

Narrative Structure in Chinese Hero Mythology 3D Animated Films: A Study Based on the Hero's Journey Framework

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Received: September 28, 2025

Accepted: November 11, 2025

Online Published: November 26, 2025

doi:10.11114/smc.v13i4.8002

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i4.8002>

Abstract

Although Chinese mythological animation has been rather successful in the commercial world, there is a lack of systematic narrative analysis. This paper focuses on the analysis of three Chinese 3D animated movies, namely, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), *Legend of Deification* (2020), and *Monkey King Rebirth* (2021) and how they negotiate Western narrative structure with Chinese cultural values. We applied the Hero Journey of Vogler as a comparative construct with Chinese textual traditions of narrative (*qi cheng zhuan he*) to a qualitative and inter-rater textual analysis using a =.87 of Krippendorff ($\alpha = .87$). The results show that there were three trends of adaptation structural continuations with cultural content modification (*Nezha*), philosophical reconstruction with more focus on the inner development (*Legend of Deification*) and not fully integrating and becoming fragmented in narratives (*Monkey King Reborn*). Good movies incorporate the Chinese philosophical ideas, *tianming*, *xiao*, *xiuyang* in the story structure instead of simply imposing cultural decorations. This study shows that the cross-cultural adaptation of narratives must be heavily philosophically entrenched, with further research on the question of how non-Western animation can both adapt to the conventions of global storytelling without being culturally inauthentic.

Keywords: Chinese hero myth, animated film; narrative structure; Hero's Journey; mythological hero characters

1. Introduction

In recent years, animated films based on traditional Chinese myths and heroes have gradually become an essential creative direction in Chinese animation (Tang, 2023), with representative works such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) and *Legend of Deification* (2020) achieving remarkable success. The commercial and industrial success of the film cannot be read only as a commercial success, but as a crystallisation of an indigenous Chinese storytelling mode that challenges the pre-eminence of dominant Western storytelling conventions without losing its ability to appeal to audiences across the globe. Based on inheriting the archetypes of heroic mythological stories, these films have been modernized, adapted, and reconstructed, showing a distinct trend of narrative innovation (Jin & Wang, 2023). Although the success of these representative films has pushed the development of Chinese mythological animation films, looking at the overall development of Chinese mythological animation films, most of the films in this genre still face significant challenges in terms of narrative quality and scriptwriting methods (Pan & Yao, 2024). Many animation creators have difficulties in mastering systematic scriptwriting methods, resulting in obvious deficiencies in story structure, characterization, and narrative logic (Kong, 2023). As one of the core elements of animation film scriptwriting, narrative structure not only affects the story rhythm and characterization of the film (Yang & Qin, 2024) but also serves as an important bridge connecting traditional culture and contemporary audiences. Despite regular industry reporting of box office success, few studies systematically analyze how Chinese mythological films navigate the intersection of traditional Chinese storytelling traditions and internationally recognized narrative conventions (Li & Wei, 2023). The neglect of such is also notable since narrative design is the bread and butter of the structure that ultimately affects viewer appeal, character development, and culture-to-culture appeal.

The Hero's Journey, as a classic mythological narrative theory, was later adapted by Christopher Vogler into a twelve-stage narrative structure that is more applicable to the writing of movie scripts (Hambly, 2021). The model is widely used in Hollywood films and Western mythological texts and is highly systematic and operational. The past few years have seen the literary and filmic discussion of the Hero's journey repositioned as focusing on the critical re-examination of its inherently Western presumptions and the demand that its application must be culturally specific

and contextualized (Hanney, 2024). Existing study forms part of this discourse by showing that Chinese animations are tactically engaged by Chinese animations in strategically mobilising, reorganising and sometimes transcending the canonical template to continue delivering narratives that concurrently celebrate local cultures and present sentimental interests to international viewers. By selecting two representative animated films with high box office and influence in China and a controversial film as a research sample, this paper combs through their story development paths, analyzes their compatibility with the twelve-stage model of the "Hero's Journey," their differences, and the characteristics of localized adaptation, and then reveals the modern narrative of Chinese animation while inheriting the traditional mythological narrative. This paper analyzes their story development paths and compatibility with the twelve-stage model of "Hero's Journey," their differences, and localized adaptation features to reveal the modern narrative strategies of Chinese animation in inheriting traditional mythological narratives.

The motivation of this study lies in the following: on the one hand, despite the vigorous development of Chinese mythological animation films, academic analysis of their script structure is still relatively weak; on the other hand, as a classic cross-cultural narrative theory, the "Hero's Journey" model has seldom been analyzed and applied in the creation of Chinese local mythological animation. This inquiry explores the transnational dissemination of narrative traditions through the lenses of cross-cultural adaptation, adding to existing conversation of transnational flow of storytelling. To introduce the themes of these complexities into circulation, the paper examines three films, *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), *Legend of Deification* (2020), and *Monkey King Reborn* (2021), and states that successful localization requires more than a literal translation approach as it requires a comprehensive re-engineering of narrative structures that are able to appeal to varying philosophical streams as well as value sets and aesthetics.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section will elaborate on this by analyzing the theoretical framework's twelve stages of narrative and its applicability.

2.1 The Twelve Stages of the "Hero's Journey" Narrative Framework

The Hero's Journey as the most paradigmatic narrative theoretical system of the 20th century, was first systematically elaborated by American mythologist Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) (Bay Gülsen, 2024), which revealed deep structural commonalities in the heroic narratives of different civilizations (Hosseini & Izadi, 2023). Patsiaouras (2022) said this discovery opened a new path for comparative mythology, laid the theoretical foundation of modern narratology, and greatly impacted literature, art, and film. Numerous critics argue that even the original theoretical formulation of Campbell was based on the reductivist interpretation of world mythologies through a lens of Western psychoanalysis, resulting in what is known among some academics as the Hollywood McMyth and flattening out a collection of non-homogenous cultures into formulae (Hanney 2024).

This critique becomes especially meaningful once defined with regards to Chinese mythological traditions that value collective unity, cyclical change, and spiritual growth much more highly than individual heroism, and linear progression. The values of Chinese storytelling are completely contrary to that of Western heroism narratives in regards to individualistic triumph that is situated historically within Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophy (Hughes 2024). As recent research into the history of Chinese animated film reveals, today filmmakers have to compromise these ideological tensions to create hybrid narratives to respect the traditional cultural values of a local audience while continuing the tradition of narrative logic that a global audience recognises (Wan 2024). These productions never simply adaptively analogue Western forms, but they also embody what the scholars refer to as the aesthetics of "Oriental Punk," which assumes a synthesis between traditional Chinese culture and the modern universal standards of animation (Jin, Kao, and Liao 2024).

The Chinese animation of today is systematic in terms of narrative structure. Effective movies creatively blend the western narrative with Chinese philosophical information, keeping it accessible to everyone in the world and retaining the cultural authenticity (Chen, 2024). The commercial effectiveness of these works points toward the knowledge that successful cross-cultural storytelling requires more than culturally superficial allusion; it required a fundamental incorporation of cultural ideology into story structure.

In filmmaking, Christopher Vogler creatively transformed Joseph Campbell's theory in *The Writer's Journey* (2007). He simplified the otherwise complex mythological model into twelve specific actionable narrative stages and reinforced the value of applying character archetype theory (Vogler, 2007). This framework is not only applied in Hollywood's screenwriting methodology but has also been widely popularized in mythological animated film scriptwriting (Ianniello, 2023). As shown in Figure 2.1, this study maps out the steps of each stage of the Hero's Journey framework. This adaptation makes the "Hero's Journey" theory particularly suitable for the narrative characteristics of animated films - its clear division of stages and character function settings precisely meet the needs of animated works for fast-paced and distinctive characterization. Wong and Achin (2021) point out that a good script should have a clear narrative structure and identify the twelve stages of the narrative by combining timecode measurements, and the "Hero's Journey" model is

considered an effective tool for delineating the stages of narrative structure in animated films. Because of this, the model has been widely used in teaching animation screenwriting and script development and has become a classic paradigm in contemporary film and television narrative theory, showing substantial practical guidance value (Wei et al., 2025).

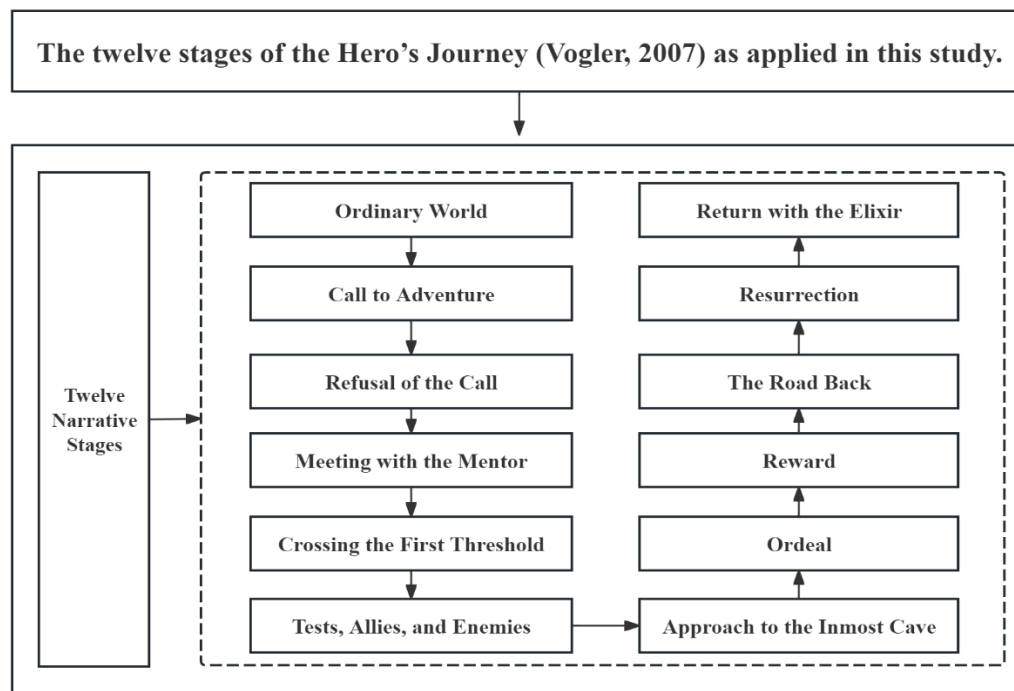


Figure 1. The twelve stages of the Hero's Journey (Vogler, 2007) as applied in this study (Source: Author's own illustration)

Although the framework is derived from Western mythological systems, its deep structure has universal significance. It can echo Eastern cultural themes of "cultivation," "awakening," and "returning," among others. It also has the potential for cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, as the core theoretical framework tool of this study, this study analyzes the narrative structure of the three film samples based on the narrative framework of "Hero's Journey" to seek a systematic scriptwriting path for the animated film scripts of Chinese heroes and myths, as well as to provide theoretical support for the understanding of the narrative strategies and cultural expressions of these films in the global context. It also provides theoretical support for understanding these films' narrative strategy and cultural expression in the global context.

2.1.1 Chinese Narrative Traditions: *Qi Cheng Zhuan He* and Indigenous Frameworks

Although the Hero's Journey by Vogler offers a systematic approach to the analysis, the Chinese narrative traditions offer similar structures based on different philosophical basis. *Theqi cheng zhuan he* (*Qi Cheng Zhuan Jie*) form--which translates into introduction, development, turn, conclusion--is a model of four parts of the narrative, which is the basis of Chinese storytelling in poetry, drama, and prose (Vorontzov, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 1997). *Qi chengzhuan he*, unlike the Western three-act story, focuses more on narrative change by focusing on the *zhuan* (turn) aspect, which changes the angle of vision, as opposed to conflict resolution (Cahill, 2003).

Chinese narratology scholars but especially Zhang Yiwu and Wang Ning have explained how Chinese patterns of narrative express culturally particular values of circular logic, holistic conceptions, and harmony among people other than individual success (Shang, 2014; Yang, 1997). The Chinese narrative theory created by Wang Ning illustrates that a successful cross-cultural analysis should be based on the idea that numerous narrative paradigms are equally important instead of Western traditions being regarded as universal norms (Wang, 2008).

Traditional Chinese Narrative Elements Include:

Stress on the moral development (xiuyang) rather than on exterior success. Cyclic as opposed to linear development.

Social decision making against individual success.

A synthesis of philosophical ideas of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoist thought.

Shi-tu (师徒) master-disciple relationships as transformative structures

Internal transformation through *yixiang* (意象) or poetic image

The structure of *qi cheng zhuan he* is quite different in contrast to Western narrative, as *zhuan* (turn) is a philosophical or emotional turn and not a climax of the plot. This form gives room to what Western tradition of narratology would call inconclusive endings in which there is psychological or spiritual closure and no plot resolution. The difference is essential when studying Chinese animated movies, as the authors tend to mix the Western structural clarity and the Chinese philosophical in-depth.

Kishōtenketsu (起承転結), the Japanese adaptation of the Chinese model, follows the same model of the Chinese version, placing emphasis on the turn as being a perspective change. Recent research by Oh (2025) investigates how this framework can be expanded to include non-conflicting, even philosophical or introspective storytelling-features that are becoming more common in the modern Chinese animation.

This paper will use Vogler framework, not as a normative norm but as a comparative tool of analysis by the way the Chinese animated films bargain between the Western narrative principles and the Chinese storytelling traditions. Through the examination of a convergence and divergence, we will uncover how these movies produce hybrid narratives that can be addressed to the local and global viewer. This theoretical synthesis will deal with the shortcoming that has been noted by reviewers, in that the manuscript was previously assuming that the Hero Journey was a universal norm and not merely a framework that is equal to others.

2.2 Applicability of the Theoretical Framework

The present research uses the twelve-step narrative paradigm of "Hero's Journey" as a comparative instrument of analysis as opposed to a standard. We do not adopt the framework proposed by Vogler as universal, but instead we place it together with the native Chinese narrative models (*qi cheng zhuan he*) to explore how the modern Chinese animated movies engage in negotiations among the various storytelling traditions. This method recognizes that effective cross-cultural animation is not the simple application of Western paradigms but a strategic restructuring, adaptation, and even overcoming of them towards producing stories that are sensitive to more than one culture.

Firstly, at the level of narrative structure, we systematically analyze the plot development of the three films and compare them with the theoretical framework of "Hero's Journey" one by one. This study focuses on (1) the correspondence of key narrative stages, (2) the adjustment and reorganization of the sequence of narrative stages, and (3) the absence of specific narrative functions to clarify the local characteristics and innovative adaptation of Chinese mythological animation narratives. Secondly, in the specific operation, this study adopts the method of textual analysis to encode the content, categorize and label the film's plot text according to the twelve stages of the "hero's journey". It performs structural analysis by combining the dimensions of visual symbols, character relationships, and plot twists and turns. Finally, this study pays attention to the adaptation and challenge of the unique elements of Chinese cultural background to the theoretical structure, reveals the relationship between traditional Chinese myths and Western narrative theories, and shows the creative transformation of Chinese mythological animation creation in the context of globalization.

3. Methods and Date

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, using textual analysis as the data collection method, to explore the narrative structure of Chinese 3D animated films based on heroes and myths through the theoretical framework of "Hero's Journey" (Vogler, 2007). Second, the twelve-stage structure aligns with the rapid pacing and visual exposition characteristic of contemporary animated films, allowing for precise identification of narrative functions and transitions.

The story architecture by Vogler is an analytical framework that has become extensively followed by the global filmmaking industry nowadays. Applied to Chinese cinema, it provides a didactic insight into the existing modalities of resistance, adaptation, and innovation dominating the sphere and the general trends that govern the formation of narratives on the worldwide scale. Such orientation by the study has avoided restoring of a binary opposition, whether simplistic or not, between western and non-western paradigms of narrative, but focused on how particular cultural contexts re-arrange and provincialize that which seems to be universal components of story-telling.

The research approach is constructivist in approach which questions how textual meaning is co-constructed in context of certain cultural milieu. Its main aim is to explain the structural logic of the growth line of the archetypical hero and to trace its local realizations.. In the selection of samples, this study has chosen three representative Chinese mythological animated films as samples: *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), *Legend of Deification* (2020), and *Monkey King Reborn* (2021), as shown in the following table 1. The three recent filmic translations of mythological material under discussion here take three different approaches: continuity, experimentation and incongruence. *Nezha* represents an efficient combination of Western narrative formula with Chinese cultural context, as it succeeded both commercially and in the respect of critics. *Legend of Deification*, in comparison, assumes a self-conscious attitude to heroic narrative tropes, and instead of a naturalistic action or action-adventure mode takes a philosophical bent. And, lastly, *Monkey*

King Reborn is the example of the impossibility to blend unique cultural traditions completely, providing a valuable example in cross-cultural adaptation challenges (Yang, 2022).

To date, several studies have shown that the mainstream method of assessing a film's success is still based primarily on box office performance (Carrillat et al., 2018; Hofmann et al., 2017). Therefore, there are three reasons for the selection criteria of the sample frame in this study: first, a theatrical film based on a traditional Chinese mythological hero and produced using 3D animation. Second, it has a particular box office, and its box office data should be more than 100 million yuan, with broad market influence and cultural dissemination value. Finally, the films of this genre listed on China Douban Film Network and have a gap in ratings are selected. Wu et al. (2021) argued that the review data of China Douban Film Network contains great mining research value, and the analysis of animated movie ratings can objectively reflect the quality of animated films presented and the problems generally expressed by the audience.

Table 1. Composition of the sample frame for data collection in this study.

Rank	Film Title	Box Office (RMB 100 million)	Douban Film Rating (China)	Release Date
1	<i>Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child</i>	50.35	8.4	July 2019
2	<i>Legend of Deification</i>	16.02	6.6	October 2020
3	<i>Monkey King Reborn</i>	1.14	5.3	August 2021

The box office data is sourced from Dengta Professional Edition – China's Domestic Animation Box Office Ranking (retrieved on March 28, 2025).

To make the logic of data collection and analysis of this study clear and rigorous, this study adopts a systematic data analysis process, which consists of four progressive research steps: firstly, through multiple rounds of in-depth viewing and close reading of the plot text, a complete narrative database is established; secondly, to ensure systematic and theoretical support for the analysis, this study is strictly based on the twelve-phase framework of the Hero's Journey, and the narrative units are divided into twelve stages. Secondly, to ensure systematic analysis and theoretical support, this study divides the film into narrative units strictly according to the twelve-stage framework of the "Hero's Journey," which is used to systematically analyze the script structure of the sample animated films and ensure the unity of the following coding step. Finally, a cross-text comparative analysis is conducted through the production stage comparison table to refine the three films' cultural commonalities and localized characteristics regarding narrative structure.

Rigorous Coding Procedures and Reliability Measures were employed in the study. It can be phased as:

1. Orientation Phase: Comprehensive review of Vogler's framework and coding criteria
2. Calibration Phase: Joint analysis of pilot scenes until achieving Krippendorff's $\alpha \geq .80$
3. Independent Coding Phase: Separate analysis of complete films using standardized coding sheets
4. Reconciliation Phase: Discussion of discrepancies and consensus-building
5. Validation Phase: Third-party adjudication of unresolved disagreements

The final dataset achieved Krippendorff's $\alpha = .87$, indicating strong inter-rater reliability. Our three-point coding system (1 = fully present, 0.5 = partial presence, 0 = absent) allows for nuanced analysis of how narrative stages may be modified, compressed, or partially realized in different cultural contexts.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the research findings, the findings were verified and validated in this study through triangulation, member feedback, or external expert review (Creswell, 2014).

4. Findings

Based on the "Hero's Journey" narrative theoretical model (Vogler, 2007), this chapter conducts a case study and comparative analysis of the narrative structures of three 3D animated films based on Chinese mythology, identifying how the framework is adapted, varied, and corresponds to in the three works. In the current study we put forward a scheme of analyzing the narrative coherence offering three overlapping dimensions which are structural integrity, the scope of the character transformation and narrative logic used to contrast thematic coherence with narrative structure. This framework is subsequently analyzed by cultural adaptation and its operational application on the pedagogy practice.

4.1 Case Study Analysis

Case Study 1: *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* - Masterful Cultural Integration

The Ordinary World (Fully Present): The movie puts Ne Zha in an initial position of existential alienation where this situation is not just physical solitude, but a profound feeling of estrangement which is rooted in the Chinese philosophical notions of fate (ming) and social harmony (he). In contrast to the motifs typical of the Western narrative,

where main characters are often presented as outcasts who are trying to achieve personal growth, Ne Zha is presented as a creature who is in fundamental opposition with cosmological order and who is confused with the reincarnation of the Demon Pill. This initial situation expressly alludes to Chinese philosophical debates about predestined fate and at the same time sets out universal themes of belonging and acceptance.

Call to Adventure through Cultural Destiny (Fully Present): The announcement that Ne Zha is an immortal spirit who has both a limited life time forms a personal crisis as well as a cosmological conundrum. The text is able to combine the Western conceptions of the heroic calling with the Chinese notions of tianming (heavenly mandate); both types of audience, the Western spectators who are familiar with the idea of heroic destiny, and Chinese readers who are used to hearing of the discussions about the control between fate and free will, are interested in such an attitude.

Refusal of the Call through Philosophical Rebellion (Fully Present): The contemporary cinematic adaptation of Fei Tian of the refusal of Ne Zha in his assigned destiny is much more than a conventional demonstration of hesitation in accepting the divine determination; it gains the scale of an open act of resistance to the natural order- an act that resembles and, in some aspects, even perfects, traditional Chinese literary traditions of upright disobedience towards rapacious power. In effect, the movie displaces Western psychological paradigms of struggle with Chinese philosophical aesthetic.

The foremost example of this adaptation is the manner in which mentorship is treated. Unlike Western mentor-hero relations, which are often focused on learning various skills, classical Chinese Shifu Tudi relationships insist upon gradual moral improvement. Fei Tian manages this discrepancy through her offering a variety of mentor characters whose teaching progresses the moral and spiritual growth of Ne Zha without breaking with local pedagogical value systems.

Ordeal and Resurrection through Filial Sacrifice (Fully Present):

The heroic moment of the Ordeal changes the personal heroic victory to a filial sacrifice (xiao), a Confucian family morality. The fact that Ne Zha prefers to sacrifice personal identity to save the family and society and later resurrecting after the community accepts him, which is not an individualistic act, shows a significant localization of the narrative role in culture. Instead of triumphing over external foes as the Western heroes usually do, the development of Ne Zha comes as a response to the cultural patterns of the Chinese population and is structurally comprehensible to the global audience. This cultural authenticity is explicitly mentioned in Douban user reviews, and the best-rated ones talk about the film having a Chinese core with international appeal and that it dispels the myths about Chinese mythology (Douban, 2019; top-rated review, 50,000+ user votes).

Case Study 2: Legend of Deification - Philosophical Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Inverted Ordinary World - The Fall from Grace (Partially Present): Instead of introducing an ideal hero who is called to be slated to adventurous activities, the film begins with Jiang Ziya being banished out of the celestial realm and, hence, reversing the conventional expectations about the narrative of the hero. This subversive continuation of the fallen god trope challenges Western norms of heroic plots at the same time as the echoing with Chinese literary tradition of exemplary officials sent into exile as a result of their moral uprightness.

Continuous Refusal and Philosophical Doubt (Fully Present): The plot of Jiang Ziya does not follow the structuring of such traditional heroes as he does not give up his philosophical defiance until the end of his narrative. This kind of uncertainty over a long period parallel learning customs in Chinese intellectual culture where great emphasis was on careful moral reflection at the expense of acting on impulse when arriving at a decision, and the result is one who embodies the ideals of the reflective intellectual, as opposed to the more Western model of action and aggression.

Absent Mentor and Self-Cultivation (Absent): The film's most significant departure from Vogler's framework involves the complete absence of traditional mentorship. Jiang Ziya's transformation occurs through internal cultivation (xiuyang) and moral reasoning rather than external guidance. This reflects Chinese philosophical traditions that emphasize self-cultivation and internal moral development, particularly Confucian and Buddhist approaches to wisdom acquisition.

Spiritual Ordeal and Moral Choice (Fully Present): The final part of the movie is characterized by self-reflection instead of explicit fighting, which brings moral logic and the dilemma caused by collisions of values to the forefront. Jiang Ziya, needs to find equilibrium in the forces of the supernatural potency and humanistic nature of empathy, cosmic well-being and human clemency. Such a philosophical exigence not only owes itself to the Chinese corpus of philosophical thought but also maintains a narrative tension in which psychological effort supersedes visual action.

Humanization as Resurrection (Modified Present): Rather than returning with enhanced power or status, Jiang Ziya's "resurrection" involves conscious choice to abandon divinity for humanity. This inversion of traditional heroic triumph reflects Chinese philosophical values that often prioritize humility and service over power and recognition.

These examples of ambivalence in the critical reception of the film, along with the comparatively minor commercial success of the film, which by any measure was not nearly as successful as Ne Zha, demonstrate the potential and the

constraints of radical narrative experimentation. Critics praised the philosophical sophistication of and visual ingenuity of the production, but some of the aspects of its design appeared to limit its overall popularity; although viewers clearly do not object to the introduction of significant twists in the narrative frame (as has been the case ever since the deconstruction of the Brechtian narrative model), the explicit deconstruction of classical hero archetypes may have limited the film to a smaller audience.

Case Study 3: *Monkey King Reborn* - Incomplete Integration and Missed Opportunities

Narrative outcomes are highly dependent on the context of production. *Monkey King Reborn* was made under significantly different conditions in comparison with *Nezha* with a much smaller budget and a much shorter production period. The challenges affecting Chinese animation firms constantly are shortages of talents, restrained R&D budgets, and the necessity to produce works in a short-periodic manner (Li, 2021; Yan et al., 2024). The movie also tried a more experimental visual approach of mixing the classic Chinese inpainting style with 3D animation, which could have cost the film resources, spent better on the screenplay (Yang, 2022). Such systemic industrial factors should be put into perspective in the assessment of narrative quality.

Fragmentary Ordinary World and Motivational Gaps (Partially Present): The film establishes Sun Wukong's post-imprisonment existence but fails to adequately develop his psychological state or relationship to the ordinary world. Unlike *Ne Zha*'s careful establishment of character psychology and social position, *Monkey King Reborn* provides insufficient context for understanding the protagonist's initial condition, creating motivational gaps that persist throughout the narrative.

Weak Call to Adventure and Emotional Engagement (Partially Present): While the threat of the White Wolf and involvement of the reincarnated girl technically constitute a call to adventure, the film fails to establish compelling reasons for Sun Wukong's eventual commitment. The emotional connection between hero and stakes remains underdeveloped, reducing audience investment in the outcome.

Absent Mentorship and Lost Opportunity (Absent): Perhaps most significantly, the film entirely lacks meaningful mentorship, missing opportunities to engage Chinese master-disciple traditions that could have provided both structural coherence and cultural authenticity. Sun Wukong's transformation occurs without guidance or wisdom transmission, making his character development feel arbitrary rather than earned.

Confused Ordeal and Unclear Stakes (Partially Present): The climactic confrontation between Sun Wukong and his moral dilemma regarding the girl's fate creates potential for meaningful ordeal, but the film fails to clearly establish the stakes or consequences of different choices. The resolution feels more convenient than inevitable, undermining dramatic impact.

Ambiguous Return and Social Impact (Absent/Ambiguous): The film's conclusion provides no clear sense of how Sun Wukong's journey impacts the larger world or what wisdom he brings back to ordinary reality. This absence of meaningful return weakens the overall narrative arc and fails to provide satisfying closure.

Analysis of online reviews and critical commentary reveals that audiences specifically identified these structural weaknesses, with many noting the film's "emotional drift" and lack of clear character motivation (Douban User Reviews, 2022). The film's underperformance relative to other mythological animations in our sample suggests that structural integrity remains crucial for audience engagement, even when visual production values remain high.

Although our structural analysis reveals narrative fragmentation, there are other possible ways of understanding it. The movie can also be deliberately focused on the visual narration rather than on the verbal one with references to the Chinese aesthetics tradition of focus on *yixiang* (*Yi Xiang*, poetic image) instead of exposition. The lack of plot in favor of contemplative visual sequences might indicate conscious artistic decisions as opposed to lack of narrative, which indicates an experimental attitude towards cross-cultural adaptation that places emphasis on visual poetry and narrative form.

4.1.1 Audience Reception Analysis: Douban Review Insights

To support the arguments about the audience perception and cultural appeal, this paper reviewed publicly accessible Douban review data on all three movies and assessed both quantitative appraisal on the websites and qualitative thematizing trends in user comments. Although this method is an understanding of the constraints of online populations being self-selected, Douban is the main resource of Chinese film critique and offers an important understanding of the perception of the audience (Wu et al., 2021).

Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child

- Douban Rating: 8.4/10 (from approximately 1.2 million users)
- Box Office Performance: ¥50.35 billion (top-performing film in sample)
- Top positive themes in user comments: "cultural innovation," "emotional depth," "authentic characterization," "philosophical resonance"

- Representative high-rated review (50,000+ user endorsements): "Finally, a Chinese animated film that respects both tradition and modern storytelling, achieving harmony between local and global aesthetics"
- Critical consensus: Praised for structural clarity and cultural authenticity

Legend of Deification

- Douban Rating: 6.6/10 (from approximately 500,000 users)
- Box Office Performance: ¥16.02 billion
- Top positive themes: "philosophical sophistication," "visual artistry," "mature themes," "experimental narrative"
- Mixed reception patterns: Praised by intellectually-oriented viewers for ambition but critiqued by mainstream audiences for "slow pacing" and "narrative complexity"
- Representative review (widely endorsed by niche audiences): "A thinking person's animation that rewards contemplation, though its philosophical density may limit mainstream appeal"
- Critical assessment: Respected for ambition but acknowledged as acquiring taste film.

Monkey King Reborn

- Douban Rating: 5.3/10 (from approximately 100,000 users)
- Box Office Performance: ¥1.14 billion (significantly underperformed)
- Most popular negative comments by users: "poor character motivation," "lack of emotion," "lack of consistency in the storytelling," "deficient character growth," "lack of visual beauty cannot save inappropriate storytelling,"
- Most-endorsed negative review (the largest number of users endorse it): "There is no way that beautiful images can defeat the lost plot - characters are not motivated enough and the emotional character of the story is not natural but forced.
- Little positive criticism was given, but it was confined to technical animation and action sequences as opposed to plot or character.

Analysis and Implications:

This reception data supports the structural analysis of this study. Movies that have reached a full narrative structure and rich philosophical construction (Nezha) are highly rated and have huge viewer visits. On the other hand, partial integration of narrative structure (Monkey King Reborn) leads to significant audience discontent even though there is technical merit, user reviews clearly demonstrate structural flaws and not visual or technical constraints.

The ambivalent reaction of Legend of Deification is especially educative. This movie shows that the modern viewer is willing to see a movie that has been experimented with the narrative and philosophical layers, but needs enough structural integrity to be able to feel emotions. The strong reception of the film by intellectual audiences and low popularity among the mainstream audiences indicates that it segments the market in terms of the level of audience sophistication and cultural literacy.

Implications for Narrative Practice:

The high correlation between the structural integrity and the depth of culture and the audience reception implies that effective cross-cultural animation must be performed both in terms of these dimensions concurrently. Neither Western narrative authenticity through cultural specificity nor cultural specificity through Western narrative coherence in and of itself will guarantee audience reach. Instead, the success of localization is implemented in what is described in this study as a deep integration- when cultural values, philosophical ideas, and characterization are inbuilt in narrative architecture as opposed to being decorative.

4.2 Cross-Film Comparative Analysis and Cultural Patterns

Pattern 1: Selective Structural Adoption: All three films retain core structural elements of departure, initiation, and return while selectively modifying specific stages to accommodate Chinese cultural values. The most successful adaptations (Ne Zha) maintain overall framework integrity while transforming content and meaning. Less successful attempts (Monkey King Reborn) compromise structural coherence through incomplete implementation.

Pattern 2: Philosophical Integration vs. Surface Adaptation: Films achieving critical and commercial success integrate Chinese philosophical traditions into narrative architecture rather than merely adding cultural references. Ne Zha's integration of concepts like tianming and xiao into heroic journey structure creates authentic cultural resonance. Legend of Deification's emphasis on moral cultivation and self-reflection draws deeply from Chinese intellectual traditions while challenging Western heroic assumptions.

Pattern 3: Mentorship and Wisdom Transmission: The treatment of mentorship reveals fundamental differences between Chinese and Western pedagogical traditions. Chinese master-disciple relationships emphasize gradual moral development and wisdom transmission rather than skill acquisition. Films that successfully adapt these traditions create more culturally authentic narratives while maintaining structural familiarity.

These patterns indicate that successful cross-cultural narrative adaptation requires what we term "deep localization"—fundamental integration of cultural values into narrative architecture rather than superficial cultural decoration of Western storytelling formulas

After analyzing three 3D animated films based on Chinese mythology, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, *Legend of Deification*, and *Monkey King Reborn*, this study further compares them horizontally through the twelve-stage framework of the Hero's Journey. This comparative analysis not only helps to clarify the specific adaptations of each film in terms of narrative structure but also reveals the common characteristics and different paths of Chinese mythological animation in terms of story construction. The following table shows the correspondence between the stages of the three films under the structure of "Hero's Journey," with "√" (highly compatible), "△" (partially presented/weaker), "×" (partially presented/weaker), and "—" (missing or ambiguous):

Table 2. Comparison of the structural fit of the three films within the twelve stages of the "Hero's Journey" narrative framework

Twelve stages	<i>Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child</i>	<i>Legend of Deification</i>	<i>Monkey King Reborn</i>
1. The Ordinary World	√Present clearly	√Fall/Exile	√ Silent state after sealing
2. Call to Adventure	√Awakening of Fate	√ Ethical Awakening via Xiao Jiu	√ White wolf recovery drives crisis
3. Refusal of the Call	√Escape/angry resistance	√ Shaken faith/psychological resistance	√ Refusal to fight again/negative attitude
4. Meeting the Mentor	√Taiyi's guidance	×Missing	×Missing
5. Crossing the Threshold	√ Determined to take on destiny	√ Take Xiao Jiu away.	△Motivation is insufficient
6. Tests, Allies, Enemies	√ Fighting and friendship against each other	△ Driven by inner trials	√ Action-based combat
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave	√Facing self-destruction	√ Revealing the truth of deification	√ Identify the White Bone Spirit
8. Ordeal	√ The choice of parental sacrifice	√ Decision on sacrificing Xiao Jiu	√ The dilemma of killing or saving
9. Reward	√ Social acceptance/self-actualization	△Spiritual Cognitive Enhancement	× Missing positive reward depictions
10. The Road Back	√ return as a god	√ Rejecting divinity and returning to humanity	△ Lack of social transformation
11. Resurrection	√ Rebirth	√ spiritual awakening	√ Regains his fighting spirit
12.Return with the Elixir	√ Bringing hope/value transfer	△ End of Spiritual Reflection	△ Ambiguous in spiritual meaning

As can be seen from the above comparison table, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* presents almost the entire 12 stages of the "Hero's Journey" in its entirety, forming a clear and systematic growth arc, with a high degree of correspondence between the psychological changes of the characters and their external actions, making it a typical case of a "high fit" type. It represents a typical example of strong alignment with the framework. From motivation to awakening, from trial to sacrifice, each link has a clear node and emotional progression, supporting the entire work's narrative tension and emotional resonance.

Legend of Deification, on the other hand, shows a significant tendency toward "structural reconstruction." Although its external journey and stage paths can still partially correspond to the model framework, its focus shifts to "inner moral awakening" and "faith remodeling." The focus has shifted to "inner moral awakening" and "faith remodeling." For example, the absence of the "mentor role" and the spiritualization of the "reward stage" shows the film's localized reinterpretation of the framework. It establishes a kind of "inner transformative hero's journey," which provides the classical model with new possibilities for local philosophizing.

In contrast, although *Monkey King Reborn* intentionally retains several structural nodes in its storytelling, the overall presentation is somewhat ambiguous. Especially in the key stages of "Mentor's Guidance," 'Reward' and "The Road Back," the expression is weak, making the character transformation unconvincing. From the perspective of the Hero's Journey structure, the film falls into the category of "low adaptability." Although the plot progresses in a journey, the emotional logic, sublimation of values, and character growth are not sufficiently handled, making it challenging to build up the overall narrative tension effectively.

Saldaña (2021) explicitly states that Ordinal Coding can be used to classify qualitative data into hierarchical levels, to realize cross-sectional comparative analysis. To effectively compare the degree of embodiment of different animated films in the

narrative structure of the “Hero's Journey”, this study constructs a three-valued quantitative system (1, 0.5, 0) based on the method of textual analysis: 1 means that this stage is fully embodied in the film; 0.5 means that this stage is only partially presented or weakly performed; 0 means that this stage is missing or not embodied and not represented.

This hierarchical rating system, guided by a theoretical framework, is widely applicable to structural textual analysis and comparative case studies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). It not only enhances the clarity and standardization of the coding process but also strengthens the comparability and visualization of the structural embodiment of different films across the twelve stages of the Hero's Journey, laying a solid analytical foundation for subsequent research and discussion. The following figure 2 shows the comparison of the degree of embodiment of the three films in the twelve stages of the “Hero's Journey.”

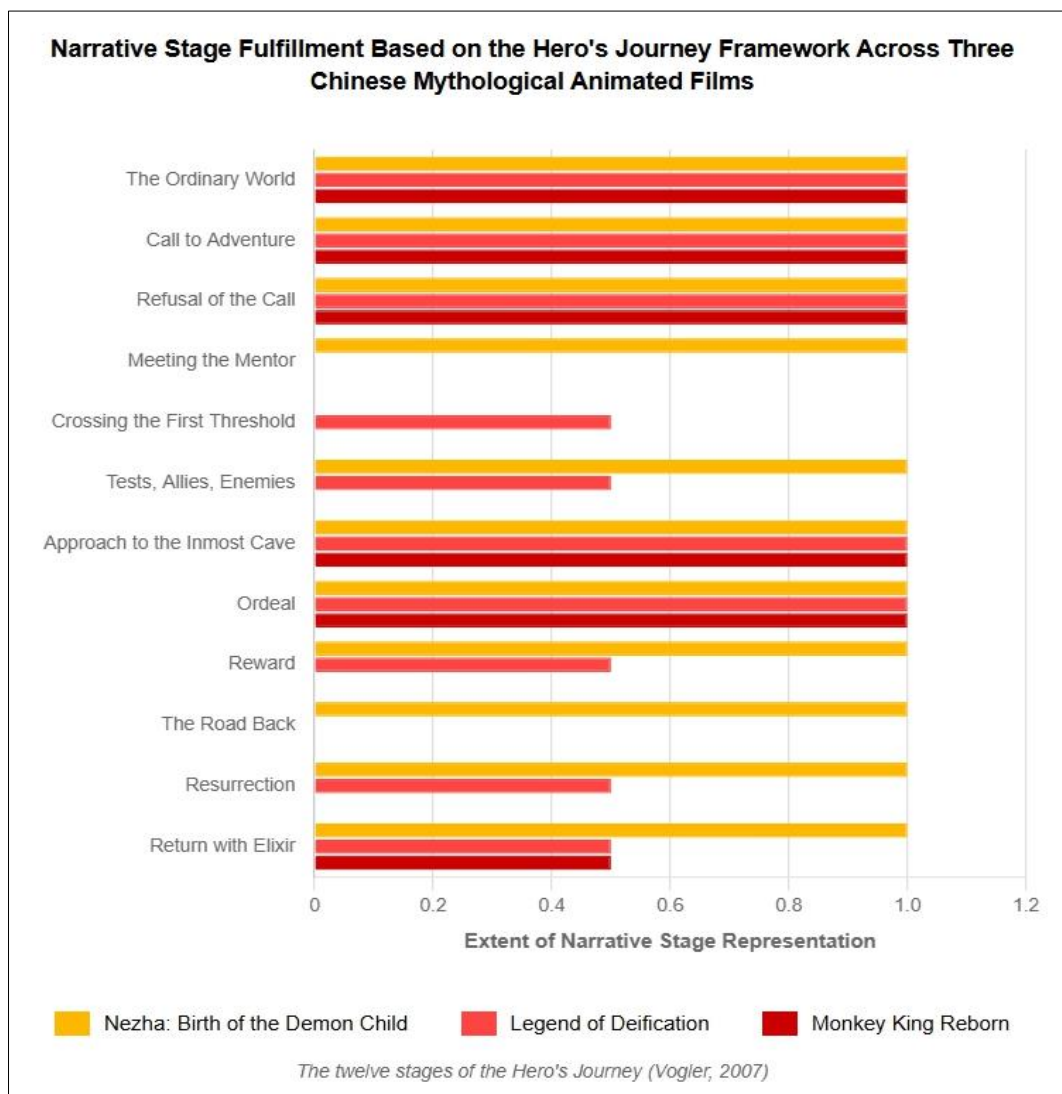


Figure 2. Comparative Visualization of the Hero's Journey Stages in Three Chinese Heroic Mythology Animated Films
(Source: Author's own illustration)

Comparative analysis shows that the "Hero's Journey" can be used as an essential narrative framework in the creation stage of animation scripts and still has significant value as a reference for narrative structure in Chinese mythological animation films. Whether or not it is effectively utilized directly impacts the growth trajectory of the characters, the narrative rhythm, and the degree of audience empathy. Studies have shown that when Chinese animation utilizes the classic international narrative framework to convey local values, it is more conducive to cross-cultural acceptance. The success of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* demonstrates that structural clarity and cultural resonance can provide Chinese animation with a reference narrative path for global dissemination. Therefore, when Chinese mythological hero animation draws on classic model frameworks, it should consider the integrity of the narrative structure and cultural uniqueness and realize the dual values of narrative optimization and cultural expression through framework orientation and cultural embedding.

5. Discussion: Implications for Theory and Practice

5.1 Theoretical Contributions to Narrative Studies

Firstly, our analysis reveals that successful cultural localization operates at the level of narrative architecture, not merely content. Chinese animated films achieve cultural authenticity by transforming the philosophical and moral foundations underlying familiar structural elements, creating hybrid narratives that speak to multiple cultural traditions simultaneously.

Secondly, our findings suggest that contemporary global audiences possess sufficient cultural literacy to appreciate narratives that integrate unfamiliar cultural elements within familiar structural frameworks. The commercial success of *NeZha* in international markets indicates growing appetite for culturally specific stories that maintain structural accessibility.

5.2 Negotiating Narrative Frameworks: Beyond the Hero's Journey

We have analyzed that the most successful Chinese mythological animations do not merely impose Western frames but instead, they engage in a negotiation process of several narrative frames. There are three levels of this negotiation:

Structural Level: A successful film has consistent three act or journey based structures to be read worldwide, but rearranges internal phases to suit Chinese narrative logic. The fact that *qi cheng zhuan* focuses on transformative turn instead of conflict climax is one of the basic 180-degree changes in the purpose of narration. These narratives do not lead to a conflict with the outside world, as they being built to the inside, to a transformation or philosophical awakening.

Philosophical Level: Western ideas of personal heroism are reconceptualized in systematic structure using Chinese constructs of group harmonies, filial piety (*xiao*), moral cultivation (*xiuyang*), and heavenly command (*tianming*). This revolution completely changes the role of narrative but still retains a familiar structure. The victory of the hero in Chinese situations is developed to be achieved by playing with the social responsibility instead of surpassing the personal barriers.

Pedagogical Level: Western mentor-student relations are changed into *shifu-tudi* relations which focus more on the transmission of wisdom and moral growth and less on the acquisition of skills. This difference represents well-rooted Confucianism educational traditions that emphasized formation of character rather than technical skills.

Implications for Cross-Cultural Narrative Theory:

This multilevel negotiation posits that cross-cultural narrative success involves what this paper calls deep localization, an incorporation of cultural values into narrative structures other than shallow cultural embellishing of Western recipes. Superficial (additional) injection of cultural features (costumes, settings, the names of characters) without structural change also form what some critics refer to as orientalist aesthetics to a visual signifier of otherness; this does not alter structural logic in the narrative, as it remains western.

Films such as *Nezha* are successful because they manage to attain what can be called structural bilingualism, such that Western and Chinese narrative grammars do not contradict each other. This entails complex knowledge on the philosophical basis of both traditions and their areas of overlap. In a case when such integration is not fully made, as in *Monkey King Reborn*, spectators are aware of structural disunity at least though they may not be capable of expressing the philosophical incompatibility of the narrative.

5.3 Practical Implications for Industry Practitioners

- **Structural Integrity as Foundation:** Effective cultural adaption consists in retaining the structural integrity of a pre-existing story, and refitting its content and significance. As a consequence of this, practitioners in the field cannot give precedence of narrative coherence without giving precedence to cultural specificity at the same time, nor do they resist the temptation to discard the existing frameworks en bloc.

- **Philosophical Integration over Surface Decoration:** Successful localization requires an intense exploration of Chinese philosophical and cultural conventions, where such conventions are not a decorative embellishment on top of Western plot structural models but form a part of the supporting structures of narrative form.

- **Mentorship and Character Development:** The empirical studies reveal that Chinese viewers are strongly oriented to those forms of narratives characterized by putting into the foreground the traditional relation between a master and a disciple and the corresponding pattern of moral growth. Material that privileges these conventions becomes both locally and ultimately more domestically relevant, and at the same time it also offers foreign viewers a means to understand Chinese cultural values.

- **Technical Excellence as Cultural Platform:** The usage of advanced animation technologies is a great resource of cultural expression but it is not a substitute of it. The most effective patterns in the discussed corpus include the combination of both advanced visual techniques and culturally established narrative frames, thus enriching instead of superseding the cultural authenticity.

The emergence of what is known as the glocal narratives, or those stories that incorporate locally specific cultural elements alongside globally accessible structural patterns is one of the most conspicuous trends of the modern

entertainment production. These stories are negotiating international conversation and understanding and do not lose business effectiveness in diverse markets.

As empirical evidence shows, effective cooperation of foreign distributors with Chinese animation production companies depends on their profound understanding of structural adaptation to foreign culture. A simple translation is an incomplete solution; to create long lasting relationships, there must be an interactive involvement with the fundamental differences in story telling philosophy and character growth approach that exists between the two cultures.

5.4 Enhanced Limitations and Future Research Directions

Our methodology, while rigorous, relies primarily on textual analysis and critical reception data. Future studies would benefit from incorporating audience research methodologies including eye-tracking studies, physiological response measurement, and cross-cultural audience surveys to understand how different cultural groups respond to various narrative adaptation strategies.

The rapidly evolving nature of Chinese animation technology and international co-production practices suggests need for longitudinal studies tracking industry developments over time. Future research should examine how emerging technologies like virtual reality and interactive media might influence cross-cultural storytelling approaches.

Emerging Research Opportunities: The success of Chinese animation internationally creates opportunities for comparative studies examining how other national animation industries approach similar challenges. Research comparing Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian animation industries' approaches to cultural localization could provide broader insights into global storytelling dynamics.

Methodological Innovations: Future research should explore computational narrative analysis techniques that could provide more systematic approaches to cross-cultural story structure comparison. Machine learning approaches to narrative analysis might reveal patterns invisible to human coders while maintaining sensitivity to cultural specificity.

Industry Collaboration: Academic-industry partnerships could provide access to production data, creator interviews, and audience research that would significantly enhance understanding of how narrative decisions impact both artistic and commercial outcomes.

Methodological Limitations

Although our textual analysis offers systematic information about narrative structure, it does not present real audience cognitive and emotional reactions. Inter-rater reliability measure (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .87$) shows that the stages of the narrative are reliably detected, though a subjective definition of the cultural meaning and viewer experience cannot be fully attributed. To gain insight into how various cultural populations perceive and react to narrative adaptations, future studies ought to be based on employee-tracking, physiological response measurement (galvanic skin response, heart rate variability, pupil dilation), and cross-cultural audience survey (Praveen et al., 2022; Amini et al., 2018).

Empirical Reception Limitations

Though the available Douban review data were included in this study, this is a self-selected online population that is mainly represented by younger and more urban and more education-oriented population groups and does not necessarily represent wider subdivisions of the audiences in China and among the diaspora communities. The systematic audience research on stratified sampling in terms of age groups, educational background, geographic areas and cultural contexts would offer stronger tools to study the receivership patterns and cultural resonance.

Production Context Limitations

We only analyze completed movies without the possibility of viewing production procedures, decision-making of the creators, or intentions of the movie-makers. This introduces a suspicion of misunderstanding creative decisions as lapses in the narrative and not intentional decisions as art. The next research needs to include filmmaker interviews, documentary records of production, industry research and histories of creative collaborations to know how industrial limitations, market demands, international co-production processes and creative impulses influence narrative decisions.

5.5 Future Research

Emerging Technologies and Narrative Innovation

The next wave of cross-cultural animation storytelling will be probably influenced by newer technologies such as artificial intelligence, interactive narrative systems, and immersive media (AR/VR). Already, AI-based animation software is allowing shorter production times, variants of stories tailored to particular audiences, and autonomous systems of character animation (Chen et al., 2024; Vibrant Zone, 2025).

Future studies must look at the possibility of training AI to identify and maintain the culturally-specific values of the narrative and speed up the production. Questions are: Does machine learning have the ability to detect cultural narrative

patterns and inform the scriptwriting to incorporate them? What are the interactions of AI-generated visuals with philosophically-based narrative forms?

The interactive storytelling platforms are offering unique possibilities of cross-cultural versus non-cultural narrative innovation. The presence of cyclical and perspective-shifting qualities of *qi cheng zhuan he*.

structures can be closer to the non-linear and branching narratives than Western linear narrations. Interactive media might allow the audience to interact with stories by showing various changes of perspective on them and permitting them to share in group rather than individual hero-point of view. A study of the way audiences are engaged by interactive and linear adaptations of the same story set across cultural lines may yield important information on how various cultural communities like to consume stories.

Comparative Cross-Cultural Studies

Although this paper addresses specifically the Chinese animation sector, we can presume that, in other national animation sectors that are tackling similar issues of cultural localization in the international arena, similar forces at play are at play. Japanese animated adaptation of American narrative traditions, the balancing of Eastern and Western narrative-telling of Korea webtoons, classical Sanskrit narrative traditions in Indian animation, all of which provide an opportunity to engage in comparative research. Categorical analysis of the practices of Japanese, Korean, Indian, Southeast Asian, and other national animation industries dealing with the same issues of cultural localization would both enrich the theoretical knowledge about the dynamics of global storytelling and open to view the most efficient strategies that can be used in the situation of various cultural backgrounds.

Industry Collaboration and Longitudinal Research

Partnerships with academic institutions may offer access to production data, the processes of creative development, interviews with the filmmakers and producers along with the proprietary audience research which will contribute greatly to the understanding how narrative choices affect the artistic and commercial performance. The development of Chinese animation industry over 5-10 years could be followed with longitudinal studies that would document changes in the cross-cultural narrative strategies with more international co-production and altered distribution through streaming channels.

6. Conclusion

Based on Christopher Vogler's adaptation of the "Hero's Journey" narrative structure, this study systematically analyzes the differences in the application of the scripted narrative structure of three 3D animated Chinese hero-mythological films, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, *Legend of Deification*, *Monkey King Reborn*. Through textual analysis and structural comparison, this study reveals how Chinese hero-myth animation introduces classical narrative models in traditional cultural contexts and forms diverse narrative paths in adaptation, reconstruction, or deviation.

The study finds that the "hero's journey," as an international classic narrative paradigm, has significant potential for construction in Chinese mythological animation. Still, the adaptation effect varies from film to film. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* has a rigorous structure and clear phases and fully presents the hero's growth path of "Summoning-Trial-Resurrection," successfully combining the global narrative framework with local cultural connotations, making it a typical example of a high degree of success. Although the structure of the *Legend of Deification* has been changed, the expression of the "spiritual journey" reveals the deeper philosophical propositions of local Chinese myths, reflecting the flexibility of the narrative framework and the ability to integrate with local culture. In contrast, although *Monkey King Reborn* retains part of its framework structure, it is weak in handling key stages, with some stages missing and character motivations lacking advancement, reflecting the weakening trend of narrative structure construction in some of the current animation works.

This study not only verifies the possible application of the "Hero's Journey" framework in Chinese mythological animation scriptwriting but also reveals the deep connection between structure, emotion, narrative, and culture. The integrity of the structure not only affects the coherence and rhythm of the plot but directly determines the audience's perception of character growth and story meaning. Research shows that the more precise the narrative structure and the more distinct the transformation, the stronger the effect of emotional connection and cultural dissemination.

Therefore, for Chinese hero myth animation movie creators, the "Hero's Journey" is not only a set of narrative structure references but also a creative tool that can enhance the narrative logic of the script, strengthen the emotional tension, and give cultural depth. When creating animation scripts with mythological themes in the future, it is necessary to respect the cultural core and flexibly utilize the structural paradigm to form a narrative system that meets the expectations of the genre and is rich in local spirit. The findings of this study provide a theoretical foundation and analytical framework for future research on animation scriptwriting. Further studies may incorporate audience feedback, creative processes, and cross-cultural comparisons to deepen the understanding of the relationship between narrative structure and audience reception. This would contribute to advancing Chinese mythological animated films from simply telling good stories to crafting narratives that are structurally coherent, culturally embedded, and emotionally resonant.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable.

Authors contributions

Not applicable.

Funding

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Not applicable.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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