant recruitment through social networks, which may introduce sampling bias. Participants may share similar backgrounds or interests, potentially affecting the diversity of responses.

Finally, the interviews were conducted in different languages (Chinese and Japanese), which may have introduced a language mediation effect. Subtle nuances in participants' expressions could have been influenced by translation or interpretation during analysis.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, ensuring greater demographic diversity, and employing more diverse recruitment strategies. Additionally, cross-linguistic validation methods could be applied to further enhance the reliability of comparative findings.

Taken together, this study contributes to both cross-cultural communication research and game studies by demonstrating how interactive gameplay structures shape the interpretation of cultural meanings. Unlike narrative-driven games, where cultural content is primarily conveyed through linear storytelling, MOBA games such as *Honor of Kings* embed cultural symbols within repeatable, character-based gameplay systems. This structural feature allows players to encounter and reinterpret cultural elements through ongoing interaction, making meaning-making a cumulative and experience-driven process. By highlighting the role of gameplay practices in shaping cultural decoding, this study extends existing reception theories beyond passive media contexts and underscores the importance of considering interactivity in the analysis of digital cultural communication.

7. Suggestions

7.1 Suggestions from this study

The findings indicate that players play an active role in cross-cultural meaning-making rather than passively receiving symbolic content. For players, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds, games such as *Honor of Kings* can serve as opportunities for reflective cultural engagement. Moving beyond surface-level aesthetic appreciation, players are encouraged to explore the historical, cultural, and mythological meanings embedded in in-game symbols. For non-Chinese players, negotiated or alternative interpretations are a natural part of cross-cultural reception; however, cultivating curiosity toward unfamiliar symbols—such as seeking background stories or historical references—can deepen understanding and enrich the gameplay experience. In this way, games may function as entry points for informal cultural learning, allowing players to reconstruct meaning through their own cultural perspectives while remaining open to the original cultural context.

For game designers, the study highlights the importance of encoding cultural symbolism in ways that remain accessible to diverse audiences. Although characters, costumes, and mythological motifs are often visually recognizable at the denotative level, their connotative meanings are not always clearly communicated across cultures. This suggests that cultural symbols should be supported by narrative context, in-game explanations, or storytelling mechanisms rather than serving purely decorative functions. Given the cultural proximity between

China and Japan, designers can strategically combine culturally specific symbols with globally appealing gameplay and visual styles. Even when interpretations remain partial or primarily aesthetic, such designs can still promote cross-cultural communication by enhancing visibility, recognition, and emotional engagement with Chinese cultural elements.

7.2 Suggestions for further studies

Several directions for future research emerge from the findings and limitations of this study. First, future research could expand sample diversity beyond Chinese and Japanese players by including participants from regions such as Southeast Asia, Europe, or North America, enabling broader cross-cultural comparisons. Second, methodological expansion through mixed-methods approaches could complement qualitative interviews with surveys or experiments, helping to identify broader patterns and relationships between cultural exposure and players' attitudes or interests. Third, longitudinal studies could examine how interpretations and cultural engagement evolve over time, particularly through sustained exposure to culturally themed game content. Finally, future research should consider cross-game and paratextual factors, such as promotional materials, esports discourse, fan communities, and social media, which may significantly shape how cultural symbols are interpreted beyond the game itself.

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