

# Research on the Strategy of Film and Television Adaptation of the Mythical Story of Dayu

Jiahua Wang

School of Art, Anhui University of Finance and Economics, Bengbu, Anhui, 233032, China.

## Abstract

In recent years, mythological themes have always been a hot topic in film and television adaptation, while the film and television adaptation of the story of the Great Yu myth is in a lukewarm state. By analyzing the existing film and television adaptations of the Great Yu mythological story, it is found that there are problems in the current film and television adaptations of the Great Yu mythological story, such as narrow selection of materials, simple and monotonous themes, rigid character settings, flat plot development, insufficient mastery of time and space, and a lack of global awareness. Based on this, this paper proposes some adaptation strategies, such as digging deeply into ancient books, diversifying themes, reshaping images, Defamiliarization characters, building a mythical universe, and modernizing narrative, in order to help Dayu's mythical stories find a modern adaptation path.

## Keywords

The mythological story of the Great Yu; Film and television adaptation; Adaptation strategy; Modernization Path.

## 1. Introduction

In the film and television adaptation, because of its unique spiritual connotation and aesthetic value, the Chinese myth story provides reference for looking back and understanding the ancient world through the transformation of audio-visual symbols, such as Fuxi Nuwa, Fengshen Bang, Jigong, etc., for example, the series of film and television plays adapted from Classic of Mountains and Seas and the series of film and television works adapted from Journey to the West have built a very marketable Chinese myth universe. However, while the construction of the "Chinese mythological universe" is hot, there have been frequent film and television adaptations of mythological IPs such as "Sun Wukong", "Nezha", and "White Snake". However, the adaptation of the rich and vivid and complete story of the Great Yu myth has not yet been deeply explored.

From 2013 to 2022, according to the Cat's Eye box office ranking, a total of 16 film and television adaptations of Chinese mythological stories grossed over 100 million yuan, with a total box office revenue of 201.8 trillion yuan, accounting for 5% of the total box office revenue. From the perspective of box office structure, the position of Chinese mythological stories in film and television adaptations is becoming increasingly irreplaceable. From the perspective of reception aesthetics, stories such as "Gun and Yu Control the Water", "Splitting Mountains to Guide the Huai River", "Yu Marries the Tushan Family", "Three Passes through the Family without Entering", and "Yu Meets the Marquises" have a high recognition and popularity foundation. However, so far, there are only a few successful cases in the film and television adaptation of the "Da Yu" IP theme, such as the animated film "Da Yu Control the Water", which is far from its influence. What are the difficulties behind the "desertification" adaptation of the mythological story of Dayu in film and television? How can we combine the specific context of the adaptation of Chinese mythological stories in film and television to find new breakthrough

space for the reconstruction of the image of the mythological story of Dayu? This article analyzes existing film and television works on the theme of the Great Yu, and combines successful cases of film and television adaptations on similar themes to find a modern path for the adaptation of the mythological story of the Great Yu.

## 2. The Current Situation of Film and Television Adaptation of the Mythology of Dayu

Throughout the process of film and television adaptation of the mythological story of the Great Yu, there are few works that can be traced. However, it is gratifying that these film and television adaptations cover the main categories of film and television, such as movies, TV dramas, animations, documentaries, and feature films. So far, they can be divided into the following two stages.

The first stage is from the new era to the 21st century, when the film and television adaptation of the Great Yu mythological story first appeared in the 1980s. Lu Yu and Zhou Shaofeng directed "The Spirit of Shenzhou" in 1988, which was the first film adaptation of the Great Yu mythological story in China. As the pioneering work of the film and television adaptation of the Great Yu mythological story, it transformed text symbols into audio-visual images for the first time, not only providing the public with an unprecedented image of the Great Yu in film and television, It also provided references for later generations. Shenzhou Spirit "has a rich plot setting and a complete story structure. The story mainly revolves around the grand theme of" controlling the water ", fully showcasing the series of efforts made by Gun and Yu to control the water, and showcasing their dedication and spirit of sacrificing their family and defending the country, and selfless dedication. In addition, the audio-visual language of the film and the special effects used at that time now seem timeless, such as the white smoke rising when Gun died in Yushan, and the yellow dragon disappearing and falling on the mountaintop, transforming into the Great Yu. In summary, "The Spirit of Shenzhou" has profound significance as the first film adapted from the mythological story of the Great Yu. Since then, more and more IP images of the Great Yu have gradually emerged in film and television works, such as the audio-visual images of Gun and Yu in the 1995 fantasy costume TV series "Legend of Yanluo" directed by Ma Yuhui. During the same period, there was also a drama film adapted from the mythological story of the Great Yu, directed by Xiao Lang in 1996, titled 'The Great Yu's Control of the Water'. The traditional Chinese opera film "Da Yu Zhi Shui" has opened up a diverse creative path. The film is performed in the form of Shaoxing opera, with carefully designed scenery and actor performances. The melody is also very pleasant, and it basically includes the well-known story of Da Yu Zhi Shui. During this period, overall, China's mythology was mainly presented through storytelling in terms of animation, with a focus on the unfolding nature of the story and showcasing its complex relationships. [1] For example, in "Shenzhou Spirit", a complete storyline can be seen, where the water gods work together to cause chaos in the world, the Heavenly Emperor orders Guns to control the water, Guns steal land to control the water, Guns kill at Yushan, Yu inherits his father's will, Yu fights and works together, and Yu marries Tushanjiao. In the film, people are cut from the perspective of struggle and resistance. The narrative of the story also has continuity and prominent contradictions, which are also the main clues driving the development of the plot, The educational significance is very significant. The second stage is from the 21st century to the present, during which a large number of different types of film and television works on the theme of the Great Yu emerged. Firstly, there are documentaries and feature films, which are mainly produced by CCTV and provincial and local programs. In recent years, with the continuous development of new media technology, individual films and TV works on the theme of Da Yu have gradually emerged. The emergence of film and television works in such documentaries and feature films not only fills the gap, but

also exposes the occurrence of monotonous images due to the lack of directly accessible image materials, which to some extent affects the viewing quality of the works. But after all, historical documentaries are not original representations of characters, scenes, stories, etc. in real time and space, but express the cognitive interpretation, Value judgment and emotional experience of the creative subject for history through image construction. Therefore, how to tell the story of the Great Yu well has positive significance for us to understand the Great Yu, understand him, and comprehend his spirit. Secondly, there are TV dramas. In 2015, the 35 episode TV drama "Da Shun" produced by the Shandong Film and TV Drama Production Center revolved around the winding life of the ancient emperor Da Shun, telling the story of Yao, Shun, and Yu who went through hardships, managed floods, and achieved great success for the people. Finally, the most well-known animation of this stage is the first 4K ultra high definition animation in China, "Da Yu Controlling the Flood", created by Zhejiang Broadcasting and Television Group in 2019. The commercialization of the adaptation of the animated film "Dayu Harnessing the Flood" has been successfully operated. With the vigorous development of Chinese animation's animation industry, the commercialization and entertainment of the adaptation of Dayu's mythical stories have become more clear.

### **3. The Problems in the Film and Television Adaptation of the Legend of Dayu**

To this day, the Da Yu series of film and television works have become an indispensable force in the context of Chinese mythological consumption. However, compared to film and television adaptations of other mythological IPs of the same type, the film and television adaptations of the Da Yu series have exposed a series of problems, of which three are worth paying attention to.

#### **3.1. Narrow selection range, simple and monotonous theme**

At present, China's film and television works adapted from the myth of the Great Yu have a relatively simple choice of the original text. The "Spirit of China", the drama film "The Great Yu Controlling the Flood", and the animated film "The Great Yu Controlling the Flood" are basically selected from ancient books such as "The Classic of Mountains and Seas · Overseas Classics", "The Classic of Mountains and Seas · Hainei Classics", and "The Chronicles of the Five Emperors". Most of these works have chosen the bridge of "Gun and Yu Controlling the Flood" for interpretation. Although some works have been highly praised for their unconventional rewriting of mythological masterpieces, the convergence of story selection ultimately leads to a "thousand pieces on one side" in the domestic animation film market, frequently exploiting the commercial value of a certain mythological IP, which can easily lead to audience aesthetic fatigue and greatly reduce the dissemination effect of film and television works. In addition to the serious homogenization of material selection, there are also some issues with the theme expression of the adaptation works of the Dayu Mythology film and television. Film and television art is an art form with both commercial and entertainment. Film and television adaptors realize that copying the Metanarrative in the original text is difficult to resonate with today's audience, so they simplify the obscure themes in the original text to varying degrees. [2] The themes of "Shenzhou Spirit" and the drama film "Dayu Water Control" have always revolved around dedication and selflessness, while neglecting the themes of love and exploration involved in the process of water control.

#### **3.2. Stereotypic character setting and flat plot development**

Throughout the film and television adaptations of the mythological story of the Great Yu, most of the works have produced impressive portrayals of the Great Yu, but most of the other characters in these works still have not escaped the problem of stylization and flattening. In

film and television works, there is a distinction between primary and secondary characters, and secondary characters also play an important narrative role in literary and artistic works. "Secondary characters can form a contrasting relationship with the main or other characters, as well as a contrasting relationship. [3] Therefore, the lack of portrayal of secondary characters in film and television works can also make the plot dull and lack depth. The most typical issue of the lack of portrayal of secondary characters in existing Da Yu mythological film and television works is the portrayal of villains and female characters. As for the villain character "Gonggong" in the movie "Shenzhou Spirit", the portrayal of him in the film is too superficial and superficial. The audience did not understand from the film why he acted wickedly and harmed the people, just for the villain but for the villain, and the significance of his existence is only a stepping stone on the growth path of the "protagonist". In addition to the villains, there are also issues with the portrayal of female characters in Dayu's mythological film and television works. The mythological story of the Great Yu was born thousands of years ago in the feudal era, and there are very few female characters recorded in literature, resulting in a flat and absent state of women in the mythological story of the Great Yu. As a result, there are problems with the portrayal of women in the mythological stories of the Great Yu in film and television adaptations. Throughout the film and television works on the theme of the Great Yu, the protagonists mainly portray male heroes, with some female characters appearing mostly as "tool people" or "background boards". The image of Tu Shan female Jiao in the animated film "Da Yu Zhi Shui" and the three princesses in the movie "Shen Zhou Jing Souls" both have this problem. There are only a few scenes in the animated film "Da Yu Zhi Shui" that portray the image of a female coquette, such as playing melodious music on the grass and waiting for Da Yu on the mountaintop during the appearance. The image of a female coquette lacks self-awareness and subjective initiative. Similarly, a group of female characters in "Shenzhou Spirit", such as the Third Princess and Lady Yunhua, are caught up in this issue.

### **3.3. Insufficient mastery of time and space, lack of global awareness**

Due to the fact that most of the film and television works adapted from mythological stories have constructed a virtual mythological world full of fantasy colors, such films often change quickly in time and space, with large spans. However, some works lack sufficient control over narrative time and space, and lack a certain level of global awareness, often resulting in narrative confusion for the audience. The most prominent issue in the adaptation of Da Yu's mythological film and television works is the two issues of narrative rhythm and narrative space. One is the issue of narrative rhythm. In most Chinese film and television works, the setting of the plot is consistent with the setting of the novel's storyline, which is "beginning development climax ending". The opening part of the first act is used to explain the background of the story and pave the way for the following text. Therefore, this part should not be too long, and it is best to bury the first suspense within ten minutes of the opening to stimulate the audience's attention and curiosity. At the beginning of the animated film "Da Yu Zhi Shui", it portrays Gun's deep self blame on a flood ravaged hillside, laying the groundwork for the subsequent conflicts and conflicts of stealing the land of the Heavenly Emperor. However, there are also related film and television works that have problems such as excessively long construction parts and delayed narrative. For example, in the opening part of the drama film "Da Yu Zhi Shui", only the scene where the Emperor of Heaven executed him due to the unfavorable control of the water by Gun took a lot of time, causing slow entry into the main topic, disrupting the audience's thinking, and making people lose their desire to watch. The second issue is the shaping of narrative space. Film and television art is an audio-visual art, so the shaping of visual space is particularly important, but some works overlook the inherent connections between various narrative spaces. In the movie "Spirit of Shenzhou", in a scene where Da Yu seeks Lady Yunhua to control the water, a "fairy" Lady Yunhua does not have a

mansion but stands next to a small stone, which seriously contradicts the overall narrative style of the space here.

## **4. The Modernization Path of the Film and Television Adaptation of the Mythology of Dayu**

### **4.1. Digging deeply into classics and diversifying themes**

Famously known and popular mythological classics such as "Gun and Yu Controlling the Flood", "Splitting the Mountains to Guide the Huai River", "Yu Marries the Tushan Clan", "Three Passes through the Family Door without Entering", and "Yu Meets the Marquises" have a wide audience base. Therefore, these mythological stories have certain advantages in film and television secondary creation, but frequent adaptation and interpretation of a certain content can lead to a proliferation of homogeneous works, ultimately causing disgust among viewers. To break this situation, creators need to carefully consider material selection, deeply explore vast mythological classics, and turn their attention to the non popular "blue ocean". For example, in the adaptation of "The Great Yu Controlling the Flood", it is not necessary to limit oneself to the character of the Great Yu. Characters such as Gengchen, Boyi, and Zhuhai all have a magnificent legendary color, and there are also many stories worth exploring and adapting behind these characters. In addition, film and television creators can choose some relatively obscure stories for modern adaptation. The vast mythological classics are a natural treasure trove waiting to be developed, and selecting materials from a wider range can not only enrich the theme, but also achieve the popularization of classics and the role of education in entertainment, which is also beneficial for the inheritance of traditional culture.

In addition, for any narrative work, the theme is the core element of its success or failure. The film and television works adapted from the myth of the Great Yu mostly adopt a flat and straightforward narrative approach, which poses a serious problem of homogenization of themes. Film and television creators should break out of the "strange circle" of a single theme, cleverly integrating themes such as friendship, dreams, exploration, and rescue in the narrative process. The diverse themes provide more possibilities for the unfolding of the story plot, and also increase the viewability and fun of the film. Referring to the 2022 release of 'New God Chart: Yang Jian', it breaks through the barriers of traditional Yang Jian story themes. In the original text, Yang Jian is a handsome young man, while Shen Gongbao is narrow-minded. In the new film, although Yang Jian retains his handsome appearance, he becomes a down-to-earth bounty hunter, while Shen Gongbao is portrayed as both righteous and evil. The film breaks away from the theme of mountain splitting to save the mother, and instead tells the story of two generations of uncle and nephew going on a thrilling and magical adventure together.

### **4.2. Remodeling image and Defamiliarization of characters**

The ancient books about the mythological story of the Great Yu are of an early age. The writers of the ancient books only briefly introduced the experience of the Great Yu in controlling the water, lacking descriptions of the characters' psychological activities and leaving a lot of blank space. This requires film and television creators to use their imagination in secondary creation, supplement the human taste of people and objects, and make the characters' images more full and complete. Although the film and television works adapted from the mythological story of the Great Yu have created successful character images such as Gun and Yu, there are also many characters who are either black or white, either this or that. In response to the lack of portrayal of secondary characters in Dayu's mythological film and television works, improvement strategies can be learned from excellent film and television works from other countries. The shock or enlightenment that villains bring to the public is that when the audience discovers the story or inner secrets behind a villain, they will develop a strong interest in the villain, thereby

filling or enriching the public's taste and psychological deficiencies. [4] Most of the villains in the film and television works adapted from the myth of the Great Yu can be judged by their external images. They are often portrayed as ugly and vicious, and their characters lack change from beginning to end. They are "totally bad people", such as the co workers in Shenzhou Spirit and Wuzhiqi in Dayu Flood Control. In American film and television works, the villains are often "hypocritical villains". The appearance of the villain gives people a gentle feeling, but in reality, the inner darkness is unbearable. The true face of the characters will be revealed as the plot develops, such as Hannibal in "The Silent Lamb". On the surface, he is a gentle doctor, but in reality, he is a cannibal madman. Japanese movies will provide a more detailed portrayal of the reasons behind the transformation of the villain's character. For example, in "Naruto", Payne, whose parents died in the Naruto War, committed suicide and was betrayed by his brother Mihiko, who advocated for peace. As a result, his worldview collapsed, the rebel group destroyed Banzang, and he was brainwashed by the soil. Therefore, his philosophy was to maintain stability and achieve peace through military rule, and to end the war through even more brutal warfare. In this way, according to the development needs of the plot, a "humanized" villain is set up, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses, quirks and flaws of human beings. It is precisely because of this expression of the dark side that it resonates with the audience; It is precisely because of this that villains will be given different faces, personalities, and voices according to their respective settings, thereby obtaining a more vivid image.

#### **4.3. Constructing a mythological universe and narrating modernization**

In the current context of imaginative consumption, one of the reasons why mythological film adaptations are highly favored by consumers is that these films satisfy viewers' fantasy experiences by constructing a virtual mythological world. The success or failure of a mythological film and television work mainly depends on whether the film and television creator has successfully constructed a narrative time and space that is different from reality and logically rigorous. In narrative, time and space are inseparable. "We must endow space with meaning through narrative in order to transform it into a form that can exist in time. [5] At present, there are two obvious problems in the construction of time and space in the adaptation of the myth of Dayu in film and television works. Firstly, the setting of narrative time is simple, and the narrative rhythm is slow; The second is the "rupture" of narrative space, where individual paragraphs or scenes are exquisite but lack overall logic.

Due to time constraints, it is not easy for film and television works to construct a complete worldview and rigorous logical operation of mythological time in a short period of time. To solve this problem, the method of creating a "Chinese mythological universe" can be adopted, using the synergistic effect of sequels to achieve the complete construction of narrative time and space. The new Shenbang animated films produced by Chasing Light Company, such as "New Shenbang: Nezha Rebirth" and "New Shenbang: Yang Jian", although they have the awareness of creating a series of films, due to the large time span between the two films, there is no obvious internal logic and temporal continuity. Some of the more mature works in terms of time and space construction include the "Lord of the Rings" series of films adapted from the novel "The Lord of the Rings". The films create a detailed setting of the Middle Earth world, where the audience can follow the protagonist's journey and gradually explore the subtleties of the world. The full picture of the Middle Earth world is also gradually presented in the series of works. It should be noted that when drawing inspiration from domestic and foreign works, we should learn their creative techniques instead of copying superficial forms. In order to create highly Chinese mythological adaptation animated films, it is necessary to integrate and polish traditional cultural elements appropriately.

In addition, film and television creators should also strive to balance the relationship between form and content. Beautiful scenes should not only stay at the visual level, but also pay attention

to the functionality of the scene, making it serve the plot and adapt to the shaping of characters. The content and form in film art are a complex of "me in you" and "you in me". [6] When creating narrative time and space, adaptations of the Dayu mythological story in film and television need to flexibly grasp rationality and emotion, realism and freehand brushwork, and mobilize all favorable factors to achieve the expression of narrative themes. On the basis of concisely and clearly telling the story, it is also possible to increase the narrative level by setting multiple time and space, enrich the narrative structure, and improve the artistry and visibility of the film. However, this also tests the narrative skills of the creators and puts higher demands on the audience's viewing level.

## 5. Conclusion

The film and television adaptations of the Dayu mythological story have good development prospects based on the extensive audience base of the original text. However, there are still some problems in their narrative strategies, such as homogenization of material selection, shallow and monotonous themes, insufficient flat and functional characters, chaotic narrative rhythms, and a lack of overall concept. To solve these problems, film and television creators need to broaden their horizons, think attentively, and dialectically learn from excellent domestic and foreign film and television works.

## Acknowledgements

Anhui University of Finance and Economics Postgraduate Research Innovation Fund Project: Visualization Research on the Film and Television Adaptation of Dayu Mythology (ACYC2022269)

## References

- [1] Li Xiaoyan. Adaptation of Chinese Mythological Stories and Analysis of the Narrative Structure of Hollywood Animation [J]. News Research Guide, 2016,7 (20): 167+169.
- [2] Yang Yueyang. Research on Narrative Strategies of Animation Films Adapted from Classical Mythology Texts (2015-2021) [D]. Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, 2022. DOI: 10.27361/d.cnki.gtmsy.2022.000011.
- [3] Wang Qingsheng's Dictionary of Literary and Art Creation Knowledge, Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House, 1987, p. 30.
- [4] Li Yonghong. The artistic value of villains in film and television works [J]. News Research Guide, 2020,11 (08): 100-101.
- [5] Wang Anyi, Novel Class, Beijing: Commercial Press, 2012, page 142.
- [6] Luo Biyao. On the Relationship between Form and Content in Film Art - Starting from "Laura Run" [J]. Art Research, 2018, No.78 (01): 16-17. DOI: 10.13944/j.cnki.ysyj.2018.0008.