| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Narrative Innovation in Chinese Mythological Animation within the Context of Traditional Culture

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| **ABSTRACT**

The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the narrative expression of Chinese mythological themes in animated films from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, integrating insights from film narrative studies and traditional Chinese philosophical texts. The past decade has been a booming period for mythological-themed animation films in China, during which a multitude of outstanding works emerged. Creators have drawn inspiration from traditional Chinese culture, creating uniquely Eastern mythologies. Innovation can be felt in the portrayal of narrative characters, the configuration of temporal and spatial structures, or the use of traditional thinking to tell stories. This has revitalized Chinese animation, instilling it with cultural confidence, and has also poured new energy into traditional Chinese culture.

1. Introduction

In Marinovsky's view, mythology is considered the most stable and constant part of the national spirit emboding a nation's cultural essence (Min, 2018). Chinese mythology, as a significant part of traditional Chinese culture, has always been an important carrier of cultural inheritance. However, as time goes by, it is evident that traditional mythological stories need to be expressed and disseminated in modern society. In this content, animation, as a modern art form, has innovatively transformed mythological culture, allowing traditional culture to be inherited and developed in new media. By using animation to modernize mythological stories, Chinese animated films have employed multiple narrative lines, shaped new mythological time and space, and reshaped new images of the new era, thus reshaping people's cultural memory of mythology.

In the past decade, animated films based on mythology have continued to expand their audience age range, shifting from targeting young children to encompassing all age groups. The plots have evolved from being singular to innovative and substantial, while the style has maintained tradition while also introducing innovation. For example, the animated film *Monkey King: Hero Is Back (2015)*, adapted from one of the four classic novels of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West,* reignited the passion for Chinese animated films, providing audiences with a fresh audio-visual experience. The film subverted the original work while remaining true to it, daringly creating a close-to-life narrative, which amazed audiences both domestically and internationally, leaving a profound impact on the market. Its success marked a new direction for Chinese mythological animated films. As director Tian Xiaopeng stated, "To regain confidence in Chinese animation, we must first establish our cultural identity and have the confidence of self-cultural recognition" (Xinhua,2015). The success of Chinese mythological animation is inseparable from the deep nourishment of traditional Chinese culture. These films preserve the core cultural genes of mythology and use audio-visual language to give three-dimensional and visual representation to textual stories, particularly in constructing the cultural essence of mythological animation in various aspects such as character prototypes, views of time and space, and storylines. At the same time,

the logical settings of mythological animation contain Chinese wisdom, aligning with the thoughts of the I Ching and deeply embedding cultural genes within them. Accordingly, this article aims to explore how mythological animation inherits and develops outstanding traditional Chinese culture in terms of character images, narrative time and space, and narrative structure, thereby presenting new narrative expression characteristics.

2. Method
Film Selection: Selecting a range of Chinese animated films based on mythological themes for analysis. The selection process will involve identifying films that prominently feature Chinese mythological narratives and characters. Consideration will also be given to the historical and cultural contexts in the films.

Narrative Analysis: Applying principles of film narrative analysis to the selected animated films. This will involve examining the narrative structure, character development, visual storytelling techniques, and the integration of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the films. Analyze how the films utilize narrative strategies to convey mythological themes and cultural values.

Traditional Chinese Philosophy and Mythology: Integrating insights from traditional Chinese philosophical texts, such as the *Book of Changes* (Zhou yi) and other pre-Qin literature, to interpret the mythological elements within the animated films. The methodology will involve exploring the philosophical underpinnings of Chinese mythology and its influence on narrative construction and thematic expression in the selected films.

Interpretation and Synthesis: Interpreting the findings from the narrative analysis and comparative study to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of how Chinese mythological themes are narratively expressed in animated films within the context of traditional Chinese culture. This will involve drawing connections between the narrative strategies, cultural elements, and philosophical concepts and interpreting their significance in the context of contemporary Chinese animated film making.

By employing these methodologies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the narrative expression of Chinese mythological themes in animated films from the perspective of traditional Chinese culture, integrating insights from film narrative studies and traditional Chinese philosophical texts.

3. Result Analysis
3.1 Drawing on traditional mythological characters to create new mythological animated figures.
Many of our country's mythological animated films draw inspiration from ancient tales of gods and monsters, such as *the Journey to the West, Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*，and *Liaozhai Zhiyi*. The classic characters and typical environments portrayed in these tales continue to serve as an endless source of inspiration for modern creations. These classic stories, based on real-life situations, have sculpted typical characters, and animated films draw from this to construct mythological animated figures. For example, in mythological animated films, enchanting women with magical abilities are often depicted, such as *the White Snak.*" Xiaoqing and the Fox Demon in *White Snake 2,* and Wanluo in the film *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*. These characters can all be traced back to ancient mythological figures such as Nuwa, the daughter of Fuxi, the goddess Luo Shen Mifei, the daughter of Yan Emperor Yao Ji, and Jingwei. These are all mythical figures with extraordinary powers, embodying early human understanding and aspirations for all things. In the primitive matriarchal society, women held a high status, and their reproductive abilities were greatly revered, leading to the natural association of women with divine powers. Whether as goddesses, ghosts, or demons, their boundless and ever-changing powers provide primitive models for various extraordinary female characters in later generations and continue to be brought to the screen.

Canadian scholar Frazer summarized the archetype as "a typical or recurrent image" (Fray, N. R. 2006). Mr. Ye Shuxian further summarized that the archetype can be a character, plot, structure, image, symbol, theme, and so on. Jung believed that the archetype "is not only transmitted by tradition, language, and immigration but reappears spontaneously, regardless of when or what, without any external influence" (Hu Suxiao,1989). He roughly divided the regular manifestation of the archetype into two types: situation and image, including "shadow, persona, wise old man, mother, anima, animus, etc." (Hu Suxiao,1989). This is consistent with the analysis of character images in Chinese mythology. Interestingly, Jung's concept of the "transformational archetype" is similar to the experience of "inner and outer images" in the Book of Changes (Yi Jing). Jung believed that the direct experience of character images contains a "transformational archetype" in a certain psychological process, where the reader's interpretation of the archetype takes place within a certain psychological process. It is polysemous, mixed with the reader's emotional imagination, sometimes in binary opposition, sometimes identical, and sometimes even dramatic. Classic characters in Chinese mythology have different meanings and interpretations in different eras, possessing symbolism and polysemy. In the animated film *Havoc in Heaven*, Nezha symbolizes the overwhelming "three mountains"(means Imperialism, feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism) of the people, while Sun Wukong symbolizes the people and their spirit of resistance. In the animated film *The New Gods: Nezha Reborn,* Nezha symbolizes freedom, awakening, and other spirits, while Sun Wukong is more like a

guide. In different contexts, with reference to real life, the archetypal characters can evoke different thoughts and emotions among people.

In Chinese mythology, in addition to finding specific character archetypes conceived by predecessors, the description of typical characters in the mythological stories emphasizes the virtue of "benevolence." The Confucian cultural has a far-reaching influence on Chinese animation, forming special Chinese thoughts about heroes. The Western countries emphasize individual heroism, while China, for the reason of the reappearance of Chinese ancestors and imagination of heroes, emphasizes the expression of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom," encompassing the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty, perfect, harmony, bravery, and strength, which embodies the spiritual pursuit of Confucian culture such as Ma Liang in *The Magic Brush* and Mulan in *The Ballad of Mulan*. Some thoughts, including the benevolence, propriety, righteousness, integrity, filial piety, loyalty, and trustworthiness of Confucianism; the natural view and the concept of governing by the inaction of Taoism; the compassion and transcendence of the secular realm of Buddhism, as well as the spiritual characteristics of other traditional cultures, are reflected through behavior, speeches, attitudes, and other aspects, such as clothing, styling, music, and scenes with the Chinese unique cultural traditions and ethnic characteristics.

3.2 Continuing the traditional concept of time and space, expanding the dimensional space of mythological animation.

In Chinese mythology, there is a well-established and conventional concept of time and space. The cosmic spatial view of mythological animation is influenced by ancient mythology. According to ancient Chinese legend----the Pangu epoch-making myth, the world was horizontally divided into the three realms of the West, Middle, and East, and vertically divided into the heavenly realm, the human realm on the earth, and the ghost realm underground. Subsequently, familiar stories such as the War of the Yellow Emperor, the competition between the Shun Emperor and Yu Emperor, the stories of Hou Yi and Chang'e, and the Dayv flood control took place along the timeline. In Taoist mythological stories, the universe is set as the heaven realm with thirty-six layers where Immorals reside, the human realm with yin and yang, joy and sorrow, and land where people live with yin and yang, joy and sorrow and the underworld where ghosts reside. By the end of the Western Han Dynasty, Buddhism was spread into China, and its mythology built the cosmic space as the three realms and twenty-eight heavens. Despite different mythologies having different conceptualizations of cosmic space, they all have the concept of the three realms, which has been preserved in Chinese mythology and its animation. With the rise of "guoman" (Chinese cartoon), even in more complex spatial storytelling, audiences understand and compare the time and space settings based on the concept of the three realms.

In fact, the basic time view of yin and yang and the five elements have planned the time setting of mythological animation. "Spring, autumn, winter, and summer are the transitions of yin and yang, the length of agricultural time is the function of yin and yang, and the alternation of day and night is the change of yin and yang. The movement of yin and yang is normal. Even if there are occasional abnormalities, the more cannot be reduced, and the less cannot be increased". (Guanzi, Chariot Horses) The law of yin and yang changes control the rhythm of time, the alternation of day and night, and the cycle of the four seasons, which is the embodiment of the waxing and waning of yin and yang. The concept of the five elements, which appeared later than the concept of yin and yang, also influenced the form of time. It is presented in the ancient book "The Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu" as "the combination of the five elements, the five directions, the five gods, the five stars, and the five beasts" (Zeng Jianping,2000).constructing a complete worldview that integrates the basic time view of yin and yang, the five elements, and the unity of heaven and humanity. In this world, spatial orientation and the changing of the seasons are set. The flow of time is controlled by the gods, and the infinity of divine time endows it with sacredness. For immortals, the past, present, and future are the same, while for humans, their past, present, and future follow a straight line, unpredictable and unrepeatable. They exist in parallel, and time has dimensions and directions. For example, the phrase "a day in heaven, a year on earth" was originally an ancient Chinese astronomical term, which was widely spread by *the Journey to the West*. The time difference in different spaces formed the subconscious mythological time-space cognition of the Chinese people. For example, "twenty years inside the cave, only one day outside in a Chinese cartoon *White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake.*

At the same time, the time and space design of Chinese mythological animation is also influenced by the idea of "unity of heaven and humanity." Xunzi said, "ALet farmers do their best in simple farming and not be too exhausted so as not to miss the farming season and not lose the fertile soil. If everyone is so focused and responsible, then everything will not be neglected.

There is no loss of natural temporal changes above, no loss of favorable terrain below, and the support of people in the middle, so nothing will decline." (Xunzi, The Five Hegemons) In mythological animations, timing is reflected in events that occur at specific times, such as the day of the full moon, the first day of the lunar new year, and the fifteenth day. For example, in *White Snake 2*, iconic events such as "Today is the time of awakening, snakes and insects are rampant" and "That day is the time of awakening, with petals scattered all over the sky" are set at specific times. In addition, the regulations for escaping from Shura City state stipulate that "the moment of the Robbery is initiated, the moment of immersion."

Ernst Cassirer believed that space, time, and number are the three essential elements of mythological structure. In traditional Chinese concepts, time and space are influenced by traditional Chinese ideas such as yin and yang, the five elements, and the unity of heaven and humanity. This understanding of space and time inevitably affects the construction of "numbers." The animation *White Snake* " sets up a "different world" that contains characters from the three realms, with four trials of wind, fire, water, and air. In the film, the characters of the Shura City must be redeemed after undergoing a certain "numerical" experience which essentially is concretizing and dimensionalizing of "number" in Shura City. Similarly, the interpretation using Chinese thinking is also the same. In the Book of Changes, the 64 hexagrams are composed of simple yin and yang lines, with a certain number of intricate relationships between yin and yang lines, representing different hexagrams and symbols of different things. The different relationships and structures of the "number" of the people in Shura City constitute the growth history of different characters in the animation.

3.3 Reconstructing the narrative of Eastern mythology using traditional Chinese conceptual thinking.
The classification of the Five Elements and the Eight Trigrams in China is a holistic categorization of the phenomena in the world. This Eastern horizontal classification method is based on the external manifestations of things, mainly the dynamic aspects such as functional properties and the dynamic relationships between things. In mythological-themed animation, the classification often revolves around the conflict between good and evil, heavenly gods and demons, with the ultimate goal of achieving unity through the conflict of these two opposing perspectives and values. Pairing settings for character personalities, living environments, and interpersonal relationships, such as: human—sensibility—red color scheme—mortal realm, god—magic—rationality—white color scheme—heavenly realm, are used. This "classification" thinking permeates the narrative logic of mythological-themed animation. Concepts such as "like attracts like" and "Birds of a feather flock together" can be seen as interpretations of the concept of "classification." Things with an aggregative tendency are considered to be of the same category, those with similar functions and behaviors are grouped together, and things with similar inner qualities, external forms, or external connections also follow the categorization of phenomena in the animation.

In addition, there is a wonderful aesthetic of symmetry that runs deep in the Chinese psyche. The Confucian and Daoist worldviews share the same starting point and ultimate destination, with their emphasis being different. Through a certain transformation, they are mutually equivalent and complementary, displaying harmony and unity within their contradictions, forming a kind of symmetrical beauty. There are examples of this in traditional literature, such as the "Battle of the Red and White Clans," and this is also evident in mythological-themed films. The characters' personalities and relationships in a story are important plot clues, as seen in the animated film *The New Gods: Nezha Reborn,* where the depiction of Ne Zha and the Third Prince of the Dragon King embodies this wonderful symmetry of the Confucian and Daoist worldviews and outlook on life. Initially, they are in binary opposition, but after experiencing certain twists and turns, they transform and become equivalent to each other. The red and blue colors complement each other in opposing forms, demonstrating harmony and unity amid their differences and contradictions.

Chinese people have always had a concept of holistic thinking. In the Book of *Changes* (Yi Jing in Chinese), the idea of observing the world as a whole is already very mature. *The Bagua and the Sixty-Four Hexagrams* represent all the dynamic phenomena and the complex and ever-changing universe, forming an interesting holographic system. The concept of circularity emphasizes the importance of the whole from the perspective of the cycling movement. Analyzing and sharing each part within the cycle cannot fully reveal the overall appearance and deep understanding of things. Only by integrating the various parts to form a circular whole can we explain the essence of things and their underlying meanings. Audiences can truly understand and contemplate the meaning that the animation seeks to convey only after watching the complete film. This holographic viewpoint has a profound impact on artistic creation. In China, there is an emphasis on "growing the idea of the world and all the living things in mind and writing them down" (Lu Ji, "On Literature"), and mythological animation often carries real significance, serving as a microcosm of modern society and individuals. For example, in *The New Gods: Nezha Reborn,* the confrontation between Nezha and the Dragon Clan is not just a struggle between traditional good and evil but also shows themes of social class conflict, justice, and equality.

4. Conclusion
In summary, over the past decade, mythological animations have continued to innovate and develop while maintaining traditional mythological themes. The most significant change lies in the presentation of characters, shifting from a single protagonist to multiple protagonists. This is mainly reflected in the increased involvement of supporting characters or narrative reversals that draw the audience's attention to a particular character. This reflects the audience's demand for diverse story characters. Additionally, the multi-perspective narrative approach makes the story more dimensional and richer. Previously, stories were often told from a single character's perspective, but now, the use of multiple perspectives has emerged as a new narrative methods in animated films. The multi-dimensional expansion of time and space, as well as non-linear presentation, has also enhanced the aesthetic modernity of the films. In the past, the focus was mainly on a linear presentation of time, space, or a particular time and space. Now, there is a multi-dimensional expansion and non-linear presentation of time and space. Furthermore, the presentation

of themes has shifted from a relatively simple view of good and evil to multiple interpretations, and the plot settings have transitioned from single to multiple threads, from linear to non-linear, and so on.

Through these new narrative expressions, mythological animation will continue to bring new vitality to the traditional cultural landscape, providing audiences with richer and more profound viewing experiences.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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