

An Analysis of Narrative Techniques in Award-Winning Chinese Mythological Animated Films (2015 - 2024)

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Received: May 15th, 2025; **Revised:** June 28th, 2025; **Accepted:** July 3rd, 2025

Abstract

Although Chinese mythological animated films have gained increasing attention, few studies systematically examine their narrative techniques in a modern cultural context. This study fills the gap by analyzing ten award-winning Chinese mythological animated films released between 2015 and 2024, selected based on criteria of awards and recognition, market performance, diversity in themes, production technology and innovation, and cultural influence. Grounded in narrative theories by Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, and Li Xianjie, the research adopts a six-element framework including story and plot, time, space, character development, narrator, and narrative systems. Using qualitative methods, including textual analysis and in-depth interviews with animation professionals and scholars, the study reveals a three-phase evolution including the exploratory phase (2015 - 2016), the narrative maturation phase (2019 - 2020), and the stylistic hybridization phase (2021 - 2024). These works reveal increasing complexity in temporal structures, symbolic space, and narrative perspective, shifting from omniscient to subjective storytelling. Notably, heroic themes dominate this genre, responding to both state-driven cultural discourse and the psychological needs of younger audiences confronting identity challenges. The study argues that the success of these films lies in their ability to reframe traditional mythology through emotionally resonant, aesthetically diverse, and culturally adaptive storytelling. By decoding how myth is rearticulated through contemporary animation, this research contributes to the localization of narrative theory and provides practical implications for scholars and creators focused on visual storytelling in modern Chinese culture.

Keywords: Award-Winning Chinese Mythological Animated Films, Narrative Techniques, 2015 - 2024

Introduction

Chinese mythological animated films have emerged as a significant cultural phenomenon in recent years. Drawing from ancient legends, religious tales, and folk traditions, these films offer narratives that resonate with both historical memory and contemporary sensibilities. As the animation industry in China grows increasingly sophisticated, mythological storytelling has become an essential vehicle for cultural expression and aesthetic innovation.

Despite this trend, current academic research remains fragmented. Existing studies tend to focus on individual works or analyze isolated elements such as visual effects or character design (Haonan,

2024; Yi & Lin, 2024; Yuchen, 2022). There remains a clear research gap in the systematic study of narrative techniques across a decade of award-winning Chinese mythological animation. Especially under the dual influence of globalization and cultural revitalization, it is critical to examine how these films negotiate the relationship between traditional narrative models and modern storytelling practices.

This study addresses the following central research question. How have award-winning Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024) developed in terms of narrative techniques, and what patterns of innovation can be identified over this period?

To explore this question, the study selects ten representative animated films that have received major domestic or international awards between 2015 and 2024. These films are analyzed using a narratological framework that includes six core elements including story and plot, time, space, character development, narrators, and narrative style. This analytical model enables a holistic understanding of how Chinese mythological narratives are constructed, adapted, and transformed in contemporary animation.

This research adopts a qualitative methodology that combines structured textual analysis with semi-structured expert interviews. Films were selected based on artistic merit, narrative sophistication, and cultural impact rather than box office performance, in alignment with scholarly objectives. The authors have extensive experience in narrative research and have participated in the development of domestic animation projects, further supporting the validity of this study.

The academic significance of this research lies in its contribution to the evolving field of animation narratology in the Chinese context. It not only enriches the theoretical framework for understanding mythological storytelling but also offers practical insights into the cultural function of animation in contemporary society. The findings will be valuable for scholars, creators, and policymakers engaged in cultural production and narrative innovation.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the narrative technique of award-winning Chinese mythological Animated films from 2015 to 2024.
2. To compare narrative developments across different time periods.

Literature Review

1. Research Scope : Chinese Mythological Animated Films (2015 - 2024)

This study examines award-winning Chinese mythological animated films from 2015 to 2024, covering myths, legends, folk tales, and mythological fiction. Chinese mythological animation began with *Princess Iron Fan* (1941 film), evolving through classical experimentation (1950s - 60s), stylistic refinement (1970s - 90s), and industrial revitalization (post - 2015). The post - 2015 era, driven by technology, market growth, and policy support, saw breakthroughs in narrative and aesthetics. Films like *Monkey King* such as *Hero Is Back* (2015 film, 956 million yuan) and *Ne Zha* (2019 film, 5.036 billion yuan) achieved commercial success. Of 43 films released, 11 won major awards, including Golden Monkey and Golden Rooster Awards, reflecting artistic and global recognition. Recent films employ multi-threaded plots, psychological realism, and symbolic narratives, enhancing cultural

expressiveness amid China's evolving sociocultural landscape, offering significant theoretical and practical value.

2. Narrative Theory : Three Complementary Frameworks

To analyze narrative construction in this genre, this study draws on three key theorists: Seymour Chatman, David Bordwell, and Li Xianjie. Each theorist emphasizes the relationship between story and discourse but with different focal points. Chatman constructed a multi-layered model of narrative communication, emphasizing the structural distinction between story and discourse as well as the critical role of the narrator in mediating narrative perspective and meaning (Chatman, 1978). Bordwell analyzes narrative systems based on cinematic cues, viewer cognition, and typologies of narration (Bordwell, 2006; Bordwell et al., 2008). Li Xianjie proposes a localized framework of cinematic narration that foregrounds symbolic space, cultural logic, and ethical structure, situating narrative analysis within the moral and aesthetic landscape of Chinese culture (Xianjie, 2000). These perspectives combine universal narrative principles with culturally specific strategies.

3. Analytical Dimensions and Theoretical Mapping

1) Story and Plot (Chatman, Bordwell) : Story is the audience-inferred event sequence, driven by causal themes. Plot arranges events to guide emotional and cognitive engagement.

2) Time (Chatman, Bordwell, Genette) : Includes order (linear/ nonlinear), duration (narrative vs. story time), and frequency (event repetition for emphasis or new insights).

3) Space (Li Xianjie, Bordwell) : Set design shapes narrative atmosphere via settings and props. Composition uses visual layout to convey meaning and emotion.

4) Character Development (Chatman, Bordwell, Li Xianjie) : Characters drive narratives through actions, motivations, and relationships.

5) Narrator (Chatman, Bordwell) : Implied narrators use cinematic cues; explicit narrators (e.g., voiceovers) directly shape tone and interpretation.

6) Narrative Systems (Bordwell) : Bordwell's systems organize story information via event sequencing, time, space, and causality. Types include as follows.

1. Classical Hollywood Narration : Clear, goal-driven, with closed endings.

2. Art-Cinema Narration : Ambiguous motivations, psychological realism, open-ended.

3. Historical Avant-Garde/ Modernist Narration : Experimental, with nonlinear structures and innovative techniques.

This mapping ensures both theoretical rigor and cultural relevance in narrative interpretation.

4. Critical Synthesis of Existing Research

Recent scholarship on Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024) highlights their role in adapting myths for modern contexts. Scholars like Barthes, Zipes, and Warner view myths as dynamic systems reinterpreting cultural and ideological narratives (Barthes, 1972; Warner, 1995; Zipes, 2013). Chinese animation preserves heritage while reflecting modern identity and state discourse.

Research focuses on four areas, including narrative structure, character development, spatial construction, and narrative strategies. Narrative structure often follows Syd Field's three-act model and Campbell's "hero's journey," emphasizing causality and emotional arcs, as seen in *Monkey King*, such as *Hero Is Back* and *Ne Zha* (Haonan, 2024; Jinke, 2022). However, some note structural homogeneity and weak climaxes (Ming, 2015).

Character development has shifted from divine archetypes to individualized figures. Heroes like Sun Wukong and Ne Zha exhibit growth, struggle, and psychological depth, reflecting societal values (Huiyuan & Keying, 2019; Yi & Lin, 2024; Ying, 2021).

Spatial narratives integrate material, social, and cultural spaces, enhancing thematic depth and psychological expression. Traditional aesthetics and symbolic motifs create poetic unity (Feiying, 2024; Wells, 2002; Xinyue, 2023; Yaoyao, 2024).

Narrative strategies blend realism and fantasy, using 3D animation, dreams, and metaphors to craft immersive, modern stories (Ran, 2023; Ying, 2020; Yuchen, 2022). Despite progress, research gaps include (1) most studies focus on individual case analyses, lacking systematic comparisons across award-winning works; (2) insufficient horizontal generalization and vertical evolution mapping of narrative innovations make it difficult to fully reveal the diversity and cultural implications of domestic animation storytelling.

5. Identified Research Gaps and Positioning

Based on the synthesis above, this study identifies several key gaps such as Lack of cross-film comparative studies grounded in an integrated narrative framework. Minimal discussion of narrative system evolution across the post-2015 decade. Limited theoretical synthesis bridging international narratology and Chinese visual culture.

To address these gaps, this study selects ten award-winning Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024) and applies a six-dimensional narrative framework derived from Chatman, Bordwell, and Li. Through qualitative textual analysis and expert interviews, it aims to trace narrative evolution and explore how myth is modernized and localized in contemporary Chinese animation under the dual forces of globalization and cultural revival.

Research Framework

This qualitative study analyzes narrative techniques in award-winning Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024), grounded in narrative theory from David Bordwell, Seymour Chatman, and Li Xianjie. Bordwell's narrative systems emphasize cinematic cues and causality, Chatman's story-discourse distinction refines narrative delivery, and Li's focus on symbolic space and ethical logic provides a culturally specific lens. The framework integrates six dimensions for systematic analysis as follows.

1. Story and Plot : Examines causal logic and event arrangement, using Chatman's story-discourse model and the three-act structure to analyze narrative progression and themes like heroism and identity.

2. Temporal Structure : Based on Bordwell's time categories (order, duration, frequency), this explores linear/ nonlinear structures (e.g., flashbacks, dream sequences) to enhance mythic temporality and emotional depth.

3. Space Construction : Drawing on Li Xianjie's symbolic space theory, this analyzes spatial types (linear journey, mythological, emotional, cultural, technological) as narrative devices reflecting psychological and ideological meanings.

4. Character Development : Investigates protagonist growth via external (quests), internal (belief crises), or dual-driven trajectories, revealing plot and cultural symbolism.

5. Narrators and Perspective : Uses Genette and Chatman’s focalization to analyze omniscient, restricted, or subjective narration, shaping audience engagement and information control.

6. Narrative Systems : Categorizes films into Classical Hollywood (clear causality, closed endings), Art film (psychological realism, open endings), or Modernist (fragmented, nonlinear) models per Bordwell.

These six elements provide a comprehensive and comparative framework for analyzing both shared structures and individual innovations in the selected films. This framework is visualized as in Figure 1.

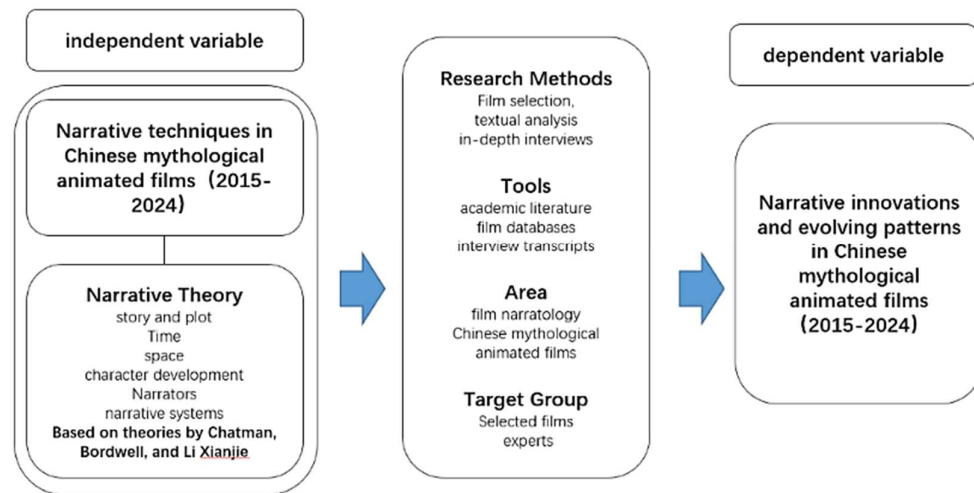


Figure 1. Research Framework

Research Methodology

1. Research design

The research process consists of three key steps as follows.

1) Film Selection : Ten representative award-winning films are selected based on criteria including box office performance, awards received, narrative innovation, and cultural value.

2) Textual Analysis : A structured framework based on narratological theory is used to systematically analyze the selected films.

3) In-depth Interviews : Semi-structured interviews are conducted with animation professionals, film critics, and university-level animation instructors. The interview protocol is validated using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index to ensure reliability and validity.

2. Population and Sample

This study focuses on ten award-winning Chinese mythological animated films released between 2015 and 2024, selected from a total of 43 using purposive sampling based on the following criteria.

1) Awards and Recognition : Received major domestic or international awards to ensure artistic quality and credibility.

- 2) Market Performance : Achieved notable box office results and favorable audience ratings.
- 3) Thematic Diversity : Represent a range of mythological origins and narrative approaches.
- 4) Technical Innovation : Showcase advances in animation technology, design, and special effects.
- 5) Cultural Value : Embody and contribute to Chinese cultural heritage and innovation.

In addition, 11 industry and academic professionals were interviewed as supplementary research participants, including 4 animation practitioners (designers and VFX artists), 3 senior film critics, and 4 university animation scholars.

These interviewees offered insights into narrative strategies from creative, critical, and theoretical perspectives.

Table 1. Film List

No	Film Title	Release Year	Number of Awards	Major Awards	Box Office (RMB Billion)	Douban rating
1	<i>Monkey King : Hero is Back</i>	2015	12	2015 Best Art Direction Award, 30 th China Golden Rooster Awards.	956	8.3
2	<i>Little Door Gods</i>	2016	1	The 2016 Silk Road International Film Festival award the Best Animation	78.6	6.9
3	<i>Big Fish & Begonia</i>	2016	14	2017 Best Animated Feature Film Award of the 15 th Budapest International Animated Film Festival	575	7.0
4	<i>Ne Zha : Birth of the Demon Child</i>	2019	17	2020 Best Art Film Award, 33 rd Golden Rooster Awards of Chinese Movies	5035	8.4
5	<i>White Snake</i>	2019	4	November 23, 2021 Best Animation Work of the Fourth Animation Award of China Culture and Arts Government Award	433	7.8
6	<i>Legend of Deification</i>	2020	3	Outstanding Feature Film, 19 th China Movie Huabiao Award, May 2023	1602	6.6
7	<i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn</i>	2021	6	2022 Silver Award for Animated Movie, “Golden Monkey Award”, 18 th China International Animation Festival	456	6.8
8	<i>Green Snake</i>	2021	2	2021 Best Art Film, The 34 th Golden Rooster Awards of Chinese Cinema	562	6.8
9	<i>New Gods : Yang Jian</i>	2022	4	Best Animated Feature Film and Best Animation Director at the 19 th China Animation Golden Dragon Award in 2022	550	7.0
10	<i>Goodbye Monster</i>	2022	1	Silver Award for Best Animated Feature Film and Best Animated Screenplay at the 19 th China Animation Golden Dragon Awards, 2022	35	6.3

3. Research Instruments and Validation

- 1) Structured Textual Analysis Framework : Adapted from narratology (Bordwell, Chatman, Prince), this framework analyzes six narrative elements (story/ plot, temporal structure,

spatial construction, character development, narrator, narrative style) tailored to Chinese mythological animated films.

2) Semi-Structured Interview Guide : Focuses on narrative strategies and cultural expression, validated through expert review and Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) for content validity.

4. Data Collection

Data was collected between January and March 2025 and include three types of materials.

1) Film texts : Ten award-winning films (2015 - 2024) analyzed for narrative elements.

2) Production-related documents : Public interviews and production notes reviewed for narrative and creative insights.

3) One-on-one in-depth interviews : Semi-structured interviews with animation professionals, critics, and instructors, recorded and transcribed for accuracy.

5. Data Analysis

This study adopts qualitative analysis as the core methodology, without quantitative statistical processing. The analysis strategies include:

1) Film texts : Narratological analysis identified narrative characteristics and trends.

2) Production materials : Interpretive analysis contextualized textual findings.

3) Interview transcripts : Thematic analysis extracted expert insights, cross-validating film analysis and linking narrative features to practitioner perspectives. Findings were synthesized descriptively, ensuring rigor and coherence.

All findings were synthesized and presented in a descriptive narrative format, ensuring argumentative rigor and logical coherence throughout the study.

Results

This study uses a “six narrative elements” framework to analyze ten award-winning Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024), focusing on story structure, temporal arrangement, spatial construction, character development, narrator design, and narrative style. It employs comparative approaches, examining thematic orientation, character motivation, and temporal structure typology. The analysis reveals diverse narrative innovations in domestic animation, explaining their success in engaging audiences through narrative logic, emotional resonance, and cultural identity, offering insights for future Chinese animation production.

1. Story and Plot

This study analyzes the three-act structures of ten Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024), categorized into three thematic groups including Heroic Awakening, Emotional Ethics, and Cultural Negotiation.

Heroic Awakening films (Monkey King : Hero Is Back, Ne Zha, Jiang Ziya) follow a fall-trial-redemption arc. Act I shows protagonists in repression, Act II introduces transformative challenges, and Act III resolves through empowerment, emphasizing agency and modern heroism.

Emotional Ethics films (Big Fish & Begonia, White Snake series) focus on internal conflicts and moral dilemmas. Act I sets up emotional or ethical issues, Act II explores guilt or dependency, and Act III offers reflective resolutions, often using nonlinear, dreamlike structures.

Cultural Negotiation films (Little Door Gods, The Mythical Ark) juxtapose traditional crises (Act I), cultural conflicts (Act II), and reconciliatory solutions (Act III), reinterpreting mythology for modern contexts and cultural identity.

The three-act structure flexibly supports evolving narratives, from heroic determinism to psychological depth and socio-cultural dialogue, articulating ideological and emotional transformations.

Table 2 Three-Act Structure Analysis of Chinese Mythological Animated Films (Grouped by Thematic Category)

Film Title	Narrative Theme	Act I	Act II	Act III	Remarks
I. Heroic Awakening and Identity Reconstruction					
<i>Monkey King : Hero Is Back</i>	Heroic awakening and return to duty	Sun Wukong is sealed; Jiang Liu'er appears	Jiang Liu'er is kidnapped by the demon; emotional trigger	Breaks the seal, defeats Chaos Demon, reclaims identity	Classic hero's journey with clear transformation
<i>Nezha : Birth of the Demon Child</i>	Defying fate and self-identity	Nezha's identity as a "demon pill" revealed; public hostility	Meets Ao Bing; misunderstanding and parental sacrifice drive growth	Defies fate; joins Ao Bing to resist the heavenly tribulation	Strong anti-fate theme; fast pacing and tension
<i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn</i>	Social oppression and personal rebellion	Li Yunxiang appears; Nezha's power reawakens	Faces Ao Guang's class-based oppression; accepts divine identity	Combines divine and human strength to resist monopoly	Urban context blended with action narrative
<i>Legend of Deification</i>	Crisis of faith and value reconstruction	Banished after the War of the Gods	Searches for Xiao Jiu's truth; questions divine logic	Rejects fate; reaffirms human-centered morality	Anti-hero narrative with philosophical tone
<i>New Gods : Yang Jian</i>	Divinity reconstruction and institutional critique	Yang Jian appears as a "working god"	Investigates Chen Tang Pass; suffers collapse of faith	Awakens divinity; confronts the heavenly system	Workplace metaphor + family and belief exploration
II. Emotional Ethics and Philosophical Reflection					
<i>Big Fish & Begonia</i>	Emotional sacrifice and life cycle	Chun forms a bond with a human boy	Revives him against nature's law, causing disaster	Sacrifices herself to save the tribe; completes reincarnation	Coexists dream logic and philosophical reflection
<i>White Snake</i>	Love and fate between human and demon	Xiao Bai and Xu Xuan fall in love	Pursued by the state; Xiao Bai loses her memory	Love rekindled; self-sacrifice; reincarnation unfinished	Dream-memory interwoven romance
<i>Green Snake</i>	Feminist awakening	Xiao Bai is captured; Xiao Qing falls into Asura illusion realm	Multiple trials; self-denial and inner struggle	Awakens and fights alone; rescues herself and her sister	Cyclical structure with psychological transformation
III. Cultural Inheritance and Modern Negotiation					
<i>Little Door Gods</i>	Decline of tradition and divine-human cooperation	Crisis of divine jobs triggers godly action	Nian Beast revives; gods descend to the mortal world	Humans and gods unite to restore faith	Dual narrative structure; culturally reflective plot
<i>Goodbye Monster</i>	Psychological healing and mythic reinterpretation	Bai Ze fails as a healer; experiences trauma	Enters dream space; battles inner demons	Emotional healing; reconstructs the philosophy of healing	Symbolic structure with psychological dimensions

2. Time

This study adopts the “six narrative elements” framework to systematically analyze ten award-winning Chinese mythological animated films released between 2015 and 2024. The analysis focuses on six key dimensions including story structure, temporal arrangement, spatial construction, character development, narrator design, and narrative style. In addition, the study incorporates multi-dimensional comparative approaches such as thematic orientation, character motivation, and temporal structure typology. By comparing the narrative strategies of different films, the study not only reveals the diverse explorations of narrative innovation in domestic animation but also helps to explain why these works effectively engage audiences on levels of narrative logic, emotional resonance, and cultural identity—offering valuable insights into narrative practices and audience reception mechanisms that can inform future Chinese animation production.

Table 3 Time Structure Types

Type	Film	Time Structure Features	Thematic Focus
Linear Time	<i>Monkey King : Hero Is Back</i>	Linear with limited flashbacks	Fall and awakening
	<i>Little Door Gods</i>	Alternation between mortal and divine realms	Tension between traditional beliefs and modern life
	<i>Ne Zha : Birth of the Demon Child</i>	Countdown-driven linear structure	Struggle against fate, burden of responsibility
	<i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn</i>	Juxtaposition of present and past-life memories	Struggle against fate, burden of responsibility
	<i>New Gods : Yang Jian</i>	Modern timeline with reincarnation flashbacks	Crisis of belief and spiritual rebirth
	<i>Legend of Deification</i>	Flashbacks to mythological background	Crisis of belief and spiritual rebirth
	<i>Goodbye Monster</i>	Embedded psychological time with some flashbacks	Healing through confronting inner fears
Nonlinear Structure	<i>Big Fish & Begonia</i>	Framed narrative with embedded memories	Reincarnation and reciprocal gratitude
	<i>White Snake</i>	Circular structure with reincarnation layers	Love across cycles of rebirth and ethnic boundaries
	<i>Green Snake</i>	Symbolic and psychological time structure	Struggles of obsession and spiritual growth

3. Space

This study identifies five dominant spatial narrative patterns across ten representative Chinese mythological animated films from 2015 to 2022 including Linear Journey Space, Emotional/ Fantasy Space, Cultural Contrast Space, Layered/ Collapsing Space, and Technological-Mutated Space. These spatial modes reflect a significant shift in animation from space as passive setting to an active narrative mechanism. Linear Journey Spaces support character growth through sequential environments, while Emotional/ Fantasy Spaces externalize psychological conflicts via dreamscapes or symbolic realms. Cultural Contrast Spaces juxtapose divine and mortal worlds, emphasizing hybrid identities and value tensions. Layered/ Collapsing Spaces employ nested environments that disintegrate as characters confront moral dilemmas. Technological-Mutated Spaces, meanwhile, reframe mythology through cyberpunk and dystopian aesthetics. Across these types, spatial

transformation frequently functions as a secondary narrative drive, reinforcing character development, emotional arcs, and thematic reflection.

Table 4 Type of Spatial Narrative

Type	Description	Representative Films
Linear Journey Space	The protagonist grows through a sequential spatial path; space transitions align with narrative progression.	<i>Monkey King : Hero is Back, Nezha : Birth of the Demon Child, Legend of Deification (partial)</i>
Emotional/ Fantasy Space (Dreamscape/ Maze)	Symbolic or emotional spaces reflect the protagonist's internal struggles and transformations.	<i>Green Snake, White Snake, Goodbye Monster, New Gods : Yang Jian</i>
Cultural Contrast Space (Dual/ Parallel Structure)	Juxtaposition of human and divine realms or traditional and modern environments to highlight cultural hybridity.	<i>Little Door Gods, New Gods : Nezha Reborn</i>
Layered/ Collapsing Space (Nested Structure)	Multi-layered spatial systems that eventually collapse, prompting the protagonist's critical decision-making.	<i>Big Fish & Begonia, Legend of Deification, Green Snake</i>
Technological-Mutated Space (Futuristic/ Cyberpunk)	Mechanized, apocalyptic, or cyber-enhanced spaces representing futuristic mythological imaginaries.	<i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn, Goodbye Monster</i>

4. Character Development

This study analyzes the "second narrative drive" in ten Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2022), defined as the core motivation driving conflict, character growth, and thematic depth in the second act. Films are classified into three types including External Drive, Internal Drive, and Dual Drive.

External Drive films (Monkey King : Hero Is Back, Little Door Gods, New Gods : Nezha Reborn) use antagonists or social conflicts to propel combat or adventure-based narratives. **Internal Drive films** (Big Fish & Begonia, Jiang Ziya, Green Snake, Goodbye Monster) focus on emotional struggles or psychological reflection as narrative drivers. **Dual Drive films** (Ne Zha, White Snake, New Gods : Yang Jian) blend external crises with internal awakenings, exploring fate, identity, and systemic tensions.

This classification highlights narrative differences in plot dynamics, character growth, and genre hybridity in contemporary Chinese mythological animation.

Table 5 Analysis of Character Development Based on the 'Second Driving Force of the Plot'

Drive Type	Representative Films	Core Thematic Orientation
External Drive	Monkey King : Hero is Back, Little Door Gods, New Gods : Nezha Reborn	Traditional adventure, heroic combat, mission-based arcs
Internal Drive	Big Fish & Begonia, Legend of Deification, Green Snake, Goodbye Monster	Psychological growth, self-discovery, value reconstruction
Dual Drive	Ne Zha : Birth of the Demon Child, White Snake, New Gods: Yang Jian	Identity crisis + systemic oppression; complex, layered themes

5. Narrator

This study identifies five distinct types of narrative agents in ten Chinese mythological animated films released between 2015 and 2024, revealing a shift from traditional omniscient

narration to more diverse and psychologically engaging narrative strategies. The five types include: (1) Externally Driven Growth Narrators, which align limited third-person perspective with the protagonist's development (e.g., *Monkey King : Hero is Back*, *Jiang Ziya*); (2) Emotionally Subjective Internal Narrators, characterized by dreamlike and symbolic inner narration (*Big Fish & Begonia*, *White Snake 2*); (3) Composite Narrators, using multiple focal points to reflect sociocultural tensions (*Little Door Gods*, *Goodbye Monster*); (4) Implicit Narrators, where perspective is shaped visually without an overt narrator (*White Snake*, *New Gods : Yang Jian*); and (5) Satirical or Anti-Traditional Narrators, which use critical narration to reinterpret mythic structures (*Nezha : Birth of the Demon Child*). These narrative trends reflect the increasing complexity and emotional depth of contemporary Chinese animated storytelling. Typology of Narrative Agents in Chinese Mythological Animated Films.

Table 6 Narrator analysis

Type	Features	Representative Films
Externally Driven Growth Narrator	Focalized perspective aligned with protagonist's growth; goal-oriented and logically coherent	<i>Monkey King : Hero is Back</i> , <i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn</i> , <i>Legend of Deification</i>
Emotionally Subjective Internal Narrator	Narration blends personal memory and dream-like states; softened emotional rhythm	<i>Big Fish & Begonia</i> , <i>Green Snake</i>
Dual-Line/ Multi-perspective Composite Narrator	Multi-character narration emphasizing social/traditional themes	<i>Little Door Gods</i> , <i>Goodbye Monster</i>
Implicitly Controlled Narrator	No explicit narrator; perspective controlled via visual focus	<i>White Snake</i> , <i>New Gods : Yang Jian</i>
Satirical/ Anti-traditional Narrator	All-knowing or audience-aligned narrator delivering critical perspective	<i>Nezha : Birth of the Demon Child</i>

6. Narrative System

This study analyzes ten Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024), revealing a hybrid narrative style blending Classical Hollywood narration with local folklore, art-cinema, modernist, and postmodernist elements, reflecting industrial evolution and cultural localization. Films like *Monkey King : Hero Is Back* (2015 film) and *Ne Zha* (2019 film) merge Hollywood's three-act structure and goal-driven protagonists with Chinese mythological themes, enhancing accessibility. *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016 film) and *White Snake* (2019 film) incorporate art-cinema traits, with introspective motivations and poetic, open-ended storytelling. *Journey to the West : Goodbye Monster* (2022 film) blends Classical structure with modernist fragmented timelines and symbolic dreamscapes. Recent films like *New Gods : Nezha Reborn* (2021 film) and *White Snake II* (2021 film) adopt postmodernist strategies, featuring genre blending and visual experimentation within Hollywood frameworks.

This hybridization showcases Chinese animation's shift from singular models to diverse, culturally specific narratives balancing industrial norms and artistic exploration.

Table 7 Narrative System Analysis

Narrative System	Representative Films	Explanation
Classical Hollywood + Local Folklore	<i>Monkey King : Hero is Back (2015 film)</i> , <i>Little Door Gods (2015 film)</i> , <i>Ne Zha : Birth of the Demon Child (2019 film)</i>	Uses three-act structure and goal-driven protagonists while incorporating Chinese mythology and folk customs to strengthen cultural identity and audience familiarity.
Classical Hollywood + Art-cinema	<i>Big Fish & Begonia (2016 film)</i> , <i>White Snake (2019 film)</i> , <i>Legend of Deification (2020 film)</i>	Combines structured narrative with poetic visuals, internal character conflicts, and emotional ambiguity, reflecting personal and philosophical introspection.
Classical Hollywood + Modernist	<i>Goodbye Monster (2022 film)</i>	While retaining goal-oriented structure, it introduces fragmented space-time, psychological symbols, and dream sequences to express trauma and healing.
Classical Hollywood + Postmodernist	<i>New Gods : Nezha Reborn (2021 film)</i> , <i>Green Snake (2021 film)</i> , <i>New Gods : Yang Jian (2022 film)</i>	Merges linear action with stylistic experimentation, genre blending, identity reconstruction, and meta-narratives, emphasizing individuality and visual spectacle.

From 2015 to 2022, Chinese mythological animated films advanced in story logic, character growth, spatial-temporal design, and stylistic integration. Using a six-element narrative framework, this study shows how domestic animation blends modern mythological expression with cultural communication, balancing globalization and local identity revival.

7. Evolution of Narrative Strategies Across Three Periods (2015 - 2024)

Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024) evolved through three phases: exploratory (2015 - 2016), narrative maturation (2019 - 2020), and stylistic hybridization (2021 - 2024). The exploratory phase, with films like *Monkey King* such as *Hero Is Back* and *Big Fish & Begonia*, adopted Hollywood’s three-act structure, blending traditional mythology with modern themes like heroic awakening. Narratives used linear, journey-based spaces and simple divine-human contrasts, with early-stage aesthetics.

The narrative maturation phase (2019 - 2020), led by *Ne Zha*, *White Snake*, and *Jiang Ziya*, featured dual narratives of heroic growth and psychological struggle. Nonlinear timelines, flashbacks, and multilayered spaces emerged, with nuanced characters and a fusion of Hollywood and art-cinema styles, balancing national values with youth-oriented themes.

From 2021, films like *New Gods : Nezha Reborn* and *White Snake 2* embraced postmodernism and psychological realism. Nonlinear, dreamlike structures and symbolic or cyberized spaces shifted focus to internal experiences. Anti-hero and multi-protagonist narratives, fragmented and open-ended, reflected Gen Z values of identity pluralism and autonomy, reinterpreting mythology for contemporary expression.

This evolution shows a shift from clear, culturally affirmative narratives to complex, psychologically rich, and globally influenced hybrid storytelling.

Conclusion and Discussion

1. Conclusion

From 2015 to 2024, Chinese mythological animated films evolved from structural imitation to innovative, culturally distinct narratives with global appeal. Using a six-dimensional framework—story, time, space, character, narrators, and narrative systems—this study analyzes ten

award-winning films, revealing how they blend traditional mythology with modern narrative logic and diverse aesthetics.

Story structures follow a three-act model, categorized into heroic awakening, emotional ethics, and cultural negotiation. Temporal structures shift from linear to nonlinear and psychological. Spatial designs progress from physical to symbolic and technological spaces. Character motivations move from external to internal and dual-driven arcs, reflecting psychological depth. Narrators vary from external to subjective and multi-threaded, enhancing immersion. Narrative systems hybridize Hollywood, Chinese folklore, art film, and postmodern techniques, showing structural maturity.

The evolution spans three phases including exploratory (2015 - 2016), maturation (2019 - 2020), and hybridization (2021 - 2024). This shift from replication to innovation, balancing national and individual expression, highlights technological, narrative, and cultural advancements, establishing a unique Chinese narrative paradigm in global animation.

2. Research Discussion

This study advances the narrative analysis of Chinese mythological animated films by offering both theoretical and methodological innovations. Prior works, such as Zhang Yue's typological study of mythological motifs (Yue, 2022) and Wang Qi's focus on cultural transmission (Qi, 2023), provided valuable insights but lacked systematic comparative frameworks or internal narrative analysis. Similarly, single-film analyses by Xu Fanshu and Zhang An'an focused on character motivation but did not establish broader structural patterns (An'an, 2023; Fanshu, 2018).

In response, this study develops a six-dimensional analytical model—covering story and plot, time, space, character, narrative perspective, and system—based on theories from Bordwell, Chatman, and Li Xianjie. Through a comparative study of ten award-winning films (2015 - 2024), it uncovers narrative patterns and innovations, particularly in spatial construction. Five spatial types are identified including linear journey, multidimensional mythology, emotional space, cultural contrast, and tech-enhanced myth, expanding Li's "symbolic space" theory into animation.

Methodologically, the research combines textual analysis and semi-structured interviews with creators and scholars, offering both theoretical depth and creative relevance. This mixed approach addresses limitations of past text-only studies and responds to calls for research that informs practice.

At a broader cultural level, the narrative evolution of Chinese mythological animated films in the past decade reflects the combined influence of creative innovation, policy support, and technological advancement. At the policy level, documents such as the Cultural Industry Revitalization Plan in 2009, the 13th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development in 2017, and the 14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development in 2022 continuously stress the importance of cultural storytelling and animation as a vehicle for cultural export and traditional rejuvenation. At the technical level, digital animation technologies have enabled the visualization of dream sequences, psychological timelines, and symbolic spaces. At the audience level, younger viewers—especially Gen Z—are more drawn to content that offers visual impact, emotional resonance, and value tension, resulting in strong connectivity across the narrative, emotional, and cultural layers.

Notably, the dominance of heroic narratives (e.g., *Ne Zha*, *Jiang Ziya*, *Nezha Reborn*, *Monkey King : Hero is Back*) from 2015 to 2024 underscores a recurring story arc: personal crisis-psychological struggle-transcendence of fate. This narrative preference reflects dual dynamics. On

one hand, it supports state-level ideological aims of reinforcing national identity and cultural confidence. On the other, it resonates with younger audiences' lived experiences of social anxiety, class immobility, and identity tension. These narratives of “defying fate” and “breaking labels” offer psychological compensation while also modeling a reconciliatory path between individual agency and traditional norms. Furthermore, their symbolic clarity and emotional intensity make them highly translatable into short-form content, memes, and viral media—enhancing their cultural visibility and transmedia mobility.

Chinese mythological animated films (2015 - 2024) achieved critical and cultural success by leveraging theoretical frameworks, updating traditional symbols, and resonating with modern viewers' psychological and aesthetic expectations. By re-encoding mythology for emotional and cultural expression, these films create a localized narrative modernity, bridging storytelling and identity formation, and advancing China's indigenous storytelling traditions.

Suggestion

1. Recommendations for the Application of Findings

- 1) Enhance localized narrative strategies by adapting Chinese mythological resources to modern contexts, creating a culturally distinct narrative brand.
- 2) Use the 'six narrative elements' framework to plan story structure, character development, and spatial-temporal design, improving narrative coherence and innovation.
- 3) Policymakers and platforms should support original mythological animation projects with cultural depth, promoting innovative content and distribution.

2. Recommendations for Future Research

- 1) Integrate quantitative data (e.g., audience ratings, box office, social media metrics) to study narrative strategies' impact on reception.
- 2) Conduct cross-cultural studies comparing Chinese mythological animation with Japanese/ Western counterparts to explore narrative, cultural, and visual differences.
- 3) Investigate market forces, platform logic, and genre conventions' influence on animation storytelling, balancing artistic expression and commercial viability.

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