

Translating Identities:
How Cultural Choices Shape Character Perception in
Genshin Impact

CATRINA-CLAUDIA MIHU
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Romania

Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the English and Chinese voice-lines of specific characters in *Genshin Impact* – a well-known open world role-playing video game developed by Mihoyo Technology – and examines the cultural implications that might have led to varied translations. By closely scrutinizing linguistic adaptations and cultural nuances, the study aims to shed light on how these differences in translation significantly influence the perception of characters among their respective audiences globally. The research delves into the complex choices made by translators and their impact on character representation, addressing the discourse on the interplay between language and culture, and how these intersect with in-game narratives. In doing so, the article not only offers valuable insights into the intricacies of cross-cultural adaptation in regards to video game localization, but also contributes to a broad understanding of how linguistic choices actively shapes the audience's perception when navigating the immersive world of *Genshin Impact*.

Keywords: *Genshin Impact*, character voice-lines, video game localization, linguistic localization, product localization, transcreation, cross-cultural adaptation, audiovisual translation, translating multimedia interactive entertainment software

Introduction

Starting with the 1970's, the video game industry has been continuously flourishing and developing at a rather fast pace, becoming a world-wide phenomenon, with more and more people choosing to indulge in playing video games during their pastime as a leisure activity. Thus, one could say that video games have become one of the most popular forms of entertainment, even surpassing the revenue generated by the film industry in 2016, according to the Motion Picture Association of America, 2016 (qtd. in Dong and Mangiron 149). As a consequence, many producers have decided to translate their games into several languages, so as to appeal to a larger audience. This has, in turn, led to the emergence of a new field of specialisation in translation studies, known as “game localization.”

Game localization has been defined in various ways, as different scholars and experts share nuanced perspectives, with different degrees of specificity. For instance, Heather Maxwell-Chandler offers a rather short and broad definition for game localization, describing it as “the actual process of translating the language assets in a game into other languages” (qtd. in Bernal-Merino 128). Minako O'Hagan and Carmen Mangiron, on the other hand, provide a more detailed and precise definition, stating that “game localization involves language translation and cultural adaptation, addressing both linguistic and cultural differences to make the game acceptable and playable in a target locale” (45). The primary objective of game localization is to maintain the gameplay experience for the target audience while preserving the distinctive “look and feel” of the original game (Mangiron and O'Hagan 14). Keiran Dunne defines localization as the “process by which digital content and products developed in one locale are adapted for sale and use in another locale” (qtd. in Zhang 370). Miguel Ángel Bernal-Merino mentions that the primary focus of game localization is not strict adherence to linguistic fidelity to the original; instead, the central emphasis lies on enhancing entertainment (127). Therefore, any elements that could potentially

detract from the player's enjoyment of the product are likely to undergo significant changes or to be removed altogether.

These definitions highlight the complex nature of game localization, addressing linguistic, cultural, and technical aspects to ensure a seamless and culturally resonant gaming experience across global audiences. However, ongoing academic debates persist concerning the usage of different terminological options. For instance, Bernal-Merino distinguishes between "product localization" and "linguistic localization" (127). He suggests that the term "localization" is more fitting when employed to describe the broader industrial context. In the realm of translation studies, it should specifically pertain to the comprehensive industrial process of tailoring a software product to meet the demands and preferences of a different locale. Consequently, this term should not be used to denote the translation of textual content within computer applications.

Another academic debate revolves around the usage of the terms "game translation" and "game localization." While game translation primarily refers to linguistic adaptation, game localization is a more extensive process that not only considers linguistic aspects, but also cultural and technical aspects, such as gameplay adjustments, in order to tailor the gaming experience for global audiences. Xiaochun Zhang notes that, as opposed to "game translation," "game localization," refers to the "whole industrial process, which includes both linguistic and non-linguistic tasks" (370).

Similarly, the concept of "transcreation" has been gaining increasing momentum and attracting scholarly focus, primarily owing to its significant implications within the realm of game localization. Mangiron and O'Hagan employ the term "transcreation" to characterize the processes involved in game localization (qtd. in Bernal-Merino 130). They also assert that, in this context, localizers enjoy a degree of substantial autonomy, allowing them to modify, omit, or even introduce elements as they see fit. This freedom is granted to ensure the game resonates more closely with players and effectively conveys the "original feel of gameplay" (qtd. in Bernal-Merino 130).

As mentioned earlier, game localization encompasses the intricate process of tailoring a video game to align with the preferences and expectations of a specific target market. These adaptations involve natural modifications across various aspects of the game, effectively “domesticating” it for the intended audience. This process is essential, as addressing the varied needs of the target culture has become a decisive factor in capturing market share. Subsequently, I will provide an example to illustrate the significance of game localization. According to David McCarthy , Atari, a prominent game development company, claims to have boosted sales in Japan for one of its U.S. games by 20% through a strategic alteration (qtd. in Bernal-Merino 128). Specifically, the company changed the soundtrack from dance music in the U.S. to rock music in Japan. The preference for rock music over dance music in Japan suggests that the surge in sales can be attributed to an effective localization.

In what follows, I will delve into the specific voice-lines uttered by characters in *Genshin Impact*, by comparing the English and Chinese versions. The focal point of this article lies in unraveling the cultural implications that presumably influenced translators, determining them to make distinct choices when translating these voice-lines. This analysis aims to shed light on the intricate dynamics of language adaptation in the gaming industry, elucidating how these nuanced translations contribute to shaping the perception of characters within the gaming narrative.

Genshin Impact. A Case Study

Genshin Impact, developed by Mihoyo Technology, a Shanghai-based company, is an online open-world role-playing game. The narrative revolves around two twins, Lumine and Aether, collectively known as “The Traveler” throughout the game. Players are tasked with choosing one of the twins at the outset, determining control over that specific character for the remainder of the storyline. The plot unfolds as the chosen twin embarks on a quest across Teyvat and its Seven Kingdoms – Mondstadt, Liyue,

Inazuma, Sumeru, Fontaine, Natlan, and Snezhnaya. Each kingdom draws inspiration from various real-world countries; for example, Mondstadt is modeled after Germany, Liyue after China, Inazuma after Japan, Sumeru after the Middle East (primarily Egypt) and India, and Fontaine after France and England. While Natlan and Snezhnaya are yet to be released in following updates, official statements from *Genshin Impact* have provided insights into the countries influencing their design, with Natlan resembling Spain, Latin America and various African countries, and Snezhnaya resembling Eastern Europe.

Voiceover dialogues in *Genshin Impact* are available in four languages: Chinese, English, Korean, and Japanese. The user interface and dialogue subtitles have also been translated into numerous other languages, such as Chinese, English, French, German, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Thai, and Vietnamese (Rahardjo 42).

As previously stated, game localization is a complex process, in which the translator strives to preserve the main idea of the story and the concept of the game, while also adapting the game so that it aligns with diverse market preferences. Thus, as a consequence, subtle variations in terms of nuance and meaning may still emerge across languages. For example, the characters in the game, as far as their personality traits go, are more often than not portrayed differently from one language to another (Rahardjo 42). I will provide several examples by comparing the English and Chinese translations of various voice-lines.

The lines spoken by the game character Zhongli, namely “此乃天道” (This is the Way of Heaven), “天动万象” (Heaven moves all things), and “天理长驱” (Heavenly Principles march deep), were rendered in the English translation as “Order guide you/I will have order!/This is order,” thereby losing the mystical nature embedded in their Chinese counterparts. While a more literal translation might have retained the mystical essence, it could have been perceived as inappropriate by English players unfamiliar with Chinese cultural concepts such as Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. These phrases, rooted in the central concept of Zhu Xi ’ s

philosophy, particularly the Heavenly Principles, reflect a worldview where “天动万象” literally means “all things in the world move in accordance with the order established by Heaven,” with Heaven representing either the supreme deity governing the universe or the impersonal laws regulating nature. The choice to translate these lines into more familiar English terms is an attempt to bridge the cultural gap without overwhelming players with concepts deeply embedded in Chinese thought.

Moreover, the line “欲买桂花同载酒…只可惜故人，何日再见呢?” spoken by Zhongli carries even more cultural weight. This line, originating from a Tangduoling-style poem by the Chinese poet Liu Guo, reveals Zhongli’s poetic inclination in the original Chinese version. The English counterpart, “Osmanthus wine tastes the same as I remember . . . but where are those who share the memory?” while capturing the essence of the original poem and its poetic flow, fails to render the cultural nuances embedded in the poetic expression for those not versed in Chinese literary traditions.

In this process, Zhongli’s cultural identity may be subtly altered for an English-speaking audience. Some may perceive him merely as a melancholic character, unaware of the profound layers of philosophy and poetry that define his character in the original Chinese context. This example highlights the delicate balance required in translation to preserve cultural depth while ensuring accessibility and resonance with a diverse audience.

Another example of the intricate nuances of the translation of *Genshin Impact* lies in the following instances:

- (1) “壁立千仞”, meaning “solid as a cliff” (literal translation: “rockwall stands at 1,000 rěn tall”), translated into English as “Rise!”
- (2) “震天撼地,” meaning “world-quake” (literal translation: “shock the heaven and shake the earth loudly”), translated into English as “Quake!”

- (3) “靡坚不摧”， meaning “nothing's unbreakable” (literal translation: “Destroy the solid that is unbreakable”), translated into English as “Crumble”
- (4) 俱收并蓄， meaning “all-embracing” (literal translation: “Gather all and accumulate at once”), translated into English as “Gather!”
- (5) 安如磐石， meaning “rock-firm,” translated into English as “Stabilize!”
- (6) 固若金汤， meaning “impregnable” (literal translation: “well-fortified as a city made of metal and a moat of boiling water”), translated into English as “Solidify!”

In Chinese, these lines have an almost “spell-like allure” to them, as they resemble the classical Chinese phrasing and the mysticism often associated with Daoism. The linguistic choices in the original reflect not only the meaning of the words but also the poetic and evocative nature deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. The English translations capture the immediate action or effect of the combat skills, yet the mystical charm and cultural resonance conveyed in the original might not fully transfer to an audience unfamiliar with the rich heritage of the Chinese language and Daoist traditions. These examples illustrate, once more, the intricate challenge of preserving the essence of the source material while making it accessible to a global audience.

The line “如遇失道旷野之难，路遭贼人之难，水火刀兵之难，鬼神药毒之难，恶兽毒虫之难，冤家恶人之难，便呼我名。三眼五显仙人」——「魑」，听召前来守护” (lit. If you encounter the trouble of losing your direction in the wilderness, the trouble of meeting thieves, the trouble of swordsmen of water and fire, the trouble of spirits and poison, the trouble of evil beasts and poisonous insects, the trouble of malicious enemies, then call my name, “The Mighty and Illuminated Adepti” [lit. Three Eyes, Five Manifestations Illuminated Immortal] — “Xiao”, here by your command), spoken by the character Xiao, has been translated into English as: “If you awake to a knife at your throat, if monsters dig

their claws into you, if death comes knocking at your door, call out my name. Adeptus Xiao. I will be here when you call.”

In the Chinese version, Xiao refers to himself as “The Mighty and Illuminated Adepti,” whereas in the English version, he simply introduces himself by his name, and this makes him appear more approachable and less arrogant. Additionally, comparing the concluding parts of each translation – “I will be here when you call” in English versus “here by your command” in Chinese – Xiao comes across as friendlier and more relaxed in the English voice-line. In contrast, the Chinese version portrays him as more aloof and uncaring, as he dismisses any future commitment to respond to the main character’s call for help by using the simple present tense instead of the simple future tense in his line.

Xiao’s choice of self-description as “The Mighty and Illuminated Adepti” in the Chinese version also adds an element of ancient wisdom and transcendence, aligning with the profound traditions of Daoist philosophy. This linguistic choice not only reflects cultural nuances but also reinforces the character’s connection to a rich spiritual heritage. However, in the English version, Xiao opts for a more straightforward introduction, relying solely on his name. This linguistic shift not only accommodates linguistic differences but also results in a portrayal that is more relatable and less esoteric, making him seem more welcoming and less distant to an English-speaking audience.

Furthermore, examining the closing lines, the subtle differences in tense choices reveal distinct cultural attitudes. The English rendition, “I will be here when you call,” carries a sense of assurance and willingness to assist in the future. In contrast, the Chinese counterpart, “here by your command” expressed in the simple present tense, imparts a stoic determination, perhaps suggesting a sense of duty. This linguistic contrast contributes to shaping Xiao’s character in each cultural adaptation, highlighting the importance of considering cultural nuances in translation to convey the intended tone and depth of a character’s personality.

In what follows, I would like to delve into Hu Tao’s voice-lines. When in combat, Hu Tao utters the following words “再会

啦!” which translates to “See you!” or “Goodbye!” in English. The use of “再会” (Zàihui) reflects the idea of meeting again in the future. The addition of “啦” (la) adds a casual and friendly tone. It is a common and polite way to say goodbye in Chinese. Importantly, this expression does not inherently carry religious or spiritual connotations in the Chinese cultural context. The expression simply emphasizes the hope for future meetings and maintains a positive and welcoming tone. However, the English version of the line, “Cross over!” is not devoid of religious or spiritual undertones, as crossing over often refers to the transcendence of a boundary, especially in the context of spirits transitioning to the afterlife. This is a great example of an instance when translators have taken into account the cultural context of the target audience. The phrase “Cross over!” aligns with Western cultural associations related to the afterlife, specifically the notion of spirits crossing over to the other side. This choice allows the translation to resonate with English speakers who may be more familiar with this cultural take. Considering Hu Tao's position as the 77th Director of the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor, the English voice-line appears even more suitable for the character.

It is essential to note that translation decisions involve a balance between linguistic accuracy, cultural nuances, and the desired impact on the audience. While “Cross over!” may introduce spiritual connotations not present in the original Chinese voice-line, this adaptation could be a deliberate choice to convey a similar emotional tone and resonate with the cultural expectations of English-speaking players.

Moreover, I aim to analyze the words uttered by the character Ayaka “稻妻神里流太刀术皆传——神里绫华，参上！请多指教哦，” that has been translated into English as “Master of Inazuma Kamisato Art Tachi Jutsu – Kamisato Ayaka, present! Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“请多指教哦” directly translates to “Please take care of me/Please enlighten me/Please guide me” in English. In Chinese culture, where humility holds significant importance, especially

when meeting someone for the first time, this phrase serves as a customary expression to convey eagerness and readiness to learn from others. However, its cultural connotations might not seamlessly translate to English-speaking audiences, as humility does not carry the same weight in social etiquette across all Western countries.

The English translation, “Delighted to make your acquaintance” matches the formality of the original greeting without explicitly emphasizing humility. Unlike the Chinese context, where expressing a willingness to learn is ingrained in social norms, Western greetings often focus more on politeness and formality than on directly acknowledging one’s seniority or on being guided by others. Therefore, the English version maintains a rather refined and courteous tone, as it portrays a conventional and culturally appropriate way to express pleasure in meeting someone for the first time.

The Chinese voice-line evokes a sense of poetry and tradition, whereas the English version seeks to uphold a formal tone. The selection of words plays a crucial role in shaping the audience’s perception of Ayaka, influencing how they interpret her character in terms of elegance, formality, and tradition. The Chinese original of Ayaka’s voice-line portrays her as notably humble and shy, in stark contrast to the English version where she exudes a greater sense of self-assurance and confidence. This divergence is not merely a linguistic nuance but stems from cultural differences in communication styles. As previously stated, in Chinese culture, modesty is often emphasized, particularly in introductions and formal settings, influencing Ayaka’s demeanor. On the other hand, the English adaptation aligns with Western communication norms, where confidence and assertiveness are often valued.

Furthermore, I would like to discuss the differences between the English and Chinese versions of one of the voice-lines uttered by the character Kazuha Kaedehara. The Chinese version, “顺风顺水” literally translates to “smooth sailing with the wind” or “favorable wind and smooth water.” The line conveys a sense of

ease and favorable conditions, and it has a poetic flow to it, conveying not only favorable conditions but also a sense of being in sync with nature and with the environment. “顺风顺水” carries cultural nuances related to fluidity and adaptability, for in the Chinese cultural context, the line is associated with the wish for auspicious and fortunate outcomes. It reflects a positive and optimistic attitude one has when embarking on new journeys. Thus, the Chinese phrase maintains its lyrical and elegant quality, emphasizing not only smooth sailing but also the aspiration for good fortune.

On the other hand, the English version, “With the wind” remains concise and rather straightforward, focusing on the wind-related imagery without explicitly incorporating the same cultural undertones related to luck and auspiciousness found in the Chinese phrase. Consequently, while the English translation captures the basic meaning of “顺风顺水,” there are differences in cultural nuances, length and poetic expression. The Chinese version adds a layer of elegance, expressiveness and cultural depth that might not be fully replicated in the more straightforward English translation.

The Chinese version allows Kazuha to be perceived as someone who embraces language with a certain elegance. This could portray him as not just a skilled warrior but also a character with a refined and artistic side. However, the concise and up-front nature of the English translation may downplay the poetic aspects, potentially portraying Kazuha as more pragmatic, focusing on functional aspects rather than on artistic nuances.

Moreover, given that “顺风顺水~” is often associated with positive wishes and good luck, the Chinese version may evoke a sense of optimism and positive intentions in Kazuha's character. This could also contribute to portraying him as a confident and hopeful individual.

In what follows, I would like to address the differences in translation between one of the voice-lines belonging to the character Tartaglia, namely “嗯——附近就没有什么值得一战的强敌吗” (Literal translation: Hmm... Are there no powerful

enemies worth fighting nearby?), which has been translated into English as “This place is pretty dead... By which I mean, there’s nothing to kill.”

The Chinese version expresses Tartaglia’s contemplation of the absence of enemies nearby, as he is asking if there are any strong opponents worth battling. He seems to be assessing the strength of potential opponents and expressing a desire for a worthy adversary. The English version retains the essence of Tartaglia’s sentiment but adds a more direct and colloquial tone, focusing on the character’s eagerness for combat by stating that “there’s nothing to kill” in a franker manner.

The Chinese version’s emphasis on the worthiness of opponents in battle may reflect cultural values related to the pursuit of challenges and honor. Thus, the original may contribute to portraying Tartaglia as a character who values challenging battles and seeks commendable opponents, adding depth to his warrior persona in a praise-worthy manner.

In contrast, in the English translation of Tartaglia’s voice line, “This place is pretty dead . . . by which I mean, there’s nothing to kill,” the humor is evident in the use of a play on words. The phrase “This place is pretty dead” is often used colloquially to describe a dull or uninteresting environment, but in Tartaglia’s case, he takes it quite literally, suggesting that his lack of excitement is due to the absence of opponents with whom he could engage in combat. The humor lies in the dual meaning of “dead,” referring both to the absence of activity or excitement and the absence of living enemies. This humorous play on words in the English version adds a layer to Tartaglia’s character, portraying him as someone who finds amusement in the mundane and is quick to make light of a lackluster situation. The play on words aligns with Tartaglia’s personality, showcasing a witty and possibly sarcastic sense of humor.

The use of humor in translation often involves adapting cultural references and linguistic nuances to resonate with the target audience. In this case, the English translation employs a pun that

fits well within the language's humor conventions. It adds a touch of light-heartedness to Tartaglia's character and makes the dialogue more engaging for players who enjoy witty banter.

Furthermore, the Chinese voice-line uttered by the character Neuvillette in *Genshin Impact*, “凡高大者，我无不蔑视” (To the towering, I show nothing but disdain), is translated into English as “Let the mighty be humbled.” While both translations convey a sense of disapproval towards those perceived as powerful, there are subtle differences that can influence the audience's perception of the character.

The Chinese version, with the phrase “我无不蔑视” (I show nothing but disdain), emphasizes a strong and unambiguous expression of aversion towards the influential. The use of the word “蔑视” (disdain) conveys a sense of scorn and disregard, creating a more assertive tone, as Chinese is a tonal language, and it can convey subtleties in meaning through variations in tone.

On the other hand, English, a non-tonal language, relies on word choice and syntax to convey meaning. Thus, the English translation, “Let the mighty be humbled,” introduces a slightly different nuance. The phrase itself suggests a passive stance, where the character is not directly stating his disdain but rather expressing a wish or consent with regards to the mighty being humbled. This phrasing implies a certain detachment or indirectness.

In Chinese culture, expressions of disdain or direct confrontation may be perceived differently than in English-speaking cultures. The use of explicit language to show disdain might be more accepted or expected in certain cultural contexts. English, on the contrary, often utilizes indirect expressions to convey sentiments, and a more explicit statement might be perceived as confrontational, hostile or overly direct in certain cultural settings.

Therefore, the choice of words in translation can influence how the audience perceives the character. The Chinese version may convey a more direct and confrontational attitude, while the English version introduces a layer of indirectness. “我无不蔑视” (I show

nothing but disdain) conveys an unmistakable and forceful disdain, heightening the sharpness of Neuville's words. In contrast, the English translation "Let the mighty be humbled" adopts a more measured approach, using a passive construction that tempers the directness of the statement. This results in a somewhat softened impact compared to the Chinese original.

Depending on cultural nuances and linguistic preferences, these differences in translation may shape the audience's interpretation of Neuville's personality and attitude towards the powerful. As stated above, Chinese culture, at times, embraces directness and assertiveness in communication, particularly when expressing disdain or disapproval. Neuville's sharp-tongued demeanor in the Chinese version aligns with a cultural inclination toward explicit language. English, conversely, often employs indirect or tactful language in certain contexts, and a more direct expression of disdain might be interpreted as excessively harsh. Hence, the English translation opts for a somewhat milder tone.

Conclusion

As technology advances and gaming becomes a global phenomenon, the role of game localization in making digital entertainment accessible and enjoyable worldwide has gained significance. The end-goal is to offer players a fully immersive experience, as they navigate intricate game worlds. Hence game localization and translation are indispensable, as video games have become exceedingly complex, featuring numerous characters and rich storylines with various divergences in the plot, where the player can actively participate and shape his own experience. Game localization invariably leads to nuanced variations in terms of meaning across languages, as demonstrated in our analysis. Characters within the game are frequently depicted differently when transitioning from one language to another. This adaptation aims to align with the expectations, social norms, and conventions prevalent in the target audience's culture.

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