Cultural Narratives and National Identity in Chinese "New Mythology" Films

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a proliferation of Chinese mythological films that have a positive impact on audiences' sense of national identity, among which three films, Legend of Deification, Monkey King, Hero Is Back and Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child have the highest box office and reputation. Through text analysis and in-depth interviews, this study will start with the above three films, combine the interview results and film content, and analyze the correlation and ways of the cultural narrative and national identity in Chinese mythological films from the perspective of narratiology and audience psychology. This article concludes that Chinese mythological films influence the viewers' sense of national identity through the way they culturally reconstruct and satisfy their psychological needs.

Keywords: Chinese mythological films, cultural narratives, national identity, psychological needs

1 Introduction

Mythology is an important part of China's traditional culture, and it has been nearly a century since the first Chinese feature-length animation, Princess Iron Fan, was released in the 1940s. In the early years, The Monkey King and Lotus Lantern left a deep impression on countless audiences. Since the new century, the output of mythological movies has slowed down slightly. But in recent years, Monkey King, Hero Is Back and Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child have once again set off a boom in the production of mythological animated movies in China. This summer, New Gods: Yang Jian a blockbuster fantasy action film based on traditional myths and legends, was also well received. In fact, most of these new mythology films are based on Chinese folklore or oral literature and have a distinctly Chinese cultural flavor, which has not been diminished by the many remakes incorporating "new narratives" and "new structures." But even a stronger national flavor in the art and the film art and animation design are filled with a stronger Chinese style, which is relatively rare compared to other film genres.I was curious about it: Does the cultural narrative in Chinese mythology films affect the audience's sense of national identity? If so, what are the mechanisms of influence? The study of cultural narratives and national identity in new mythological films will be a strong guide for the creation of new Chinese mythological films in the future.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Cultural narratives of “new mythology” films

The new narrative and new structure of "new mythology" films have become a hot topic in recent years. Due to the strong ethnicity of mythology, foreign research on Chinese "new mythology" films is scarce and lacking in prominent research results. Chinese scholars are more prominent in their research on this issue. For example, based on the perspective of "spatial reconstruction" and "national culture", Haoyu Bu explores how the spatial structure of "duality and three realms" and the metaphorical social space in mythology are reconstructed by new mythological films through the content analysis of recent domestic mythological films (Haoyu Bu, 2022). Based on the perspective of aesthetic thought and national culture, Shuang Xu and Yanrui Li explore how the new Chinese mythological films fit in with the spirit of the current times through the analysis of the textual content of the Chinese magic film genre (Shuang Xu and Yanrui Li, 2022). Another example is Zexi Liu and Zhihao Cheng 's analysis of the textual content of the original mythological stories and the new mythological films, which explores the textual transformation of the old mythological stories when they fit the aesthetics of the new era (Zexi Liu and Zhihao Cheng, 2021). I note that this research hotspot has attracted multiple perspectives in the academy. However, these studies have not examined the phenomenon that "new mythology" films are still strongly Chinese from the perspective of national identity after incorporating "new narratives" and "new structures". Therefore, they do not answer the question of whether the cultural narratives in Chinese mythology films affect the viewers' sense of national identity.

2.2 A study of the influence of “new mythology” films on the sense of national identity

Research on the influence of film on national identity has been long-standing and has shown a rich and extensive coverage in both foreign and domestic countries. From the perspective of research, the influence of films on national identity has been the focus of research in recent years, such as Qin Yao's study of Tujia films based on cultural memory theory, which analyzed the presentation of national identity and national sentiment in film and television works (Qin Yao, 2020). Ailian Hu's analysis of image expression under the sense of national identity based on creators and image expression (Ailian Hu, 2020). However, most of these studies focus on “mainstream film” and “minority films”. Foreign “national identity” theory of film studies in the content also more ink in “historical film”, “film history”, “country film” and other directions.

Existing studies have studied films more systematically through the "national identity" theory. However, fewer studies have placed "new mythology" films under this theory. The relationship between "new mythology" films and national identity has not been interpreted from the perspective of "new mythology" films, and therefore the questions about the relationship

between cultural narratives and national identity in Chinese mythology films have not been answered, which is the focus of this paper. Accordingly, this study attempts to answer the following questions from the perspective of film theory, combined with theories of national identity:

RQ1: Does the cultural narrative in Chinese mythological films affect the viewers' sense of national identity?

RQ2: What impact mechanisms, if any, are involved?

3 Methods

This paper uses two research methods, textual analysis and in-depth interviews, to answer the above questions.

3.1 Text analysis method

Textual studies of films usually include several aspects, including thematic-specific textual studies, analysis of character relationships and storylines within the scope of narratology, and symbolic studies of characterization, among other approaches. Using a variety of methods, this article will analyze the plot of Monkey King, Hero Is Back, analyzing the deeper content from the surface of the text and studying how the reconstructed story in the new Chinese mythology film is close to the modern narrative.

3.2 In-depth interview method

3.2.1 Interview outline creation

The interview questions were divided into three main parts.

In the first part, the basic information of the interviewees was mainly covered, including their age, education, and viewing habits.

In the second part, the research questions are downscaled into interview questions. They include their views on Chinese mythological films, the difference between new mythological films and old mythological films in terms of viewing, and the cultural narratives in Chinese mythological films and the viewers' sense of national identity.

In the third part, the preparation mainly deals with the issues that may be dug deeper.

During the interviews and the conduct of the study, the researcher tried very hard to avoid the fourfold ethical issues and transgressions highlighted by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) causing harm to the research participants;(2) not using informed consent documents or materials;(3) violating the privacy of the research participants;(4) deceiving the research participants. The

interviewees were also allowed to remain silent or withdraw from the interview if they had any questions they did not want to answer or if they were dissatisfied with the interview process. Interview materials that the interviewees declared that they did not want to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

3.2.2 Interview subject selection

This study conducted a 40-minute semi-structured in-depth interview with each of the 11 interviewees who had watched Chinese mythological films. According to the maximum sampling principle of the qualitative research method, by the time the 11th interviewee was recruited, the entire interview was sufficient to answer the research questions and the sample collection was closed. The interviewees differed in age, occupation, education level, region they lived in, and film-viewing habits, with a low degree of homogeneity.

The interviews were conducted by telephone interviews and one-on-one face-to-face interviews. The results of the interviews were organized into verbatim scripts, with a total of 10,280 words in the interview scripts. The process of interview content was completed by the author. The basic profile of the interviewees is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 List of basic conditions of interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Academic qualifications	AGE
1	Male	High School(enrolled)	16
2	Male	Junior High School(enrolled)	13
3	Male	Bachelor's degree	35
4	Male	Bachelor's degree	23
5	Female	Bachelor's degree(enrolled)	20
6	Female	Bachelor's degree(enrolled)	20
7	Female	Master's degree(enrolled)	24
8	Female	Bachelor's degree	47
9	Female	Master's degree	27
10	Male	Bachelor's degree(enrolled)	21
11	Female	Specialist(enrolled)	18

4 The Ways in Which Cultural Narratives Influence National Identity in Chinese Mythological films

4.1 The cultural reconstruction of Chinese mythological film

Chinese mythological films are made in different eras, and the creators influenced by the times will combine the culture of the new era to culturally reconstruct traditional works from the perspectives of characters and space, etc. The following study will analyze the cultural

reconstruction of Chinese mythological films from the perspective of narratology, taking the Monkey King: Hero Is Back as an example.

From the perspective of Grimes 's narratology, the plot participants are divided into six narrative roles: protagonist, object, messenger, receiver, adversary, assistant. The combination of these six roles is divided into three pairs of relationships, namely, the protagonist (the role of pursuing purpose) and the object (the purpose of the protagonist 's pursuit), the messenger (triggering the protagonist 's action) and the receiver (the recipient of the object), the assistant (helping the protagonist to pursue the object) and the adversary (hindering the protagonist 's pursuit of the opposite play). After bringing this theory into the Monkey King: Hero Is Back and comparing it with the original Wukong Sun of Journey to the West, this study found that:

First of all, the protagonist in Monkey King: Hero Is Back is still the Wukong Sun, but unlike the Wukong Sun in Journey to the West, the Wukong Sun, who is no longer possessing "magic power" and is not yet free from the chain seal, has to rely on Liu'er Jiang’s help in the battle with the Mountain God. This reconstructs the traditional image of the Wukong Sun.

Secondly, the object of Monkey King: Hero Is Back is Wukong Sun's decision to rescue the girl out of compassion and friendship, while the original object of Journey to the West is the Tang monk and his group's journey to the West.

Thirdly, the Monkey King: Hero Is Back branch messenger is Liu'er Jiang (the role of the Monkey King: Hero Is Back in the Journey to the West is the Tang Monk), as in the Journey to the West, he released Wukong Sun from the seal and invited him to participate in the "adventure". Although the action is consistent with the original Tang monk, but the role has changed significantly. While the relationship between the Tang Monk and the Wukong Sun in Journey to the West was that of master and disciple, the relationship between Liu'er Jiang and the Wukong Sun has changed to that of friendship. The reconstruction of the branch messenger is completed.

Fourth, the receiver is consistent with the protagonist in most works, as is the case with Monkey King: Hero Is Back, so no further analysis will be conducted here.

Fifth, the Monkey King: Hero Is Back in the assistant, in addition to the previously analyzed Liu'er Jiang, Bajie Zhu and White Dragon. The original Journey to the West in the Bajie Zhu and the little white dragon are due to their own fault led to join the scripture team. In Monkey King: Hero Is Back, there are more changes, and Bajie Zhu is replaced by Wukong Sun, who fights his way out of Heaven. The relationship between two people. The White Dragon acts as a rival for a short while in the early stage of Monkey King: Hero Is Back, and then is subdued by Wukong Sun to help him reach the demon king's cave and leave. The reconstruction of the assistant is completed.

Finally, in Monkey King: Hero Is Back, the adversary, except for a very small role, becomes the demon king Chaos. Compared to the original Journey to the West, which had a large number of adversaries with complicated backgrounds, Monkey King: Hero Is Back has abbreviated the adversary to one person, which is more in line with the simplified story. The plot. In the original book, the adversaries each had their own background, which reflected the social background

of the time. However, the social background of the time has changed, and it is difficult to meet the aesthetic needs of contemporary audiences, so Monkey King: Hero Is Back chooses to reconstruct the adversary into a single demon king. The reconstruction of the adversary was completed.

Monkey King: Hero Is Back accomplishes a narrative reconstruction in each of these six areas, re-presenting the audience with a new cultural narrative that is closer to modern audience preferences and more easily understood by modern audiences. Such a cultural reconstruction also lays the foundation for the way the film works on the audience's psychology in the following.

4.2 Film technology meets the audience's cultural identity psychology

With the development of The Times, the film technology represented by special effects has been widely used in mythological films and in the process of audience viewing. And the new mythological films use these technologies to create culturally distinctive and imposing moods, which also satisfy the audience's psychology of cultural identity. During the interviews, several interviewees pointed out this.

“I prefer the expression of recent mythological films, is a technical difference, the biggest difference is in the technology, the previous both in music and images are classical aesthetic a little. Although it is good, but I am not an ancient ah, so the modern technology will be more stimulating cultural identity. In short, it's an old story in a new shell.” (Interviewee 4)

“The special effects are very good, although the cartoon style is not as fine as the realistic style of European and American magic movies, but always expressed through a difference in a more than realistic way of Chinese mythological aesthetics. The look of the heavenly realm in The Monkey King is more realistic, a scattered perspective-like approach with a higher threshold of appreciation, but the heavenly realm in Legend of Deification is a more realistic heavenly realm, which I would prefer.” (Interviewee 9)

Although the focus varies, respondents mostly agree on the positive effects of new technologies on cultural identity. Firstly, new technologies are more relevant to the aesthetics of modern audiences. Due to the limitations of technology, previous mythological films mostly fit classical aesthetics, referencing opera and ancient artworks from soundtrack, action to scheduling, which have been classicized over a long history and are somewhat distant from the aesthetic habits of modern audiences. on the other hand, the new Chinese mythology films use a lot of new technologies based on cultural reconstruction to tell the story to the audience in a more realistic way. This makes the new mythology films more relevant to the aesthetics of modern audiences. Secondly, the new technology satisfies cultural identity not by "opposing" or "replacing" modernity and traditional culture, but by "integrating" and "adding" modernity and traditional culture. It is the "integration" and "addition" of modernity and traditional culture. Thirdly, the new technology satisfies cultural identity is not the "opposition" and "replacement" of modernity and traditional culture, but the "integration" and "addition" of modernity and

traditional culture. As Huntington said, “Cultural identity” is the positive recognition of the most meaningful things of a nation formed by people living together for a long time in a national community. Its core is the recognition of the basic values of a nation. The core and theme of the old story, which is still recognized by most people through the test of time, is the "basic value" here, and the new technology does not change the narrative theme, so it still satisfies this point. Therefore, the new mythology film combines the existing theme and new technology, which satisfies the audience's cultural identity in terms of both modern aesthetics and the preservation of traditional value identity, and then achieves national identity.

4.3 Character design to meet the psychological needs of audience empathy

As mentioned earlier, the "protagonist" of Chinese new mythology films has undergone a reconstruction, and more and more Chinese new mythology films are modifying the traditional characters, focusing on the growth and transformation of the characters, and making the character design adult-oriented, which satisfies the psychological need of audience empathy. This was also mentioned by interviewees in the interviews:

"I think there is this difference between the Ziya Jiang in legend of deification(2020,film) and the Ziya Jiang in the legend of deification(Ming dynasty,novel), who was previously a god who sealed the gods and is now a vulnerable character fighting against the heavenly realm. And the film highlights his hesitation and entanglement, the whole film is about his change of understanding and personal struggle." (Interviewee 7)

"The previous Sun Wukong was a very traditional figure who had the ability to do anything. In "Journey to the West: The Return of the Great Sage" he is surprisingly injured because he is sealed, and it becomes a bit like a normal story protagonist, and we can understand his adventure." (Interviewee 1)

Almost all interviewees mentioned the modification of the main character design in the new mythological movie.

Firstly, character design that emphasizes the process of growing up makes the audience more empathetic. According to Cohen and Strayer, empathy is "the ability to understand the emotional states of others and to share them". The protagonists in traditional mythology often have a strong "divinity" with qualities and abilities that ordinary people cannot possess. This "divinity" is like a gap that makes it more difficult for the audience to empathize with the protagonist. The new mythology film has been modified, relatively weakening the "divinity" of the protagonist and enhancing the "humanity" of the protagonist, by focusing on the protagonist's entanglement, growth, choice and other emotions that people often face, so that the audience can empathize with the protagonist.

Secondly, the adult-orientation of role design has a similar efficacy. The audience when receiving media information, will play an active role in selective cognition of the information, and this cognition out of stereotypes will affect the audience's understanding of the information. This is also the case between the film and the audience, for example, The Monkey King is a

more traditional mythological film, the traditional character design makes the impression of the Monkey King experience after the impression of traditional opera facial makeup and traditional opera.

The new mythology films avoid this resistance to understanding through the adult-orientation of character design, which lays the foundation for audience empathy. Thus, the new mythology films meet the audience's psychological need for empathy by emphasizing the character design of the growth process and the adult-orientation of the character design, and then meet the audience's cultural and national identity.

4.4 Artistic progress meets the audience's psychological need to acquire new knowledge

In addition to the technical and characterization aspects of the new mythological films, artistic progress is also an important point in satisfying the psychology of the audience. The changes pursued on the artistic level have allowed animated films to begin groping toward the philosophical level of mythology, satisfying the psychological need of audiences to gain new knowledge. This point was mentioned by some interviewees in the interviews:

"For example, in addition to showing the environment, legend of deification begins to talk about the workings of the heavenly realm and the connotations behind it. It's a new interpretation." (Interviewee 3)

"From comic books to commentaries to older mythology films. It feels like it's all retelling the same story, and I was interested in seeing some new interpretations and new understandings." (Interviewee 8)

Some viewers are not satisfied with the simple retelling of mythology in the old mythology films, and want the films to explore the philosophical aspects behind the mythology to satisfy the need for new knowledge, and the new mythology films satisfy this through artistic progress.

Firstly, the new mythological film accomplishes a new philosophical interpretation of the old story. As Interviewee 3 said, legend of deification(2020,film), taken from the legend of deification(Ming dynasty,novel), accomplishes this new interpretation. legend of deification, through further artistic expression, creates a non-binary camp of good and evil, right and wrong blurred by several pairs of contradictory relationships, such as Ziya Jiang and his master, Ziya Jiang and the fox demon. The binary pattern of fixed hierarchy, good versus evil, and three distinct realms in the original is changed. On top of this new pattern, the story of the protagonist's pursuit of justice, righteousness and truth, and the breaking of the lock and closure of the heavenly realm at the end, is given a new theme and new value orientation of pursuing fairness and justice that coincides with modern society. Such a new story line was praised by several interviewees, including Interviewee 3.

Secondly, the new mythology accomplishes a fusion of old themes with a new structure. Some interviewees are also associated with Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child. In the original works, Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child is obstinate by nature and rebellious against the surrounding environment, especially his family relations. This rebellious spirit is often

interpreted as the rebellion against the feudal ethical system and the patriarchal society, which is difficult to be understood and accepted by the audience in today's society. Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child is a fusion of the rebellious spirit with the main story line of anti-fatalism, dissolving the family conflicts of the original with a more gentle family relationship. However, the rebellious spirit of Nezha, who fights to save the people in the face of the apocalypse, is still present, but it is transformed into a rebellious spirit against his own destiny by combining it with the new structure.

Therefore, based on the progress of artistic techniques, the new mythological films, through the new philosophical interpretation of old stories and the fusion of old themes with new structures, satisfy the audience's psychological need to acquire new knowledge. And then further satisfy the audience's cultural identity and national identity.

5 Summary and Reflection

The new Chinese mythology films rely on film technology, character design and more advanced artistic expression to meet the psychological needs of audiences, and work together with cultural reconstruction to enhance the cultural and national identity of the audience. Currently, Chinese mythological films have achieved good results in building and strengthening national identity. But there are also certain problems, such as uneven film quality, westernization of visual images, and limited story genres, which need to be coordinated by many parties for improvement.

Firstlu, attention should be paid to the quality of Chinese mythological films. Many interviewees in the interviews raised the point that the quality of new Chinese mythological films is not as good as before. The criticism mainly focuses on the art design, soundtrack production and animation details. In particular, new mythology films are dwarfed by classics like The Monkey King. Therefore, Chinese new mythology films should pay attention to the quality.

Secondly, the sources of mythology films should be expanded. It is true that these myths have been around for hundreds of years, reflecting their classic nature and popularity among audiences, but repeated adaptations of a single genre may lead to a decline in audience motivation. This issue was also raised by some of the interviewees who felt that they would like to watch Chinese mythology films from other sources. In fact, there is a wealth of traditional Chinese mythology and a depth of storytelling that deserves to be explored.

Thirdly, the excessive commercialization of Chinese mythological films to cater to the film market has gradually diluted their cultural connotations. Poetic wisdom is one of the important roots of Chinese aesthetics, which is reflected in an intuitive and creative spirituality. Early Chinese animated films have profound poetic connotations, such as scenes that enable viewers to enjoy a unique Chinese aesthetic experience and a baptism of the senses. The commercialization of new Chinese mythology films is gradually washing away this advantage, and new mythology films should pay attention to the balance between commercial and artistic attributes.

In conclusion, the cultural narratives in Chinese mythology films can influence the audience's sense of national identity, and the extent to which they influence national identity is closely related to the film's technology, character design, and artistic expression. At the same time, audiences will still notice the current shortcomings of Chinese mythology films, and Chinese mythology films should improve the quality of their films in a wider range of sources and continue to reconfigure the narratives to fit modern contexts.

Finally, there are still shortcomings in the author's research process. Firstly, more interviewees should have been selected for the in-depth interviews in order to draw more objective conclusions. Secondly, the interview questions should be designed in a more hierarchical manner. Third, questionnaires should be considered to obtain yes or no answers to viewers' subjective preferences.

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