

Original Paper

Exploring the New Interpretation of the Fengshen Story

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Abstract

As a classic Chinese mythology novel, Fengshen yanyi (Investiture of the Gods) is famous for its cultural value, historical value and social value. The story of “Fengshen” is also considered a rich source of inspiration for entertainment and cultural industries in China, influencing a wide range of audiences with diverse backgrounds. As developing the potential “story universe” of Fengshen has become a hot topic in the Chinese film market, reinterpreting Chinese mythology needs to be focused on. Based on the case of the “Fengshen story”, this study aims to explore the new context of Chinese mythology by collecting and analyzing secondary research, categorizing and organizing the findings, and discussing further research from different perspectives, thereby understanding the modern adaptations of traditional Chinese mythology and suggesting a bright future of conducting interdisciplinary research on Chinese mythology in the new context.

Keywords

Chinese mythology, Investiture of the Gods, transmedia storytelling

1. Introduction

In today's media environment, more and more traditional stories are being delivered through a broad range of media, from traditional communication such as magazines, newspapers, novels and books to stage plays, movies, animations, television series and other forms of new media. In this process, media plays an important role in which more opportunities are provided by media platforms to make the audience engage with the stories, changing the way audiences gain the story experience. Fengshen story and its adaptations have influenced not only Chinese audiences but also audiences who are fascinated with traditional Chinese culture. As media evolve rapidly today, traditional stories are presented to audiences in different ways, giving audiences new experiences and providing diverse perspectives for audiences to understand traditional stories from multimedia platforms. In addition, many traditional literature works are adapted based on audiences' tastes and their social needs, which

makes it necessary to explore and understand traditional stories in the new context.

Chinese mythology stories have rich historical and cultural resources which could be considered valuable research objects for building a potential “story universe”, however, so far, the academic value of mythological storytelling has not been noticed adequately (Zhang, 2022). Some researchers also mentioned that the theory of transmedia storytelling could be considered a potential research method for the new development of Chinese mythology (Shen et al., 2020; Wall, 2019). According to the theory of transmedia storytelling, each medium ideally makes its unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, 2007) which could be one of the essential elements to critically interpret the meaning of Chinese mythology in the new context. In this paper, the main characteristics of the Fengshen story in the new context are reviewed and the concept of “Fengshen Universe” is used to interpret relevant attributes. Based on the literature review, relevant findings are categorized into subtopics for better understanding certain phenomena and interpreting the story in the new context, and further demonstrating the value of developing certain concepts. In recent years, there are many influential works have appeared in Chinese film markets which could be seen as valuable cases for this research. Through analyzing the case of the Fengshen story, conducting research on Chinese mythology and exploring the interdisciplinary study with transmedia storytelling lens are suggested, and opportunities for developing Chinese mythology in the new context are identified.

2. Story and Values

Fengshen yanyi (also known as *Investiture of Gods* or *Fengshenbang*) is a well-known Chinese novel that integrates historical events and many tales of Chinese mythological figures. It was written during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), mainly based on the history of the battle between Shang and Zhou, talking about many adventures in the battle in which many humans, deities, and spirits are involved (Haase, 2008). Same as most Chinese mythologies, Fengshen story includes ideological attributes and narrative forms based on unique historical and cultural trends (Liu, 2017), which could be seen as the origin of many forms of art and literature works, providing an inexhaustible source of inspiration for cultural industries around the world (Shen et al., 2020) and making this study a chance to see the primitive society of China and more importantly the cultural origin of Chinese identity (Lei, 2024). As a trend of studying the mythical elements especially the elements in films and other new media, the cultural meaning of the mythical symbols could be revealed (Zhang et al., 2021).

Chinese mythology includes complex genealogical relationships (Zhao & Dolah, 2024), to a certain extent, the scattered and fragmented stories are not systematically organized (Yang et al., 2008). Fengshen story is based on rich Chinese mythology resources as it includes some concepts and settings from other mythologies, such as the myth of Goddess Nüwa which is originally from the *Classic of Mountains and Rivers*. In the novel *Fengshen yanyi*, the number of characters is significantly large, as

there are over 300 gods in the “investiture” and many more relevant characters mentioned in the story. As a long tradition, many characters and plot settings have changed due to various reasons in the historical process (Zhao & Dolah, 2024), whereas different values that the same character represents in different stories could enrich the content of each story. As a classic mythology story, *Fengshen yanyi* has certain connections in terms of the plots and characters with *The Journey to the West*, one of the best classic Chinese novels, while the Fengshen story’s background is set about 1700 years earlier than the “journey”, and some characters are depicted differently in the two works, for instance, in Fengshen story, Nezha is a “Superboy” who supports the Zhou army and finally wins the battle and becomes a god, representing a role model of justice, however, he is depicted as a member of the “heavenly army” who supports Jade Emperor of Heaven to prevent Monkey King from fighting for freedom in the chapter *The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven* of *The Journey to the West*.

Unlike traditional media experience, the experience of the “Chinese Mythology Universe” and the story’s transformation from transmedia storytelling create more social attributes or patterns that influence the Chinese collective unconscious, symbolically reflecting the transformation of human experiences in China (Whyke & Mugica, 2021). So far, many terms are used to describe the concept regarding building a potential fantasy world from Chinese mythology or specifically for the story world of Fengshen in the media industry. Researchers from different fields often borrow the word “universe” in discussions which are inspired by the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), such as “Mythology Cinematic Universe” (Yang & Ning, 2021), “God Universe” (Chen et al., 2022), “Coloroom’s Apotheosis Universe” (Chen et al., 2022), “Domestic Animation Universe” (Bai, 2022) and so on. Like MCU, the “story world” is frequently described as “universe” because the main story could be connected by several subplots, and as mentioned above, it is a huge collection of stories which include complicated characters’ relationships in different plots, whereas understanding this concept of the so-called “Fengshen Universe” is better for interpreting the Fengshen story.

3. Adaptation and Renewal

The Fengshen story has been adapted from mythology text to different media forms, bringing new experience of traditional story to audiences in various ways, especially through the TV series and animated films. Some adaptations use modern media technologies to retell the story based on the original novel, such as the TV series *The Investiture of the Gods* (1990) and *The Legend and the Hero* (2007), while some adaptations feature rebuilding the story by only including the essential elements of the story, especially some independent films that feature famous Chinese mythological characters such as Nezha, Jiang Ziya and Yang Jian, giving audiences brand-new experiences with modern elements. Recent adaptations that include the potential of “Fengshen Universe” could be categorized into two types, one is the historical fantasy film that utilizes the classic plots to retell the story without

significantly changing the original plot settings, represented by *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms* (2023) and following “Fengshen Trilogy” which could be seen as a Chinese version of “The Lord of the Rings” (Wei, 2019), another one is the animated film that features building new story with traditional elements represented by *Ne Zha* (2019) and its “Coloroom’s Apotheosis Universe” (Chen et al., 2022). Animated film and historical fantasy film could be considered the two main types of adaptations which are becoming the trend for retelling the Fengshen story in today’s Chinese film market.

The combination of the new settings and the original settings has become a main strategy and inspiration in recent adaptations. The original story’s background, elements and settings of the plot are essential for the adaptations of the Fengshen story, enhancing the audiences’ experience and maintaining the consistency of the story. To deliver the story from new perspectives, the adaptations always include the basic settings based on the traditional understanding of the original story. In the main settings of the background, there are certain common and essential concepts about hierarchy for reflecting the relationship between ruler and subjects, such as by using the concept of the heaven and the realm of mortal world (Xu, 2023). Similar to the setting of the conflict between protagonist and antagonist in films, the contradiction between two powers is common in many adaptations, however, they are not always strictly opposite in the Chinese philosophical context (Xu, 2023), as it is blurry to judge certain actions and outcomes so that there is no absolute standard to determine what is right or wrong. Also, the innovative settings of the plot (Lv, 2019) are common for adaptations in today’s film market. Same as the effect that Disney redefined the meaning of “True Love’s Kiss” in *Maleficent* (2014), *Ne Zha* (2019) recreated the traditional plot of “stirring the ocean” by setting a new challenge of “saving the city” for new protagonists, bringing a distinctive experience of the story to the audience. The new adaptation is also about placing the traditional story in a modern context instead of retelling and recreating it (Zhao & Dolah, 2024). Since Chinese audiences focus more on their real life than the supernatural world (Yang & An, 2008), some topics about what values films convey are frequently discussed among audiences, especially for animated films about heroic stories. The portrait of Nezha in Fengshen story used to be designed as a hero who challenges the power hierarchy by sacrificing his life to protect people (Tang & Ma, 2021), showing how the father-son ethic controls the children's rights (Yu, 2023). As the function of Chinese mythology evolves along with the ideology of different times (Liu, 2017), certain realistic topics in today’s society are added to adaptations so that critical discussion about the story could be inspired, for instance, *Ne Zha* (2019) reflects some social realities that are closed to audiences’ real life such as the value of individualism (Tang & Ma, 2021) and educational value for both children and parents (Lv, 2019). In that sense, the diversity of value attributes in adaptations develops the meaning of the Fengshen story.

4. Storytelling and Communication

Media plays an important role in shaping public opinions and societal values (Semetko, 2004), furthermore, media environment is not only changing the way that audience perceive information but also influencing the development of integrated storytelling through different media platforms (Von Stackelberg & Jones, 2014). In today's Chinese film market, different storytelling strategies have been applied for retelling traditional mythology stories, including classical mythology resources which are commonly used for narrative purposes (Zhao & Dolah, 2024). The theory of transmedia storytelling is used by some researchers for better understanding the adaptation of Fengshen story and "Fengshen Universe" based on the construction of the story world (Shen et al., 2020). Compared to traditional communication, retelling the Fengshen story through various adaptations may form a culture in the new context, creating different experiences and values in media platforms.

Jenkins (2007) explained that creating a unified and coordinated experience requires integral elements across multiple channels, and each medium should make a unique contribution to the whole story. There is a mutual connection between the mythical content and the forms from multiple media, and the mythical narrative and transmedia storytelling are bridged by their performative dimension (Blanariu & Popa, 2018). Shen et al. (2020) stated that the key to successful transmedia storytelling lies in the construction of the story world when understanding the evolution of Nezha's portrait in Fengshen story. According to Jenkins's theory, focusing on the flow of content across media, adding new elements to the world-building process, and deepening audience engagement are essential, reflecting how users consume content on a multimedia level (Atarama-Rojas, 2019). The effect of transmedia storytelling is positive for building the "Fengshen Universe" as different media forms could be used to extend audiences' fantasy space and increase their curiosity, for instance, in *Ne Zha* (2019), the conspiracy planned by two villains is hidden in the Ester eggs clip at the end of the film (Huang & Li, 2023). Hence transmedia storytelling could be considered as a theory to understand the Fengshen story in terms of storytelling in cultural context and fan cultures, as well as delivering transmedia brand stories and creating more entry points (Granitz & Forman, 2015).

Moreover, there is a strong connection between the main story and individual characters in the "Fengshen Universe", which is essential for enhancing the meaning of the Fengshen story in the new context due to the importance of the choice of characters. To some extent, the experience of the Fengshen story is delivered through the "Fengshen Universe", as well as individual characters and their transmedia adaptations. Some characters in the Fengshen story become well-known fantasy figures in adaptations from different media, such as Nezha and Jiang Ziya. For instance, as an important narrative element in the Fengshen story, the figure of "Nezha" evolves in which the image is produced in different creative products and extended in different channels (Shen et al., 2020), as well as the story is presented in an environment affected by different international flows of technologies, aesthetics and

story structures (Whyke et al., 2021). In recent years, there have been some positive explorations in the Chinese animated film market in terms of linking different characters-based works for building “Fengshen Universe”, however compared to MCU, the current techniques for building intertextuality of character story’s text (Li, 2023) and building empathetic characters in the contexts (Zhao & Dolah, 2024) still need to be improved.

Fan culture also plays an important role in the creation of the meaning-making of certain cultural texts (Schiller, 2018). Current fan groups of Fengshen story come from a wide range of origins, and audiences’ story experience could be influenced by their different levels of understanding of Chinese mythology. Therefore, focusing on the study of audience preferences of mythological films (Ye, 2021) and different media forms (e.g., picture-story book, magazine, film or even video games) that audience encounter (Breen et al., 2017) is meaningful. However, current audience groups of the Fengshen story are limited to audiences’ age and region restrictions (Shen et al., 2022). To respond to the increasingly important influence from the groups of fans, an enhanced diversity of characters and story world representations should be focused on (Schiller, 2018). The degree of participation between producers and fans is also crucial (Ryan, 2015), and many activities related to the recreation of mythology stories can bridge the divide between narratives with traditional Chinese cultural elements and contemporary societal expectations (Wang et al., 2023). Currently, there is a transformative potential for the audience to create certain content for the story from digital shared platforms, such as Bilibili, a digital platform that is popular in China (Wang et al., 2023), which could be used for fans to rebuild their own Fengshen story.

Based on these findings, the potential for the development of the “Fengshen Universe” in terms of storytelling and communication could be explored. As mentioned before, transmedia storytelling is strongly related to user-generated content in which both the producers or writers of the original story and the audience could extend and enrich the story through their creativity and sharing from a variety of social media platforms (Atarama-Rojas, 2019). Moreover, based on the potential of the audience in terms of contributing to the recreation of narratives, an in-depth understanding of the incentives that encourage diversity of fans to engage with the story is suggested for developing the story universe.

5. Cultural Symbol and Construction

Branding and advertising influence the audience experience in which stories’ narratives are enriched and boundaries are blurred (Gu & Zhao, 2021). With the rise of the global animation and film industry, the diverse reinterpretation of the story has gradually become the focus of “Fengshen” cultural Intellectual Property (IP). As modern reconstruction of the traditional stories’ meaning becomes more common in recent adaptations, different practices are conducted to make Fengshen story more readable in terms of cultural contents, such as telling a new story or even criticizing the original story (Liu,

2020). Also, mythological IPs can show modernity through the development of traditional texts (Chen & Cho, 2024) or “postmodernism” by adding the spirituality of the characters (Tan, 2023). Based on the attributes of the cultural content and the position of the brand in the new context, “Fengshen Universe” would be a new cultural symbol that connects today and the past. In recent years, some films and animations in the Chinese entertainment market are considered huge potential for the development of local cultural IP through transmedia storytelling. Some films produced by famous companies and creative teams are easier to gain the trust of audiences and other entertainment consumers, which is also beneficial to the development of the brand (Fan et al., 2022). On the other hand, China has so far produced very few “transmedia” examples, and creators’ understanding of IP rules is still insufficient (Gilardi & Lam, 2021), making the construction of cultural symbol an important topic to focus on.

Currently, cultural IP consumers focus on content quality, culture and creative innovation about the meaning of the brand, and there are certain connections between consumers’ perception and their emotion (Fan et al., 2022). In today’s Chinese media industry, different creative methods have been used to build Fengshen cultural IPs based on specific attributes. Coloroom Pictures and Light Chaser Animation Studios are two famous companies that focus on building “Fengshen Universe”, their works interpret Fengshen story through new perspectives by using different creative strategies to create Chinese-style “Superhero” and adding different levels of popular culture in their films (Tan, 2023). However, for the adapted historical fantasy films, the effects of heroes and reflection of individualism could be weakened to certain extent, making it more challenging in terms of modernity rewriting, for instance, the storyline in *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms* (2023) is relatively vague because it includes too many characters, information and values from different levels (Zhang & Huang, 2023). Through the analysis of Chinese fantasy films, Zheng et al. (2024) summarized the advantages and problems of narratives and proposed a few strategies for developing the IP ecological process, such as building a “unified world” by creating a narrative ecosystem and deepening the relationships of characters. So far, as mentioned, the Chinese mythology brand is in the developing stage, due to the incomplete construction of the grand worldview and the lack of interaction between operators and audiences (Liu, 2019), building Fengshen cultural IP and symbol still needs to be explored in terms of the audience engagement and their perception.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

Based on the discussion above, it could be seen that the adaptations of Fengshen story and the transformation of characters’ images are made according to different social contexts, audiences’ preferences and trends of media cultures. Through the analysis of the literature, the value of exploring the “Fengshen Universe” and the significance of conducting further research to understand Chinese mythology have been discussed, which could be helpful to deepen the cultural meaning of the story in

the new context and form a unique cultural symbol. Although some previous research focused on the study of audiences' difference and the comparison among different cultures (Chen et al., 2022), the study about audiences' motivation, behavior and experience are still inadequate. It is also necessary to highlight that most findings were made based on the feedback from Chinese audiences or audiences with Chinese backgrounds, while the opinions from other entertainment consumers with diverse cultural background should also be included for exploring a broader understanding of the Fengshen story and amplifying the voice of Chinese culture in the new context. Further research about the diversity of fan groups with various cultural backgrounds and experiences could be conducted with audience-centred studies, such as how transmedia storytelling of Chinese stories occurred by including audiences' experience and engagement in different lenses. Therefore, there should be a gap that could be bridged by interdisciplinary studies to develop Fengshen story and other Chinese mythology stories. By reviewing the principles of transmedia storytelling and other researchers' interpretations based on the theory, as well as the cases from previous research, the main features of the communication in the Fengshen story are summarized, more importantly, the opportunities of developing the narratives and potential story universe could be identified. It is possible to use the "Fengshen Universe" to describe and interpret the Fengshen story in the new context. In general, the Fengshen story in the new context is influenced by diverse values, linking to the audiences' daily life rather than merely building a fantasy world. By adding new elements from different resources, the Fengshen story is being retold by new adaptations in which its meaning is deepened and enriched through transmedia storytelling and building cultural IP. The animated adaptations and historical fantasy films are used as the cases of media forms in the discussion, while their interrelationships should be explored further because the two categories are different in terms of the story structure, plot setting, storytelling and even building cultural symbol, which should be discussed separately by using more cases. The value of exploring the "Fengshen Universe" lies in its rich resources, adaptations of portraits, and plots that connect to the audience's real life, also there is a mutual influence between the characters in the story and the story's audience. In this paper, representative films are used as the cases of adaptation for demonstrating and explaining relevant concepts, while other media forms such as TV series or video games are not included due to less relevant research, which could also be the focus of further research.

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