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Descriptive Research Article



Discusses the Narrative Elements of Retelling Traditional Myths in Chinese Animated Films: A Case Study of New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021)

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ABSTRACT

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Due to policy support and capital promotion, retelling traditional mythological stories in animated movies has become a cultural creation trend. Among them, New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) is a typical controversial work in recent years that deserves in-depth analysis and discussion. From the perspective of retelling traditional myths and based on the need to build a local Chinese "IP Cinematic Universe", this article discusses the narrative flaws of this movie from four aspects. This article analyzes individual cases and tries to sort out the narrative elements of retelling traditional myths in Chinese animated films. Firstly, the concept of the "Fengshen Universe", which is currently being discussed in China, is compared with the more mature Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), and how female characters are portrayed under the premise of constructing the "IP Cinematic Universe" is presented. The "Fengshen Universe" concept is compared to the more mature the MCU. Then, based on the evolution of Nezha in mythology and the logic of commercial narratives, we discuss the setting and portrayal of protagonists and villains. Third, we analyze the need for animated films to incorporate a space for realism in the narrative retelling of myths. Finally, it discusses integrating the postmodern landscape into the narrative of retold myths in Chinese animated mythological films. This paper concludes that retelling traditional myths in Chinese animated films is not a retelling of ancient stories nor an arbitrary dissolution and parody of myths. Still, it is necessary to endow traditional myths with contemporary contexts and realist meanings through narratives.

Keywords: Chinese Animated Films; Retelling Myth; National Culture; Narrative Element; Realism-Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) is one of the most groundbreaking Chinese animated films in recent years, but according to popular feedback from Douban.com, some controversial aspects of the movie should be explored. The controversy centers on the fact that although the animated film has made significant innovations and reconstruction of the Chinese mythological text regarding the visual presentation of the worldview, viewers generally believe this is not enough to cover up the film's flaws. This article takes New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) as a case study and examines the typical problems of Chinese animated films in the retelling of myths, and at the same time, refers to and compares the narrative strategies of Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and mainstream commercial animated films to explore the narrative elements of traditional myths retold in Chinese animated films. At the same time, we refer to and compare the narrative strategies of MCU and mainstream commercial animated films, and discuss the narrative elements of traditional myth retelling in Chinese animated films.

China is one of the major ancient civilizations of the world. During the long historical development of the Chinese civilization, rich indigenous myths have been spread in various forms to the present day. Compared with European myths, Chinese myths are characterized by complex genealogical relationships and fragmentation, as well as numerous versions, and there are cases of conflicting representations of the exact mythological figure

among different versions (Tian, 2022). For example, in the Shanhaijing-Hainaijing, Zhu Rong is a descendant of Yan Di, while in the Shanhaijing-Dahuangxijing, Zhu Rong becomes a descendant of Zhuan Xu (Yang & Ning, 2021). This phenomenon reflects that although Chinese myths have many familiar character names, in the historical process of being relayed and retold, many evolutions have occurred in the sources of the main characters and the narrative elements due to various reasons. Far from the cultural soil in which they were first born, myths continue to take on new meanings in the context of new times. Lévi-Strauss argues that underneath the most absurd fantasies myths contain "order", without which no meaning can be expressed. The "order" mentioned by Lévi-Strauss is a recurring story in history, a programmed structure (X. Wang, 1991). Tan (2023), a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, argues that both creation and criticism are only tense when they interact with the times, and emphasizes that the most significant value of mythological retellings lies in reassessing and criticizing the spirit of the times.

From Princess Iron Fan (1941) in the Republican era to Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (1979) in the 1970s, animated films have always been essential for visualizing Chinese mythology. Most of the influential Chinese animated films developed so far have expressed themes closely related to the social context of the time. However, with the influence of entertainment-oriented aesthetics in recent years, contemporary features are rarely seen in the narratives of Chinese mythological animated films. On the other hand, since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Chinese government's positive advocacy of promoting traditional culture at the official level has influenced the commercial capital's projects and creations of animated films. Several animated films adapted from conventional Chinese myths have been produced since 2014 (J. Wang, 2014). Among this batch of works in this period, The Return of the Great Sage attempts to return once again to a narrative strategy with the spirit of the times, i.e., to complete narrative reshaping by adding realist topics and modern values within the main framework of traditional mythological stories. Subsequently, Nezha (2019) which followed this narrative strategy, not only raked in RMB 5.035 billion at the box office (IMDbPro, 2019) but also received overwhelmingly positive reviews on China's various social media channels, becoming a public issue that exceeded expectations. However, more animated films adapted from traditional Chinese mythology during this period did not gain recognition from domestic audiences. For example, Bia Fish & Begonia (2016) and Jiana Ziya (2020), which were not lacking in capital investment, were both criticized by audiences for their narratives. Goodbye Monster (2022), whose visual effects were above the average of China's animation filmmaking process in recent years, ended up not only losing money at the box office but also failing to make a sizable impact.

New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021), another mythological retelling adapted from the Feudal Myths in recent years and as the first installment of Chasing Light Animation's commitment to building a Chinese animated film "Feudal Universe", had accumulated high audience expectations before its release. In terms of production, the movie has made relatively significant innovations in the visual presentation of the mythological worldview, but from the popular evaluation of the film on Douban.com, it's narrative still aroused controversy among most viewers. The main issue of the controversy is the need for more connection between the film's narrative and the current social context, which is also a common problem for most Chinese animated films adapting myths. Recent research on Chinese animated films retelling myths mainly focuses on two aspects, i.e., elaborating on the significance of retelling myths and explaining individual examples of retelling myths in existing animated films. Xia (2017) and B. Zhao (2020) point out that the common problem of the current Chinese animated mythological films lies in the disconnection between the narrative and the theme of the times. Whyke and Mugica (2021) use Northrop Frye's framework of archetype and displacement to take the evolution of Nezha in three mythological animated films from different eras as a clue to elaborate on the themes of the times reflected in the image of Nezha in different periods in China. You (2022) continue on this basis to analyze the aesthetic and political entanglements reflected in Nezha in these three periods. H. Wang & Zhang (2021) make a statement about the contemporaneity and metaphors incorporated in New Gods: The Rebirth of Nezha, but ignore the feedback and evaluation of the work from the general public.

PORTRAYAL OF FEMALE CHARACTERS UNDER THE ALL-AGES STRATEGY

The discussion of the "Fengshen Universe" stems from the recognition of the commercial success of MCU by the media and Chinese audiences. The reason why MCU is so influential on the commercial level is not only because this IP continues high concept character of Hollywood movies, but also because it maximizes the scope of its audience. Except for *Deadpool* (2016) and *Deadpool* 2 (2018), most of the films are rated PG-13, which maximizes the audience of all ages, but also leaves room for the text of the film to explore some in-depth content. By the same token, it is no coincidence that *Nezha* (2019) reaped 5 billion at the box office and brought about the "broken circle" effect, but it stems from the fact that its creative team did a precise analysis of the public demand, so that the film meets the needs of different levels of audience viewing. Unlike *Nezha* (2019), *New Gods: Nezha*

Reborn (2021) borrows the "prequel" setting strategy from White Snake (2019) and makes the time and space background of the movie a "postquel", and adds a large number of fabricated female characters. Undeniably, the advantage of this strategy of stepping out of the original story is that on one hand, it can fully enjoy the popularity of the Nezha IP, and on the other hand, it can avoid the negative public opinion brought about by the audience's criticism of whether or not the spirit of the original story has been respected. Unfortunately, the portrayal of female characters in *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) makes some mistakes in terms of audience targeting.

Zhao Ji, the director of the film, said in an interview that the creative team did not isolate children from the audience (J. Zhao, Yu. & X. Zhao, 2021), but in fact many of the treatments of the film's text are not suitable for children to watch, many episodes are so "instrumentalized" in their representation of female characters that the female characters in the film become gendered objects of consumption that are gazed at by men. For example, in Dr. Su's appearance at the beginning of the film, the camera repeatedly emphasizes Dr. Su's curvaceous physique in freeze-frame close-ups; in the nightclub scene showing Kasha as a singer, all the dancers are dressed in tight and hot uniforms and dance on the stage; and in a scene of Ao Bing's treatment of his wounds, the two waitresses dressed in revealing clothes kneel down and serve Ao Bing to change his clothes (Figure 1). These visual scenes with erotic ambience suggestively and incongruously emphasize the sensual enjoyment of secularized aesthetics, and further narrow the scope of the film's audience. In addition, female supporting characters such as Jellyfish Girl and Caiyun do not have much narrative value in the film, and their roles are more like objects of sexual fantasies from the male perspective. Bu Wei, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, mentions a term called "gender awareness" in a related study. She believes that only content with "gender awareness" can go beyond the perspective of patriarchal culture and reflect gender relations, status and related social, economic and political issues more objectively by following the principle of equality between men and women (C. Zhang, 2006). It can be interpreted that the "gender awareness" here is a kind of consciousness of cultural mission and social responsibility that creators of popular culture should have. In today's world of consumerism and hedonism, the popular culture that carries the aesthetic of secularization has established an absolutely strong discourse power, and in the literature and art works deeply influenced by the patriarchal culture, the ornamental nature often becomes an absolute yardstick for the public to evaluate women (C. Zhang, 2006). In addition, the personalities of the two main female characters in New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021), Kasha and Dr. Su, are actually passive and flattened. Both female characters have ambiguous emotional relationships with the protagonist, Li Yunxiang, and are not fundamentally different in their motivations for their character's behavior, and do not have narrative-level subjective values, nor do they have independent arcs or growth processes. In other words, the setting of the two female characters is more like a landscape than a character. According to Robert McKee, the most important reason why a story needs characters other than the protagonist is because they interact with the protagonist, and secondly because each character can, in their own way, assist in portraying the complex nature of the protagonist (McKee, 1997). According to Mckee (1997), the function of the supporting characters is to create a more threedimensional protagonist, and in order to make the complexity of the protagonist's facets clear and believable, each supporting character needs to have actions and reflections that are distinct and unique from the other characters. However, the film not only retains this pair of duplicated female characters, but also allows them to get along with each other, a character relationship that is divorced from the logic of reality and analyzes the screenwriter's poor borrowing from current fast-food internet literature. Although China has not yet implemented a movie classification system, since Light Chaser Animation Studios has a long-term plan to build a "Fengshen Universe", it needs to pay attention to how to handle better the portrayal of female characters from a male-dominated perspective, and not to lose the sense of cultural mission and social responsibility that creators of popular culture are supposed to have because of claptrap.



Figure 1. Screenshots of *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) Showing the Gender Characteristics of Female Characters (Source: The author's research collection)

In fact, in Marvel's original comics, there are also plot settings such as the Green Lantern's girlfriend being abused and killed that purely display bloody violence or sensory stimulation, but in the process of adapting the comics into a movie, these kinds of narrative-less curiosity landscapes that would lead to public discomfort have been discarded. Black Widow, Captain Marvel, and Scarlet Witch in MCU all have flawed upbringings and distinctive character traits, and it's hard not to empathize with Scarlet Witch Wanda in particular as a victim of psychological trauma. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Wanda lost her twin brother in the final battle; in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), she was largely responsible for the events that led to the dissolution of the Avengers; and in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), she lost her love interest, Vision. As a result, in *Wanda Vision* (2021), Wanda chooses to use her powerful mind-control superpowers to take control of the entire population of Westview, creating a utopian world that is in reality missing within herself. Even though the character's extreme actions are morally and legally wrong in reality, the victimization of Wanda's superimposed multiple traumas creates a very three-dimensional characterization of the character that feels real and believable to the audience. Through this setting, the film answers the audience the reason for Wanda's powerful destructive power, i.e., a psychological compensation mechanism generated by the multiple superimpositions of extreme trauma, which makes it easy for the audience to forgive and empathize with Wanda's past destructive wrongdoings.

IMPERFECT PROTAGONISTS AND UNDERSTANDABLE VILLAINS

In fact, the character of Nezha, a highly individualistic character, has never been perfect in the evolution of the myths associated with it, and in the depictions of myths from all periods of Chinese history, Nezha's extremes and rebelliousness have gone beyond the bounds of what is defined by the morals and laws of modern society. As far back as the Song Dynasty, "Biographies of Chan Monks" written by Shih Hui-hung, records that Nezha "returned flesh to his mother and bones to his father", meaning that Nezha's relationship with his parents was one of intense conflict, and that Nezha's character and appearance were characterized by his anger and viciousness at this time. The Journey to the West describes in detail Nezha's violent behavior, such as bathing in the sea, knocking down the Crystal Palace, and catching and removing the dragon's tendons (Liu, 2009). The animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, reinforces the conflicting relationship between Nezha and his father and creates a tragic tone. The retelling of mythological stories in today's animated films inevitably draws on the creative logic of a commercial movie. Syd Field has mentioned four qualities that make up a satisfying character in a commercial movie: a strong and clear need for drama, a uniquely personal point of view, a specific attitude, and having undergone some kind of change or transformation. In commercial movies with a rich viewing experience, it is the imperfections of the protagonist's personality that make the shifts in character attitudes and actions in the narrative all the more powerful.

American sociologist Albert K. Cohen stated that human behavior is all about trying to solve the troublesome problems one encounter in the real world (Cohen, 1955). This idea can be used as a key to connecting the movie closely to the audience. During the movie viewing process, the audience's emotional investment is united through empathy. Viewers develop empathy because the story of the movie and the choices faced by the characters in the movie truly touch their own experiences and experiences in the real world (McKee, 1997). Therefore, the behavior of the protagonist in the movie seems to be trying to solve his own troublesome problems, but in essence, it connects and resonates with the audience through the audience's empathy, in which the protagonist's behavior is the behavior expected by the audience, and the protagonist's transformation and self-salvation are helping the audience to fulfill the unfulfilled wishes in reality. Taking this as an observation point, there are some problems with the setting and portrayal of the main characters in *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021).

Li Yunxiang, the protagonist of New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021), is not only handsome and powerful, but also cynical and caring for the underprivileged and small animals. This setting is more like a prince from a fairy tale, a perfect icon stripped of its realism, but there is a strong sense of distance between this almost flawless natural hero template and the public's self-perception. If there is any imperfection in the protagonist, it can only come from his father's comment that he is "not doing his job", but this so-called labeling of flaws does not allow the character of Li Yunxiang to build up a certain kind of behavioral tension, and it hardly affects the construction of the narrative. In contrast, the character is portrayed more vividly and three-dimensionally in Nezha (2019). Nezha's identity in Nezha (2019) is set as a "Mowan (Demon Pill)" that will be reborn three years later and will be subject to a predestined "Tianjie (heavenly made curse) ", but his parents deceive Nezha in order to keep him happy, allowing him to learn the skills of Taiyi Zhenren. Three years later, Nezha is told by Shen Gongbao that he is the reincarnation of the "Mowan", and after being deceived, Nezha's demonic instincts explode, causing havoc at the Chentang. When Nezha learns that his father was willing to sacrifice his life to endure the heavenly calamity, he is touched by his parents' selfless love, and because of it, he suppresses his demonic instincts and ultimately saves Chentang, becoming a true hero. Throughout the narrative, Nezha's behavior repeatedly oscillates between good and evil, experiencing four journeys and three key twists and turns, which means that his actions are wellmotivated and have ups and downs. Most viewers on *Douban* were impressed by the imperfect protagonist, as if they could see themselves in reality through this "small potato" version of Nezha, who breaks stereotypes (Figure 2). Similarly, comic book movies and many excellent animated movies often feature imperfect narratives of personality flaws, childhood shadows, or tragic pasts, such as Iron Man, Captain America, Hulk, Scarlet Witch, and many other superheroes who have tragic pasts and insurmountable demons. In addition, many well-known animated movies have similar settings; Kannami Yuuichi in Mamoru Oshii's The Sky Crawlers (2008) is an overly introverted and almost autistic pilot, Shinji Ikari in Shinseiki Ebuangerion (Neon Genesis Evangelion) is an introverted, low self-esteem and cowardly boy, and Black and White in Tekkon kinkreet (2006) are both goodnatured but have extreme character flaws. Compared to the perfect heroes in the main theme, such flawed protagonists are closer to reality and easier for the audience to empathize and sympathize with.

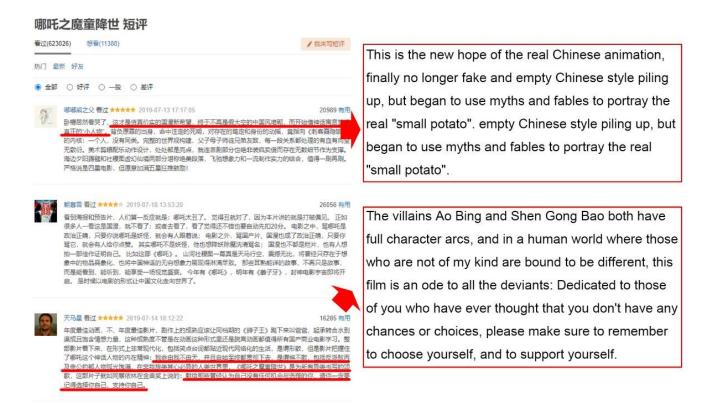


Figure 2. Screenshot of the Audience's Comments of *Nezha* (2019) on Douban.com (Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/26794435/comments?status=P)

Similar to the setup for the protagonists, the movie's setup for the villains is rather thin. Ao Guang and Ao Bing, father and son, take their identities from the reincarnation of the father and son of Dragon King of the East Sea in the novel Fengshen Yanyi, and in the worldview of this film they are in control of the monopolized family business in East Sea City. In that setting, the De family controls the economic and political discourse in East Sea City, causing drought and water shortage in East Sea City due to the cultivation of the Dragon Balls controlling water source of the city, and causing serious polarization between the rich and the poor due to the monopoly of the family business, and the accumulation of these illegal acts ultimately becomes the trigger that induces serious social conflicts. In short, the deeds of the De family in New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) can be described as unforgivable, and there is no premise that deserves the audience's sympathy, so the audience will not be able to generate any emotions from the De family's standpoint. Under this premise, all confrontations in the movie collapse into a "dichotomy" between absolute good and absolute evil. In contrast, Nezha (2019) is more threedimensional in its design of the identity of the Dragons Raja: Dragons Raja are regarded as demonic beasts, and not only are they not used by the Heavenly Court, but they are also sealed at the bottom of the sea in order to check the other monsters, so as to exchange for a short period of peace on earth. Therefore, the tragic fate of Dragons Raja directly led to the "flooding of Chentang" incident, in which Ao Bing took revenge for his family's wrongdoing. In the setting of Nezha (2019), the "injustice" done to the dragons by the Heavenly Court provides an entry point for the audience's empathy. It can be argued that the dragons are not inherently evil, but rather are compelled to rebel against the oppression of their power, which is intertwined with Nezha's rebellion against his fate, and which directly sublimates the film's core theme. Similar to this setting, in most of the settings the motives for the villains' behavior in comic book movies arouse the audience's sympathy. For example, Zemo in Captain America: Civil War (2016) stirs up the relationship within the Avengers in order to avenge his parents; Erik in Black Panther (2018) chooses to challenge T'Challa's throne, which, in addition to avenging his father's death, also implies his dissatisfaction with T'Challa's pursuit of a soft policy on the level of ethno-political issues; Nebula's Hatred and Misanthropy in Avengers: Endgame (2019) stems from the Mental Torture She Suffered in Childhood; Thanos in Avengers: Infinity War (2018) wants to wipe out half of the human population of the universe not to dominate the universe, but to maintain the universe's resources and ecological balance. Not only that, the villains in more excellent animated movies have all kinds of "reasonable but not legal" motives for their behavior. For example, in Spirited Away (2001), the weird Faceless Monster devours innocents in the "Oil House" because it has fallen into self-cognitive disorders; The cybercrimes of the "Puppet Master" in Ghost in the Shell (1995) are rooted in the ripple effects of human crime.

It can be argued that the hollowness of the characters' motivations for their actions in *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) leads to a facile characterization. The hollowness referred to here is not that the characters have no motivation for their behavior, but rather that their motivation for their behavior is completely detached from the arc of realism and floats in a kind of empty grand narrative that fails to make the audience empathize with it. This flat characterization weakens the film's idealized narrative possibilities and deprives the retelling of the myth of its contemporary significance.

THE SPACE FOR EXPLORING REALISM IN RETELLING MYTHOLOGICAL NARRATIVES

The use of classical mythology as a narrative resource has always been one of the important creative directions in Chinese cinema, as well as a form of retelling myths. However, most of the current discussions on the value of retelling myths are in the field of literary scholarship, and have not been given enough attention in the field of practice, especially in film and television creation. As a result, in this era of ubiquitous visual culture and consumerism, retellings of myths have often gone astray in the new medium. For example, movies such as Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back (2017) and A Chinese Odyssey: Part Three (2016) have arbitrarily flirted with the "Journey to the West IP" and deconstructed it in a nonsensical way, and various shoddy online games have abused the concept of the Classic of Mountains and Rivers. Ye (2007) has discussed the concept of retelling myths many times, and he believes that retelling myths is not a random deconstruction or parody, but requires an in-depth understanding of comparative mythology, folklore and other related fields, as well as recognition of the core meaning of the symbols in the original myths. With the development of human civilization and changes in the political and economic environment, myths have entered the contemporary cultural context with a hiatus from their classical forms, and have been influenced and transformed by scientific rationality and modern philosophical discourse (B. Zhang, 2010). Northrop Frye uses the term displacement to define the key to retelling myths, that is, retelling myths produces a displacement of the meaning of the text (Frye, 1961). Some of the most influential Chinese animated films of the last century have done a lot of displacement of period narratives on the basis of respecting the original mythological framework, i.e., constructing a space for realist exploration in the process of retelling myths. For example, Princess Iron Fan (1941), adapted from a chapter of Journey to the West, alludes to and criticizes the government in the Shanghai International Settlement and the privileged class at the time, and calls on the public to participate in the anti-Japanese salvation (Y. Zhang, 2022). Adapted from Fengshen Yanyi, Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (1979) maps the transformation of the mainstream consciousness of Chinese society after the end of the Cultural Revolution through Nezha's rebellious spirit (Macdonald, 2015). In this context of change, the "national style" is actually changing dynamically, and powerful works tend to mediate between past and present through narrative and aesthetics, so that the mythological text is given a new significance in the new period (Whyke, Mugica, & Brown, 2021). On the contrary, the retelling of myths in New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) does not have much mapping relationship with the context of today's China, and its space for realism exploration is obviously missing.

Zhao Ji, the director of New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) mentioned in an interview that because the creative team of the movie are all young people, so they are more familiar with the preferences of young people, it is not difficult to explain why the narrative structure of the movie is very similar to youth films. Genre films have a familiar story structure and ideological system, and the retelling of mythological narratives in animated films is still essentially guided by the framework of commercial genre films. The first act of the film's narrative begins with a racing scene between Li Yunxiang and Dr. Su, which also introduces a female supporting character, Kasha, who impresses the audience. The film's narrative shows that Kasha's words and actions in this scene are selfcontradictory; on the one hand, she has a crush on Li Yunxiang, and on the other hand, she encourages Li Yunxiang to hit on another female character, Dr. Su. This character relationship set-up of a love triangle is typical of commercial teenage movies. The overly instrumental setting of the female characters discussed in the previous chapters leads to the main narrative structure becoming very simple, becoming a simple story of the protagonist, Li Yunxiang, as a rebellious teenager who constantly fights monsters and upgrades. Of course, the director tries to build a worldview with realist discussion value: the monopolized operation of the four big families, especially the control of water resources, has led to a huge gap between the rich and the poor in Donghai City, and therefore the people at the bottom have an extremely difficult life. "Although we have traveled to other cities, I know that all cities are the same, with different people living in different places. There are places where every leaf of the trees and grass is clean as if it has been washed with water, while there are places that are full of chaos, disorder and filth, and it's always been like this..." is the protagonist's line at the beginning of the movie. The director tries to use this statement of the protagonist to justify his subsequent acts of resistance. However, the movie's presentation of this worldview only stops at the landscape level, and does not continue to discuss the social contradictions of the worldview stated by the protagonist, including the director's self-reflection of "who am I" for

the protagonist, and does not provide a valuable answer, so that the protagonist Li Yunxiang's every battle with the villain is like a performance.

In contrast, although Marvel movies are typical Hollywood commercial movies, they establish multiple mappings between the self-identification of individual typical characters and real social issues such as social group conflicts and contemporary national views of history through their narratives. For example, in Captain America: Civil War (2016), the climactic scene in which the two camps, Team America and Iron Man, battle each other at the airport is a representative case. This civil war stems from the divergence of positions within the Avengers, which can be briefly described as a rift in friendship, which is the first level of the story. In fact, the difference between the positions of the two sides is triggered by the Sokovia Accords, in which Iron Man believes that the Avengers should be regulated for the negligence they cause in the fight against terrorist crimes, while Captain America believes that all regulation comes from a few people with ulterior motives. The differences between the two sides are based on their respective perspectives on the issue, and there is no absolute right or wrong. Additionally, the villain Helmut Zemo's parents died from accidental injuries during the Avengers' fight against crime, while Iron Man's parents were killed by the Winter Soldier under the control of Hydra. As a result, Helmut Zemo used the Winter Soldier to divide the Avengers by any means necessary, while the Winter Soldier was on the other side of the fence, although the reason for killing Iron Man's father was that he was under the mind-control of Hydra, Iron Man chose not to forgive the Winter Soldier, and was hell-bent on killing the man who killed his father. All of these behaviors are motivated by the reasonable instinct of revenge shaped by human nature, but they are "reasonable but not legal". Based on the collision of positive and negative perspectives, the movie reveals a reflection on the reality of social contradictions, moral and ethical contradictions, which is the second level. The third level is buried in the depths in the form of metaphors, insinuating the political metaphors behind their respective positions, which can also give insight into an ideological stance of the author. According to Althusser, films and other media are "Ideological State Apparatus", and through the multiple means of symbolism, intertextuality and other metaphors, films can not only allude to historical events in international politics, but also construct ideologies, constructing ideologies (Rivkin & Ryan, 2017). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the U.S. president signed the USA PATRIOT Act, which included the expansion of the functions and jurisdiction of the police, and the expansion of the Treasury Department's control over financial activities. Supporters of the Act argued that the government's heavy-handed surveillance powers were necessary to curb terrorism; opponents expressed great concern that the Act was a direct assault on democratic freedoms. The Sokovia Accords' restriction of the Avengers' movements and the USA PATRIOT Act's release of police powers in the real world may seem opposite, but in fact they both refer to the contradictory issues of security and freedom. Team America and Iron Man, who hold their own views in the movie, are in sync with the supporters and opponents of the Act in reality. Mark Millar, author of Civil War comic strip, said: "The political allegory is only for those that are politically aware. Kids are going to read it and just see a big superhero fight (Gustines, 2006). " As an example, Marvel superhero movies construct three levels of access to the viewing experience, so that viewers of all ages, from children to middle-aged, can get the expected sense of access to viewing in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Not only Marvel, but countless more Japanese animated movies have also often chosen to construct realistic explorations of space. Indeed, the expectations of animation fans who emerged in Japan in the 1980s were often of cool mecha, cute girls, and various fantasy worlds that offered refuge from reality. However, animation producers such as Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki believed that fantasy worlds also needed to take on social significance, and thus have been asking Hayao Miyazaki to include in his works a critical nature that maps the real society (Qin, 2015). Therefore, we are able to see the social significance reflected behind these classic works such as Spirited Away (2001) and Princess Mononoke (1997). These fantasy stories in the overhead worldview actually belong to another level of contemporary Japanese narrative, which let the world see the confusion and thinking of the current Japanese people. As for the current narrative problems of Chinese animated films, Xia Ying, a scholar at Tsinghua University, believes that Chinese animated films need to reflect on and criticize the current era (Xia, 2017). Other scholars point out more specifically that the biggest problem of current Chinese animated films lies in the narrative, and the most common problems of the narrative are mainly in two aspects, i.e., the loss of the mother topic, and the dislocation of the national culture and the context of the times. In layman's terms, it means that the story lacks social values, or the values of the story lack connection with the context of the era in which it lives today (B. Zhao, 2020). It can be said that the narrative problem of Chinese animated films reflected in New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) is not an isolated case, but is indeed an important issue that deserves attention and needs to be solved urgently.

POSTMODERN LANDSCAPES IN RETELLING MYTHOLOGICAL WORLDVIEWS

Although the retelling of myths can enjoy the story framework of the original IP as well as the text of the main characters' relationship, the construction of new visual landscapes is still necessary if the value of the retelling is to be presented. There is no denying that the visual effects presented through digital technology in New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) are indeed very diverse and creative. By paying homage to the classics, the movie builds a gorgeous postmodern collage landscape that caters to the visual spectacle that today's teenage audience craves. The film has a very different overhead worldview from the previous "Fengshen IP" films. Throughout the film's main visual symbols and scene designs, steampunk, cyberpunk and wasteland punk elements are mixed in, creating an overhead world with a huge amount of post-modern symbols and information. The story is set in Donghai City, thousands of years after Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (1979), and this collage landscape of an elevated city contains five main zones: the "Commoner's Zone", which is a retrospective of the Stone Gate neighborhoods of old Shanghai during the Republic of China period, and the Manhattan neighborhood of New York City in the 1930s, which is modeled after Manhattan in the 1930s. Manhattan in the 1930s, the "Rich Zone", the "No Man's Land", a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the "Unregulated Zone", which retains oriental temples and religious elements, and the "Steampunk Zone", which is inspired by Victorian fantasy literature. The "industrial zone" is a steampunk style that originated from Victorian fantasy literature. As the spatial carrier of the narrative, these five main scenes are based on the corresponding scene archetypes to integrate the related visual symbols. The visual symbols referenced are, in descending order, the pigsty walled city in Kung Fu Hustle (2004), Gotham City in Batman Begins (2005), Gobi Valley in Mad Max: Fury Road (2015), the Iturup Island complex (also known as the Outer Limits of the Law) in Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence (2004), and Steam City in Steamboy (2004). By recreating classic scenes from ACGN (Anime, Comics, Games and Novels) and attempting to create a spatial narrative, these organized visual symbols are sent to the audience in a set of scenes, in an attempt to awaken the audience's memories of these classic episodes, which in turn is expected to trigger deeper resonance in the audience. However, according to the feedback from Douban and other mainstream Chinese movie evaluation platforms, this attempt does not seem to have met the above expectations. A large number of viewers think that this post-modern collage is just a stacking of landscapes, and that the many different art styles of the scenes create confusion about the theme (Figure 3). Because the film's art was set up as a collage of various styles, during the publicity and distribution of the film, various media outlets had different labels such as cyberpunk, oriental punk, Chinese punk, and Republic of China punk to describe the art style of the film, which also reflects the fact that the meaning of these complex and gorgeous visual symbols in the film is hollow.

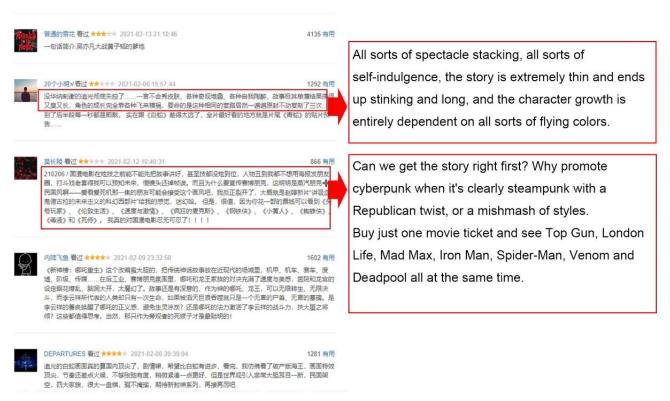


Figure 3. Screenshot of the Audience's Comments of *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) on Douban.com (Source: https://movie.douban.com/subject/34779692/comments?status=P)

In the past, in film and ACGN, imitating and recreating a particular scene in a classic work was called homage. Still, in most cases, homage is only a kind of landscape imitation, which brings about a tense and witty contrast effect by deconstructing the classic, but whether homage produces an intertextual meaning of the archetype or not is considered. For example, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory (2005) recreates classic sequences from Hitchcock's Psycho (1960) and Kubrick's 2001 Space Odyssey (1968) in different episodes, but in reality, it is only a deconstruction and collage. The other kind of homage that we focus on here is not only the imitation of a sense of formality, but another kind of homage that creates intertextuality with the expressed content, ideas, and emotions in the archetypes, such as Mr. Big's entrance scene in Zootopia (2016). Mr. Big's entrance pays homage to a classic sequence from *The Godfather* (1972), played by Marlon Brando, and the unit being paid homage to is not the character of Mr. Big, but the entire space associated with it, including Marlon Brando's movements and accent, his daughter in a gown, and the ambient stage lighting effects. Frances Yates once mentioned that the earliest medium used by mnemonics in real-world history was spatialization. The role of space is extremely important in the mnemonics of collective culture in human civilization. Jan Assmann mentions that while realworld mnemonics rely on imaginary spaces, memetic cultures add symbols to natural spaces, so the entire natural scene becomes the medium of cultural memory. Based on this, the natural scene is not valued through symbols, but more as a whole that is sublimated into a symbol (Assmann, 2015). Obviously, a more accurate description of the natural scene mentioned here would be a realistic scene, but this description seems to be equally valid in the realm of movies as well as ACGN. The classic bridge in *The Godfather* (1972) is remembered by the audience as a symbol sublimated as a whole in terms of space, and the appearance of Mr. Big in Zootopia (2016) awakens the memory of the audience. It is worth paying attention to the fact that the plot of *The Godfather* (1972) is placed here and the theme of the whole movie of Zootopia (2016) also generates intertextualization, because the main theme of the movie is to explore the hierarchical relationship and the complex interpersonal relationship in the real society, which is almost the same as what The Godfather expresses. In this way, the audience will be able to empathize with the sense of acquisition generated by watching The Godfather (1972) to Zootopia (2016) in the process of watching the movie. Not only that, but in 2022 Disney produced a spin-off show related to it, Zootopia+ (2022), in which it enriched and added to the ins and outs of the important characters that appeared in the movie, and also explained why Mr. Big, as a tiny shrew, was able to drive so many ferocious carnivores to do his bidding. Mr. Big was a weak shrew who immigrated with his family to Zootopia to survive, and through his strong business acumen went from being a small man at the bottom of the social ladder to eventually becoming the head of a gang, which is pretty much the real-life history of how the Italian gangsters made their fortune in the United States in the 1930s. The further additions to the characters through this spin-off somehow continue to reinforce the audience's sense of empathy for the film's main theme.

In a similar vein, Westworld (2016) pays homage to Mamoru Oshii's Ghost in the Shell (1995). As we all know, Ghost in the Shell (1995) is adapted from Masamune Shirow's manga of the same name and is considered one of the most important cyberpunk works. Although cyberpunk today has evolved from a science fiction literary genre to a social and cultural movement, the definition of cyberpunk in the mainstream media has been in a state of fragmented assemblage. Even so, there are still two highly distinctive features that distinguish cyberpunk from other science fiction genres: the ambiguous treatment of technology and the existence of a dense area of heterogeneous cultural juxtapositions dominated by visual landscapes (Yu, 2020). From these two perspectives, Westworld (2016) is not cautious about the high-tech society behind the symbolic metaphors, but is full of naked criticism, and the chaotic and decaying "Interzone" of neon lights, commercial billboards, shabby hotels, and pornographic establishments that is so common in cyberpunk works is not found in Westworld (2016), so it's almost safe to say that the 2016 series isn't a cyberpunk artwork, but that doesn't detract from the fact that the latter is highly similar to Ghost in the Shell (1995) in terms of its storytelling thrust. Westworld (2016) delves into social issues such as "what is a human being," "what is AI," and "what is the future destiny of mankind," an attitude that, like all cyberpunk works this attitude, interrogates the traditional view of the human self, questioning and challenging the ontology and subjectivity of the world (Yu, 2020). Thus, Westworld (2016) homage to Ghost in the Shell (1995) is not just a visual parody, but an intertextualization of the same philosophical and social issues. By constructing this deep relationship of intertextualization with the main themes of the classic, the audience will identify more with the logically self-contained worldview that the latter constructs in the film.

The "Oriental Punk" landscape constructed by *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), although it piles up a lot of visual symbols of different styles and tries to recreate a lot of classic scenes and elements in the ACGN field, it only stays on the surface of the visual landscape (Figure 4). In fact, there is a complete worldview behind each of the visual landscapes presented in the film, such as cyberpunk, steampunk, wasteland punk, and post-apocalyptic styles, and all of them contain very complex philosophical connotations, such as reflections on civilization, world

order, the energy crisis, and ethical issues, etc. Unfortunately, *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) doesn't choose to discuss these topics, and lacks thoughts and explorations of the state of existence of ordinary people today. It also lacks the reflection and exploration of the living conditions of ordinary people. Under this premise, the only remaining punk-like resistance in the so-called "Oriental Punk" has completely collapsed from an anti-traditional and anti-cultural attitude that should have been more three-dimensional, to a flat and simple game of good guys defeating the bad guys, i.e., a battle between two symbols of absolute justice and absolute evil. As can be seen in many excellent works, the adapted postmodern landscape needs to establish a referential intertext with the archetypes it pays homage to, and it needs to construct the landscape in the movie into a narrative space with metaphorical meaning, rather than just letting the audience browse the landscape. In this way, the retelling of myths becomes more powerful in animated films.

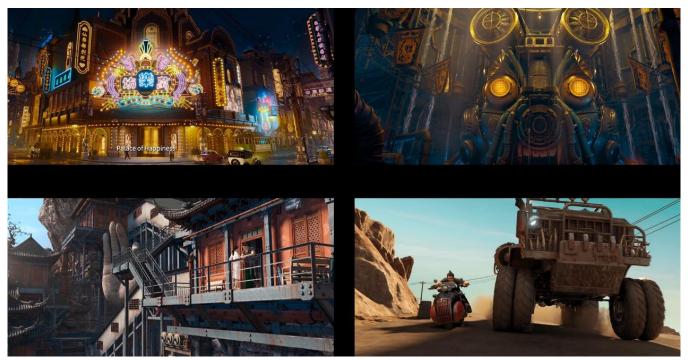


Figure 4. Screenshots of Visual Landscapes of Different Art Styles in *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) (Source: The author's research collection)

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the controversial narrative problems of *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021) through a case study of this animated film. From the perspective of retelling myths and incorporating the need to build a "Fengshen Universe" for Chinese animated films, this paper discusses the narrative problems of this animated film from four aspects. Further, it comprehends the narrative elements of retelling traditional myths in Chinese animated films.

From the perspective of building a local "IP film universe", the "all-ages" strategy can guarantee the maximization of the audience base, which requires avoiding restricted elements. Considering the lack of a movie classification system in China, as an animated movie, it is necessary to deal with the portrayal of female characters, and fully consider the social responsibility of cultural dissemination such as "gender awareness".

In the domestic and international cases mentioned above, a convincing characterization requires a complete and credible characterization and growth process. Many of the fairy, devil and demon settings in traditional Chinese mythology are inherently characterized by contradictory personalities and temperaments. In the narratives of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and other American and Japanese animated films, imperfect protagonists and understandable villains are more empathetic to the audience than absolute heroes and villains.

The revival of traditional mythological stories as a narrative resource is a response and practice of Chinese animated films to the official discourse of "cultural confidence" in recent years. The movement of retelling myths comes from literature and has subsequently gained a diffuse influence in contemporary film and television productions. It is worth focusing on the fact that retelling myths is not about retelling and recreating ancient traditional myths, but rather about placing the structure of mythological stories in a modern political and cultural

context, so it is necessary to establish a relationship between narrative themes and the social reality of the current era. From *Lotus Lantern* (1999) to *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016) to *Goodbye Monster* (2022), the lack of reflection on and criticism of contemporary themes has always been a concern in the practice of retelling myths in Chinese animated films, and it is also a familiar narrative crux of Chinese animated films in recent years.

New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021) is a pioneering attempt by Chasing Light Animation in the practice of retelling myths. The film combines Chinese style, steampunk, cyberpunk, dieselpunk, and other worldview elements to construct a complex, diversified, and compatible postmodern landscape, but regrettably, behind these innovative visual landscapes, there is a lack of a logical structure of the worldview that is consistent with the narrative theme, making various art elements float on the visible surface. Integrating the constructed postmodern landscapes into the narrative and mapping current social issues are also important issues to be solved in the future practice of retelling myths.

To summarize, although the content discussed above originates from the case of *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), the feedback from the general public indicates that these problems are common in retelling myths in Chinese animated films. By discussing the controversial narrative issues of the film, this paper attempts to sort out the narrative elements of Chinese animated films retelling traditional myths, to provide valuable references for the future creation of Chinese mythological animated films.

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