

The Portrayal and Representation of Mythological Stories in Chinese Cinema in the Digital Age

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Abstract. This scholarly article delves into the dynamic interplay between mythological narratives and digital innovation in Chinese cinema. By scrutinizing the amalgamation of traditional story arcs with modern cinematic techniques, it casts light on how digital advancements enrich narrative complexity and enhance visual allure. The methodology merges traditional film critique with digital analytic tools, underscoring the profound influence of digital technology on storytelling. Central to this discourse are case studies like "Ne Zha," which exemplify the modern reinterpretation of mythological themes. The paper contrasts how mythology is depicted in mainstream versus independent films, shedding light on their distinct narrative approaches. Additionally, the analysis extends to understanding the diverse reception of these mythological stories among domestic and international audiences, with particular attention to motifs of nostalgia and youth. In its concluding section, the article contemplates the wider ramifications for the film industry, explores challenges in audience engagement, and discusses the intricacies of copyright in the digital era.

Keywords: Chinese Cinema, Mythological Narratives, Digital Innovation, Cultural Adaptation, Visual Narratives, Film Analysis, Contemporary Mythology, Audience Perception, Copyright in Digital Era.

1. Introduction

This article critically examines the metamorphosis of mythological storytelling in Chinese cinema, particularly in the context of the digital era. It underscores a significant shift in the representation and portrayal of these time-honored narratives, adapting them to align with contemporary sensibilities while maintaining their intrinsic cultural value. The primary aim of this study is to scrutinize the adaptation of these mythological narratives within the digital age, emphasizing how technological advancements have reshaped cinematic storytelling in the Chinese film industry.

Historically, Chinese cinema has served as a conduit for cultural and mythological tales, deeply ingrained in the nation's rich heritage. McGrath's (2023) treatise, "Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age," offers an exhaustive examination of this evolution, tracing the journey from conventional methodologies to cutting-edge digital formats. This historical exploration is vital to comprehend the current state of mythological storytelling in Chinese cinema [1].

The onset of the digital epoch heralds a transformative shift in cinematic techniques, narrative frameworks, and audience engagement strategies. McCleary's seminal work, "Never Seen Before--Again: Aesthetic Adaptation and Transmedia Storytelling Networks in the Age of Digital Cinema," investigates this revolution, analyzing the profound impact of digital technology on storytelling modalities and audience experiences in the cinematic realm. This transformation holds particular significance in the realm of mythological narratives, where the amalgamation of age-old tales with contemporary digital innovation results in a distinctive narrative dynamic.

Additionally, the influence of cultural globalization on Chinese cinema is explored through Soh and Yecies' (2017) research on Korean-Chinese film remakes. Their examination of movies like "Miss Granny" and its Chinese counterpart "20 Once Again" illuminates the evolving narrative styles in Chinese cinema, shaped by both domestic and global influences [3].

Moreover, Brooks' exploration in "Storytelling and Computational Narratives – Reaching for the High Bar" provides insight into emerging storytelling forms in the digital age[4]. This research is instrumental in understanding how computational and digital narratives are influencing new methods of mythological storytelling in Chinese cinema.

In essence, this paper dissects the complex interplay between mythological narratives and digital technology in Chinese cinema, exploring how this confluence has revolutionized the landscape of storytelling. The ensuing sections will delve deeper into historical context, contemporary themes, the impact of digital technology, and offer comparative and critical analyses, thereby presenting a thorough examination of this captivating subject.

2. Digital Alchemy: Revitalizing Mythological Narratives in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

The evolution of mythological storytelling in Chinese cinema, especially during the digital age, offers an intriguing examination of cultural adaptation and technological influence. This literature review delves into multiple aspects of this evolution by referencing scholarly works that explore historical viewpoints, current themes, and the influence of digital technology.

2.1 Historical Overview

The evolution of Chinese cinema from its inception in the silent era to the contemporary digital age is characterized by a persistent duality of realism and traditional conventions. The pivotal text by McGrath (2023), "Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age," offers an exhaustive historical analysis to comprehend this cinematic journey. McGrath's exploration into the initial depictions of myths within Chinese cinema tracks the progression from conventional narrative forms to the integration of modern digital technologies [1].

Employing a vast repository of studies from scholars of Chinese film, McGrath meticulously traces the foundation and evolution of the fantasy genre in Chinese cinema. The research by Zhang Xiaolin on Chinese mythological cinema underscores critical junctures in the development of this genre, highlighting the transformation in storytelling techniques and thematic focus across different eras [23]. The discussion also places the advancement of mythological narratives in a wider historical and cultural framework, underscoring the genre's evolving nature.

The influence of digital technology on the fantasy genre, particularly Chinese mythological cinema, is also a significant focus of the study. Chang investigates how digital innovation has transformed visual storytelling, from the enhancement of special effects to the enrichment of narrative depth. The analysis further discloses how these technological strides have empowered directors to depict mythological subjects with increased artistic freedom and visual sophistication.

2.2 Contemporary Themes and Character Representation

The representation of Chinese myths and beliefs through festivals, as explored by Siew Poh Phung, offers a unique lens to understand contemporary themes in Chinese cinema[5]. This research highlights the significance of mythological narratives in Chinese culture and their adaptation in modern digital media. It underscores the evolving nature of mythological storytelling, reflecting both traditional values and contemporary societal shifts.

Using Zhang Xiaojie's critical analysis of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, a case study can be presented to exemplify current trends in mythic representation. The film's innovative approach to narrative, character development and visual design exemplifies how contemporary Chinese cinema harnesses and reinvents traditional myths [20].

2.3 Digital Technology's Impact

Xiao Liu's analysis in "Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China" (reviewed by Liang Yao, 2021) provides critical insights into the impact of digital technology on

Chinese media and cinema. Liu's work emphasizes the distinct response of Chinese cinema to new media technologies compared to the West, highlighting the unique ways in which digital advancements have influenced the narrative and visual storytelling of mythological tales [24]

2.4 Comparative and Critical Perspectives

The psychological mechanisms of audiences in response to domestic animated films, as discussed by Bian Yinan and Ji Tianxing, offer a critical perspective on the reception of mythological stories in modern Chinese cinema[7]. This research sheds light on how contemporary animated films, often depicting mythological narratives, are designed to resonate with audiences, reflecting the intricate balance between traditional storytelling and modern cinematic techniques.

At the same time this study draws on Zhang Xiaojie's exploration of the intersection of traditional mythological themes and contemporary film techniques. It discusses how modern filmmakers can balance respect for cultural heritage with the needs of a globalised, digitally savvy audience. This equilibrium between traditional storytelling and modern innovation is essential for comprehending the present dynamics of Chinese mythological cinema in the digital era [20].

In summation, the body of literature examined offers a layered perspective on the depiction and manifestation of mythological narratives in Chinese cinema. This encompasses a spectrum from their historical progression to present-day reinterpretations, the influence of digital advancements, and the varied responses of audiences. Together, these scholarly contributions provide an all-encompassing snapshot of the evolving tableau of mythological storytelling within the digital epoch of Chinese filmmaking. The amalgamation of these diverse insights underscores the genre's persistent evolution and ingenuity, especially in relation to the advent of new technologies.

3. Methodology

The methodological framework of this investigation is shaped by the latest progressions in cinematic scholarship, with a keen focus on the developments within Chinese film studies amid the digital era. This segment will delineate the research design and methodology, while also defining the study's extent and acknowledging its constraints.

3.1 Research Design and Approach

Incorporating G. Marchetti's (2021) insights on the impact of technological innovations in the pedagogy and research of Chinese-language cinema, this study adopts a composite methodology that merges conventional film critique with contemporary digital methodologies. Marchetti emphasizes the growing importance of online platforms and digital repositories for film studies, an aspect that is exceedingly pertinent for the analysis of modern Chinese cinema [8].

Additionally, the research methodology integrates the framework put forth by Haizhou Wang and Yifeng Lin (2023) in "A Reconstruction of 'Cinema as the Vehicle of Dao'." This particular approach melds classical Chinese cultural doctrines with current cinematic theory, providing a distinct perspective for scrutinizing mythological narratives within Chinese cinema [9].

3.2 Scope and Limitations

This inquiry is specifically focused on dissecting a curated collection of digital-era Chinese films that foreground mythological narratives. The analytical framework is enriched by Jia Tan's (2022) notion of the "cinema–ecology complex," which examines the tangibility of digital environments in these films. This approach affords a layered interpretation of the manner in which digital technologies mold the representation of mythological components [10].

The study is mindful of its constraints, recognizing potential biases inherent in the selection of films and the personal interpretation of their narrative elements. Ying-ying Xiao's (2021) discourse on the emergent youth-centric narratives in Chinese cinema's digital epoch is a testament to the

heterogeneous and transient nature of cinematic storytelling, nuances that this study may not encapsulate in entirety [11].

To summarize, the methodology underpinning this study is crafted to provide an in-depth and sophisticated examination of mythological storytelling within Chinese cinema, harmonizing both established and digital methodologies in film study. The objective is to contribute a nuanced discourse to the existing corpus of knowledge regarding the impact of digital progression on the articulation of mythological tales in current Chinese cinematic culture.

4. Analysis of Mythological Representation in the Digital Age

4.1 Integration of Digital Technology in Storytelling

This segment examines the intricate interplay of mythical tales within the sphere of current Chinese cinema, underscored by the profound influence of digital innovation. The mythic storytelling in Chinese film, traditionally anchored in classical motifs and structures, has experienced a marked evolution with the advent of the digital era. This shift is evident not merely in the stylistic and technical fabrication of the films but also in the reimagining and recontextualization of mythic components to align with contemporary perceptions.

The advent of digital technology has significantly transformed the landscape of Chinese cinema, particularly in the portrayal of mythological narratives. Xiao's study, "Yesterday once more: IP film, phantom/fandom of music, and the youthful (re)turn of Chinese cinema in the age of new digital media," provides an insightful perspective on this transformation. Xiao (2021) emphasizes the intersectionality and intermediality that characterize the new era of IP film, highlighting how digital media has reshaped the representation of youthfulness and authenticity in Chinese cinema. This shift is particularly evident in the adaptation of mythological stories, where digital technology has enabled a more vivid and immersive storytelling experience, thus redefining audience engagement with these narratives [11].

A central aspect of Yang Fan's analysis is the enhancement of visual narratives through digital technologies. How advanced CGI, animation techniques and digital cinematography have enabled filmmakers to bring mythological worlds to life with unprecedented detail and creativity [17]. In addition to visual enhancement, Yang Fan also discusses how digital technologies enable more complex narrative structures. This section will delve into how non-linear narratives, interactive narratives, and multi-threaded plots have become viable in mythological films, providing audiences with richer and more engaging experiences. The researchers also highlight the increasing role of digital platforms in shaping audience reception and interaction with mythological films.

4.2 Case Studies

In examining specific case studies, McGrath's "Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age" offers a comprehensive historical context. McGrath (2022) traces the evolution of Chinese film from its silent era origins to the contemporary digital age, providing a backdrop against which the current portrayal of mythological stories can be understood. This historical perspective is crucial in analyzing how mythological representation has evolved in response to technological advancements and changing audience expectations. McGrath's work underscores the transition from traditional storytelling methods to more sophisticated digital techniques, illustrating how these changes have influenced the depiction of mythological themes in Chinese cinema [1].

Zhang Shu Shu and Wang Li's (2021) study uses the DIMIT (Decoding, Interpretation, Meaning and Transformation) model to analyse the film *Ne Zha*. *Ne Zha* is firstly considered as a film production and as a cultural phenomenon, linking traditional mythological narratives with contemporary digital narratives. The DIMIT model is outlined, explaining how it provides a framework for dissecting and understanding layered symbolism in mythological films.

A major focus of Zhang Shu Shu and Wang Li's research is the process of decoding the mythological symbols in *Ne Zha*. This section delves into specific symbols used in the film, such as characters, motifs and thematic elements, and interprets their meanings within the context of traditional Chinese mythology. Emphasis is placed on the re-conceptualisation and re-purposing of these symbols through the construction of runes to resonate with modern audiences [16].

For the analyses show that *Ne Zha* goes beyond mere retelling to creative reinterpretation, injecting new meanings into old symbols. Changing the mythology to conform to current social values and technological capabilities. This shift is reflected not only in the portrayal of the myth, but also in its reception and interpretation for a global audience, signalling a significant shift in the way Chinese mythological stories are perceived and evaluated in the digital age.

4.3 Comparative and Critical Perspectives

Edwards' thesis, "Alternative visions, alternative publics: contemporary independent Chinese documentary as a public sphere," delves into the realm of independent documentaries in China. Edwards highlights how digital technologies have facilitated the rise of an unofficial screening culture, offering new ways to represent and interpret mythological stories. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding the diverse and often unconventional ways in which mythological narratives are presented in the digital age, challenging traditional norms and offering alternative viewpoints [12].

In "Contemporary Chinese independent cinema: urban spaces, mobility, memory," Courage explores the cultural politics of China's subaltern voices in independent cinema. Courage's research is instrumental in understanding how contemporary Chinese independent cinema, through various modes of intervention, represents and reimagines mythological stories. This analysis is crucial for comprehending the multifaceted ways in which mythological narratives are woven into the fabric of contemporary Chinese society, reflecting its complexities and nuances [13].

Wang discusses how contemporary Chinese filmmakers are reviving ancient myths to make them appealing to modern audiences. By analysing the strategies used by filmmakers to keep the essence of these myths intact while adapting them to contemporary contexts and emotions. Emphasis will be placed on the creative fusion of traditional elements with modern film techniques to create a new narrative experience [25].

A central focus of Miao Wang's analysis is the balance that filmmakers must strike between adhering to traditional mythological themes and appealing to contemporary, geographically diverse audiences. Successful examples of achieving a harmonious balance are highlighted through an in-depth discussion of the specific ways in which filmmakers have responded to this challenge [21]. The research focuses on the creative and narrative techniques used to make traditional myths resonate with modern audiences, while maintaining the authenticity of the mythological culture.

The integration of digital technology in Chinese cinema has not only revolutionized the technical aspects of filmmaking but also profoundly influenced the portrayal of mythological stories. Through a blend of historical context, contemporary analysis, and critical perspectives, this section has explored how digital advancements have reshaped mythological narratives in Chinese cinema, offering new insights and interpretations that resonate with modern audiences.

5. Comparative and Critical Discussion

5.1 Domestic vs. International Reception

The varied audience reception of mythological narratives in Chinese cinema is striking, particularly when comparing the domestic viewership to that of international audiences. Xiao's (2021) work in "Yesterday once more: IP film, phantom/fandom of music, and the youthful (re)turn of Chinese cinema in the age of new digital media" sheds light on this divergence. Xiao examines the interplay of various media forms and intellectual property (IP) films in the new millennium,

underscoring the thematic and structural nuances of the coming-of-age genre within contemporary Chinese cinema [11]. This investigation is pivotal for grasping the domestic audience's connection, especially among the youth, with the current depictions of mythological narratives that often blend with youthful themes and a sense of longing for the past.

Conversely, McGrath's "Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age" (2023) provides a comprehensive historical panorama vital for appreciating the global reception of these narratives. McGrath maps the trajectory of Chinese cinema, setting the stage to comprehend the contemporary interpretations of mythological stories. This historical lens is instrumental in discerning how the portrayal of myths has been shaped by the progression of technology and the evolving expectations of audiences around the world [1].

Post the release of "Monkey King: Hero Is Back" in 2014, the film has become a touchstone for analyzing the rejuvenation of mythological tales in Chinese animated films. The discourse here pivots on the resurgence of mythical themes in animation, emphasizing the potential of contemporary technology and narrative strategies to reinvigorate age-old legends, thereby cementing their appeal for Chinese viewers [22].

5.2 Industry and Audience Perspectives

Braester's seminal text "Painting the City Red: Chinese Cinema and the Urban Contract" (2011) re-examines the very notion of "Chinese cinema" and embarks on a journey through the domain's fruitful methodologies. Braester provides a lens for the comparative and critical study of Chinese cinema, which encompasses the depiction of mythological stories. His critique serves as a key to unlocking an understanding of the cinematic industry's treatment of mythological narratives and the perceptions of such narratives by diverse audiences, both within China and internationally [15].

Yu Hui's scholarly work, encapsulated in the thesis "Protecting Copyright in the Digital Era in China: A Critical Analysis of the Relevant Law and Practice from a Comparative Perspective," scrutinizes the legal and cultural frameworks that underpin the operations of the Chinese cinematic industry in the digital age. This assessment is particularly pertinent when considering the obstacles and intricacies the industry faces, especially regarding the depiction of mythological tales. These narratives necessitate a fine equilibrium between artistic freedom and copyright concerns, a balance that is growing ever more complex in the digital landscape [14].

Xiao Chengxiao focuses on the "reinvention" of myth in contemporary Chinese fantasy cinema [18]. We can see that filmmakers are deeply exploring how modern Chinese cinema adapts classical myths and folklore and uses them as creative material for modern narratives. In the process of Chinese film-making, it is important to explore how these adaptations reflect contemporary cultural discourses and narrative innovations.

Liu Xiaoxi's study applies archetypal criticism to Chinese mythological films, providing a framework for understanding the narrative and cyclical patterns of these films. The author analyses how Chinese mythological films have evolved to combine both aesthetic value and trans-regional elements, reflecting on how these films combine ancient mythological archetypes with modern film narratives [19].

In summary, a comparative and critical discussion of mythology in Chinese cinema reveals the complex interplay between historical evolution, audience reception and industry dynamics. It reflects shifts in the representation of myth in Chinese cinema, highlighting the genre's adaptation to modern sensibilities and technologies. The different perceptions and acceptance of these narratives at home and abroad highlight the multifaceted nature of Chinese cinema in the digital age.

6. Comparative and Critical Discussion

This thesis has critically examined the transformation of mythological storytelling in Chinese cinema during the digital era, focusing on the integration of traditional narratives with modern

cinematic techniques. The conclusions of this study underscore major advancements in both narrative and visual storytelling, propelled by digital innovations, which have greatly enhanced the representation of mythological narratives. These developments have rendered these tales more captivating and visually impressive, thus significantly heightening their appeal to modern audiences.

6.1 Key Findings:

Narrative and Visual Evolution: It emphasizes the profound influence of digital technology on the narrative frameworks and visual artistry in Chinese cinema. This technological progression has augmented the depth and intricacy of storytelling in mythological tales.

Modern Reinterpretation of Mythology: The research employs case studies such as "Ne Zha" to demonstrate the contemporary reimagining of mythological motifs. This reveals how these stories are adapted to align with current values, while still preserving their cultural roots.

Divergence in Cinema Approaches: A juxtaposition is made between the narrative approaches of independent and mainstream cinema. Independent films tend to offer more nuanced interpretations of mythology, while mainstream films typically aim for broader appeal.

Audience Reception Dynamics: The study uncovers diverse audience reactions to mythological narratives, shaped by themes like youth, nostalgia, and cultural identity. These perceptions vary notably between domestic and international audiences.

Industry and Copyright Implications: The thesis delves into the wider industrial implications, especially the challenges posed by copyright in the digital era. It also discusses the necessity of creative innovation in sustaining the legacy of myth in Chinese fantasy cinema.

In summary, your thesis contributes significantly to the discourse on the adaptation of mythological narratives in the digital age within Chinese cinema. It highlights the transformative role of digital technology in redefining storytelling and offers insights into the cultural, artistic, and commercial dynamics within the film industry. As Chinese cinema continues to evolve, it opens new avenues for academic research, particularly in the realms of global cultural exchanges and the advancement of digital media.

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