

The “Old Tales Retold” of Pre-Qin Mythology-- On the cultural consciousness of the Book of Mountains and Seas in the 21st century Chinese animation films

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Abstract: For a long time, the studies of *The Book of Mountains and Seas* is mainly carried out around text study, images evolution and the romantic spirit, little attention is paid to the national emotion and cultural consciousness behind the mythological narration. Based on the reconstruction of mythological elements in Chinese animated films in the 21st century, this paper expounds the transformation of mythological narration in the contemporary context, compares and explores the inheritance and innovation in the “new stories” of mythological narration, and clarifies the necessity of establishing cultural self-confidence through the new narration of Chinese mythology.

Keywords: *The Book of Mountains and Seas*; Faraway countries and alien people; Central standard; Myth restatement; Cultural confidence

1. Introduction

The pre-Qin literary work *The Book of Mountains and Seas* was composed of *The Mountain/The Mountain Classics*, *The Sea/Overseas Classics*, *The Wild/The Four Great Wilderness Classics* and *Hainei Jing/Hainei Classic*. There are still many unsolved mysteries surrounding the book, Lu Xun said “it was assumed that Yu, the third of the three legendary emperors who created the Chinese state, was not the author, and that the author has nothing to do with *The Song of Chu*”.^[1] There is speculation that *The Book of Mountains and Seas* was a large-scale project presided over and compiled by the early state.^[2] Since the Han Dynasty, the work of sorting out, annotating and interpreting the theme of this all-inclusive book has not been interrupted despite many twists and turns in history: geographical Chronicles of natural and humanistic colors, wizard and witchcraft, fairy tales with metaphors, encyclopedia of national will, novels... Opinions vary. As important original texts of Chinese myth narration, the myth of *The Book of Mountains and Seas* contains crucial canons.^[3] In today’s China, the narration has changed in the “new” mythological narration bred in the context of Chinese animated films in the 21st century.

2. The presentation of cultural consciousness of mythological narration in *The Book of Mountains and Seas*

2.1 Faraway countries and alien people: “Tianxia” Consciousness and the Construction of eastern “Aeneas Tradition”

According to the order of orientation of south, west, north, east and middle, *The Mountain* describes the mountains, hydrological and mineral deposits, exotic plants and rare animals and so on in the given direction. In addition to displaying the mythological imagination, the most primitive and natural exploration perspective in the text can not be ignored. With the continuous extension of the narrative perspective, it is found that the cognitive process of the world has been put into practice in the context of myth, and gradually formed a primitive world outlook with rich external space in addition to human society. Through the long journey, our ancestors constantly took steps to explore the vast external world to seek universal laws, form the concept of “Tianxia”, and manifest the consciousness of “Tianxia”. In the later generations, the concept of “Tianxia” is a unique attribute that distinguishes Chinese mainland culture from marine culture. It affects the Chinese way of thinking and derives the Chinese philosophy of life.

The Sea is divided into “inside the sea” and “overseas”, each of them is arranged in order of south, west, north and east. It tells the story of the sea farther than the farthest mountains in the original concept, the magical tribes and beast-like-god and monsters of natural power gradually enter the readers’ sights. Under the weaving of natural myth, tribal war myth, hero myth, cultural origin myth and so on, people’s hidden longing for foreign lands, curiosity and contradiction attitudes project the worship of nature to the power of superhumanity. By describing the conflicts between the tribes of the ancient Yanhuang and Chiyou, the labor and production activities of the tribes of the ancient Yao Shun Yu, it shows the communication between gods and men, and then latter the great isolation from god to man. So it is better to say *The Book of Mountains and Seas* is the mythify history than to treat the narration simply to put tribe of man in a world where gods, men and beasts live in their respective places. The collective consciousness is reinforced by the repeated recognition of these ties - by depicting how tribal ancestors survived conflict and war, retained their identity, intermingled with each other, eventually establishing kinship and other ties that continue to this day - to provide legitimacy for a unified nation.

Just like the *Aeneid* in ancient Rome, *The Book of Mountains and Seas* is a realistic demand for the ancient ancestors related to the actual needs of expansion and transformation of tribes into Chinese history. Mythological narration serve historical identity, which serves political order. The mythological narration of the book also creates a cohesive national community by forming internal spiritual order, avoiding civilization competition. The Han Dynasty is a dynasty that emphasized the establishment of national identity in ancient Chinese history. Therefore, the generally accepted judgment of the academic circles on the completion time of the book is also in line with our inference of the significance of the book. The Han Dynasty is a dynasty that emphasized the establishment of national identity in ancient Chinese history. The time of the completion of the book accepted by the academic circles refers to the great social turmoil or the ruling class’s ardent hope for the establishment of a unified regime and the recovery of the people after the turmoil from the Warring States period to the early Han Dynasty. Its emergence tells the cultural needs under the view of natural society: reconstructing history, trying to introduce the unknown world to trace its origin, which can be regarded as an effective way to establish current identity.

2.2 Centrality: the concealment of the author's perspective and the presentation of “center-based” cultural consciousness

Who are the observer of the alien people in the distant country of this wide and fantasy world? Although the identity of narrative perspective is not evident in the text, when Zhang Hua’s *Natural History* in Wei and Jin Dynasties first to propose the term “faraway countries and alien people”, it tacitly accepted “Center-Based” as the reference of “distant country”, while defined “fantastic people(or so called ‘alien’)” as comparison of “human standard”.

The description of faraway countries and fantastic people in the book implies a comparative context. In this world made up of and surrounding by non-human elements such as plants, trees, minerals, gods and animals, people have their own location for living: the center of everything, which is also the starting point for *The Book of Mountains and Seas* to tell readers about the grand world outlook. Without exception, the exploration of the external world starts from here, which is where the “middle” lies. Compare the other in the external world with the inner “I”, and then confirm the location of man by confirming the location of God and beast.

“Center-Based”, or pronounced “Zhong” in mandarin, occupies a special position in the traditional Chinese concept. “Zhong” stands for the location where is the center of the universe, all the things with my color view of things; Centrality, also read as “Zhong Yong”, coming out from “Center-Based” and have the same effect as harmonious and even balance, flowing in the national blood to become a submissive character in Chinese people; the word “Zhong Tu” which means the land of the middle earth, is the cultural tradition of settling the land and hate to leave a place where one has lived long. The civilization and prosperity bred have become a cultural symbol with far-reaching implications.

3. The changes of cultural consciousness from past to present: The Book of Mountains and Seas in Chinese animation films in the 21st century

People cannot exhaust the mystery of nature and absolutely dominate nature because of the relative improvement of productivity -- Yuan Ke affirms this view. In other words, it is necessary and inevitable to “recompose the story” of myth narration in modern context, we can still learn so much about the

world and the life. As one of the loyal partner who accompany “the Chinese School of Animation” from birth, growth, to through the trough, what *The Book of Mountains and Seas* offered the most original imagination and romantic stories has become an important source of inspiration, it just enjoys a unique opportunity when “the Chinese School of Animation” is eager to climb the peak of International Animated films in the 21st century.

3.1 The Fragmentation of modern mythological narratives: Intervention of family ethics and growing themes

In the 21st century, Chinese animated films lack the practice of grand myth narration.^[4] They no longer pay attention to the construction of a harmonious world view, and myths become empty shell of plots, and the mythological elements become broken picture embellishments. *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), in which gods and monsters such as Chisongzi, Goumang, Fuzhu, Houtu, Rushou and others appeared one after another, didn't leave enough display room for them to show themselves as legendary creatures. The audience spend just a glimpse at them, while lack of understanding of their roles in the mythological world. Let alone the cultural awareness conveyed by the mythological narration, the mythological world where those story happens was unfamiliar to the audience, even weakens the mythological theme in the fragmented narrative. In this sense, the myth becomes a purely labeled empty symbol.

The deconstruction of grand narrative means the establishment of individual heroic history. Subject to the market's expectation of educational significance in the theme of animated and the limitation of the length of the film, animated films tend to focus on one certain (or several) character(s), trying to connect the plot through the growth experience of the main characters from weak to strong, and the contradictions and reconciliation between family and individual ethics. Monkey King in *Monkey King: Hero Is Back* (2015) has gone through all kinds of adventures, from being cynical when he was newly freed, then gradually change into supporting Jiang Liuer to send An Xin, a little girl saperated with parents, home. By assuming the responsibility of protecting his partners, Monkey King finally completing the establishment of the hero's will. In *Jiang Ziya* (2020), Jiang Ziya has completes his understanding of the supreme goodness in the fox demon Xiao Jiu who is longingly searching for here father. When his road to immortality comes to an end, Jiang Ziya, a hero who saves common people, is fully displayed on the screen.

In addition, the themes of 21st century Chinese animated films reflect personal growth and family ethics, which are missing from traditional mythological narratives. *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019) depicts the deep love of Li's family and the harmony between the couple, which is a supplement to the ancient Chinese story of Nezha in *Fengshen Romance*. The expansion of the narrative theme of mythology is a necessary measure for new mythology to meet the current aesthetic taste, while the secondary roles, such as Bajie the Pig who accompanies all the way or Nezha's parents live in Chen Tang-Guan, are inevitably reduced to the graphic characters promoting the plot in order to realize the theme of ethics and growth.

The elimination of divinity in animated films weakens the essence of god into a man, wearing the empty shell of divinity, distorting the style and personality of god. In *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), Ao Bing shows the character image of excessive material desire, violence and centralization of power, which has become a typical villain and completely evil character which was criticized by modern society. Qiu said in *Big Fish & Begonia* that “what you refuse is the love of a God”, which makes local audience can't help laughing, although it's not meant to entertain the audience. The infatuation for your sweetheart makes the young god behave like a fool... The confusion between man and God will undoubtedly pulls down from the altar, and the romanticism of myth weaves a wedding dress for realism.

3.2 The awakening of individual consciousness shocks the traditional aesthetic of the integration of family and country

At present, the prosperity of the Chinese cultural market has brought diversified consumption options for Chinese consumers.^[5] Foreign cultural inputs with mature market-oriented consumption ideas, such as Japan's world-class influential animation culture industry in the post-war era and the European and American film models represented by Marvel Universe, are impacting the senses of a new generation of young people and deconstructing the traditional Aesthetics under the situation that the new “New Chinese School of Animation” is still in its infancy in the 21st century.

The frequent application of mythological elements by “New Chinese School of Animation” reveals the high expectation of the society for the mythological narration. The characters and themes carry the practical educational significance of reality, which has become the most intuitive way for the mythological to carry the ideological propaganda task. Nezha’s “My destiny isn’t controlled by Gods, but held in my own hands” has become a powerful slogan, the awakening of personal spirit has become a stepping stone for many Chinese animated films to resonate with the audience, and the central standard thought represented by mythological narrative has been alienated. The educational significance of myth should be more than that. To explore the educational significance of Chinese mythology, find the transcendence of Chinese mythology in the 21st century, extract the national spirituality from the narrative of mythology, and make a new narration with modern image art as the carrier, rather than mechanically apply the plots on the basis of mythology in order to realize the educational significance.

The essence of the new narration of old myths is the reflection on traditional culture at present. A kind of heroism that advocates liberalism and individualism which is close to modern Western ideology has been moved to the screen of Chinese films. We can’t help but asking whether individualism is the best solution of Chinese mythological narration? Has the grand narrative of the integration of family and nation lost its vitality? The answer is clearly no. The transfer of Roland Barthes’ view that “Myth is a kind of speech” to the present gives rise to the possibility of the rebirth of myth regeneration. For a nation, the meaning of myth is fundamental and original. The differences between eastern and Western mythological contexts have a subtle impact on the identification of national cultural identity, and the benign combination of mythological narration and film and television artistic narration is an important way to transform cultural heritage into cultural confidence.

4. Conclusions

Compared with that the Chinese animated school has “reaching the world’s first-class level and forming a unique Chinese school of art style” in the 1950s to 1980s, what is the problem of Chinese animated films lack in the 21st century, although has achieved both high box office and public praise with several representative works, is by no means as simple as the lack of talents reserve. The successful path of reproducing the Chinese School of Animation of the last century only has very dim hope, and a new problem has emerged: how to make a secondary excavation on the basis of mythological classic theme to create a new mythological narrative that conforms to the national aesthetic, arouses national identity and has international effect? The answer awaits for future Chinese animation filmmakers to find.

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