

On Strategies and Effects of Cross-cultural Communication of Chinese Mythological Animated Films—With *Nezha* and *White Snake* as Examples

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ABSTRACT

Animated films with Chinese mythology are endowed with the most distinctive ethnic features. With *Nezha* and *White Snake* as examples, this paper analyzes their successes in cross-cultural communication strategies in the context of globalization from the perspectives of native cultural elements, narrations on affections, integration of Western cultures, and so forth, accompanied by their predicaments explained in many aspects including cultural differences between China and the West. It has been found that based on the native myths with less global popularity, the key to the effective communication of such film types lies in the cultural similarities, as witnessed by international narrative styles and mainstream emotional values.

Keywords: Chinese mythology, cross-cultural communication, *Nezha*, *White Snake*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Produced in animation and characterized by strong visual effects, techniques, artistry, and entertainment, animation has been the most unique type of cinematographic art. Based on reality, its creation can express real life in any era through animated characters and scenes; divorced from that, it can give full play to the rich imagination of creators by integrating with surreal elements, including mythology, fairy tales, fables, and dreams. In other words, by relying on technology, this kind of film creates screen images of real or fantasy space, thus showing broader and more diversified themes than live-action ones. Moreover, due to improved techniques ranging from the past 2D to 3D and then to the current 4D, animated films' increasingly vivid screen images have gradually bettered audiences' experience of moviegoing. With multiple themes and unique visual scenes, the animated one has served as a kind of film art appreciated by all age groups.

The advance of Chinese animated films could be in the initial stage before the 21st century. There had only been a handful of films released, including *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), *The Monkey King* (1961), *The Legend of Sealed Book* (1983), *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1984), and *Lotus Lantern* (1999); since entering the century, the domestic animation has begun to evolve gradually, with the released volume from 1 in 2005 to 31 in 2019 (Ding & Zhang, 2020, p. 105). Nevertheless, its market is still in the infancy of its late commencement. And affected by the popularity of animation in Europe, America, and Japan in the past, the domestic one has faced severe challenges. However, in recent years, thanks to the prosperity and growth of the domestic film market and the support of national cultural policies, China's animation industry has progressively recovered and emerged. The films produced by high-level techniques, such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), *Big Fish & Begonia* (2016), and *White Snake* (2019), achieved a good reputation and box office in China. Notably, *Nezha* (2019) has been hailed as the new "glorious light of domestic animation" for earning over CNY 5 billion at the domestic box office, toppling the previous record of approximately 1 billion sales of *Monkey King: Hero is Back*.



Animated films themed on Chinese myths are typical of those that feature national identity. Wan Laiming, the founder of Chinese animation film, once said, “*To enable the Chinese animation industry to boast infinite vitality, it must take root in its national traditional soil*” (Wang & Chen, 2013, para. 6). In recent years, all of the related excellent films have been adapted from Chinese myth stories, including *Nezha* and *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. Ancient Chinese myth boasts a huge system, diverse contents, numerous characters, and many brilliant stories and figures, which have gained popularity. These familiar film IPs based on the myth are also highly accepted by domestic viewers. Therefore, the relevant stories remain popular themes to be adapted for the animated film producers. Animation, with strong artistic appreciation and wild imagination, is the best film and television type to interpret stories related to Chinese myth. Jiaozi, the director of *Nezha*, once remarked, “*Animation may be the most suitable way to export traditional Chinese mythology*” (Zhuyu, 2019, para. 10).

2. STRATEGIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF CHINESE MYTHOLOGICAL ANIMATION NEZHA

Nezha, adapted from the story of ancient Chinese myth, describes the life experience of Nezha, who was born to be a demon but changed his destiny against heaven. From the very beginning of the plot, the Primeval Lord of Heaven refined the Chaos Pearl bred by spirits of heaven and earth into Spirit Pearl and Demon Orb, and authorised Taiyi Zhenren (a Taoist Spiritual Master) to enable the Pearl to be reincarnated into a new body of Nezha, the son of Li family in Chentangguan, to assist King Wu of Zhou Dynasty (B.C. 1046–B.C. 256) in overthrowing the Shang Dynasty (B.C. 1600–B.C. 1046). However, due to Shen Gongbao’s hindrance, the Pearl was stealthily substituted by the Orb. By default, Nezha became the devil incarnate, going from a wasted man to a great hero by changing his fate. Based on the adaptation and innovation of Nezha’s legend, the film not only conveys the native myth contents but also integrates with the Western cultures, modern elements, and emotional narrative of universal values to better realize the cross-cultural communication of this Chinese myth IP.

2.1. Application and Innovation of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements

2.1.1. Regarding Chinese Traditional Gods and Spirits

Chinese mythology generally refers to the collection of ancient legends, history, religion, and rituals, circulating through oral presentation, fable, novel, ceremony, dance, or drama in the ancient society... Besides, literary and artistic creations by past generations that imitate myths and reflect or satirize reality under the guise of legendary gods are also included (Wu, 2022, pp. 1–2). According to this, regarded as fictional stories, these myths and legends tend to be integrated with the ideas of each generation in the process of inheritance. They have become an object of choice for the adaptation of film and television works.

As an animation adapted from ancient Chinese myth, the film *Nezha* assimilates the classic elements from myth stories. The first is the character design of ‘gods and spirits’ referring to the supernatural or immortal beings, ghosts, and monsters. In legend, some animals, plants, and other living things with spirituality can cultivate themselves into monsters for hundreds or ten thousand years and even become fairies and immortals. The term ‘gods and spirits’ is also a cultural symbol with characteristics of the ancient myth. The film script of *Nezha* is based on the legend *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, which originated from mythic fictions in the periods of Yuan Dynasty (from A.D. 1271 to A.D. 1368) and Ming Dynasty (from A.D. 1368 to A.D. 1644), namely “*A Complete Collection of Three Religions Searching for Gods, Creation of the Gods and Journey to the West*”. The creation of film characters also continues the setting of immortals, human beings, and evil spirits in Chinese myth. However, based on the brand-new narrative, many modifications have been made to the characters of gods and spirits. The first character is the leading role Nezha, a typical figure in the above-mentioned literary classics and the films and television dramas adapted in the past, who normally presented a positive heroic image of justice, vigour, loyalty, and goodness. But to prevent the audiences from being immersed in aesthetic fatigue, this role is designed into a little devil reincarnated by Demon Orb, who was even a little monster in the eyes of common folks in Chentangguan. As regards another important role, Ao Bing, the Dragon Prince who was originally born of the immortal family and mostly portrayed as a villain against Nezha in the past, in the film was a contradictory image of the demon race and the reincarnation of the Spirit Pearl, having the honour of Nezha’s friendship. In addition, the legendary Taiyi, bearing sage-like features, had become a simple and honest fat person who loved to drink and spoke the Sichuan dialect. However, Shen Gongbao was a villain and leopard demon apprenticed to the Primeval Lord of Heaven. He often envied and opposed his senior fellow apprentice Taiyi because of anger for not being treasured.

2.1.2. *Regarding Chinese Religious Culture*

Taoist cultural elements, an important part of Chinese myth, are also inherited by the film *Nezha* and presented on the screen in various forms. First, as the origin of the film story, the Demon Orb and the Spirit Pearl are matched by the Yin and Yang poles in Taiji Diagrams. Secondly, there are several immortal characters in Taoism, including the Primeval Lord of Heaven from Qingxu Palace in Kunlun Mountain and one of his twelve immortal apprentices, Taiyi. Immortals also use incantations, such as ‘magic figure for fate interchange’ and ‘heaven-made curse.’ These belong to Taoist magic incantations, which originated from early ancient martial arts and were then used by Taoists to summon gods to hunt ghosts and exorcise evil spirits (Yuan, 2020, p. 143). Furthermore, the spirit of resisting destiny is the core idea conveyed by the film, which also reflects the profound Taoist doctrine. In the second half of the film, in the battle of Chentangguan, the two most exhilarating lines show, “I govern my destiny, not God. Being a demon or an immortal is only up to me”. These align with one Taoist thought, which implies that “my destiny is governed by me, not by heaven and earth” (Unidentified, 1988, p. 507). Since Taoism is a native religion that originated in China, the film that presents different Taoist cultural symbols in various image forms also serves as the embodiment of spreading China’s archaic religious culture.

2.1.3. *Designs of Ancient Architectural Scenes and Props*

First, the story’s location, Chentangguan, is a small town in the earthly world surrounded by mountains and seas, boasting antique designs of architectural landscapes. For example, the house of the Li Family is devised into a standard square courtyard with magnificent style. Towering brick walls, tall red columns, exquisite rockeries, and blue tile eaves are all visual symbols typical of ancient Chinese mansions. Another example is the street scenes, where there is a path paved with blue stones and bricks in the middle and row upon row of houses built on both sides, presenting white walls, blue tiles, small windows decorated with wood and wooden stairs, with a combination of ancient living utensils including earthen jars, wells, palanquins, shoulder poles and the like, thus spreading out vivid pictures of the life on ancient Chinese streets. Moreover, the small fishing villages near the sea have thatched huts lined with low earth walls, fishing nets, large earthen tanks, and wooden frames, all cultural marks of landscapes featuring archaic fishing villages.

Secondly, it refers to the marvellous spectacles of fairyland in the Map of Mountains and Rivers, where the picture scroll depicts the ranges and trends of Chinese mountains and rivers during the primordial times. But in its boundless unreal scenes are the highlights and most attractive spectacles of the whole film. As was remarked by Director Jiaozi in an exclusive interview, “lotus leaves of these scenes are designed presenting small worlds based on Chinese potted landscape, some of which are snow-capped mountains, some deserts, and some waterfall” (Fuyou, 2019, para. 19). Potted landscape, which originated and developed in China, is an ancient and brilliant traditional art agglomeration of literature, aesthetics, botany, and garden art, claiming to be a treasure of national cultures (Shao, 2002, p. 2). By adopting this unique art form, the scenes in the Map are devised into a vast world with a galaxy of beautiful landscapes abundant in hills and rivers, showing a fairyland with great oriental charm and poem-like pictures.

2.2. *Integration of Western Cultures and Modern Elements*

2.2.1. *Design of Dragon as a Negative Character ‘Demon’*

Given the cultural differences between the East and the West, the film makes a great subversion, setting the dragon as a monster. In Chinese culture, the dragon, a fictional animal, has existed for a long time in oriental mythology and folklore. Being valued as a sign of good fortune and the most spiritual beast by Chinese people since ancient times, this animal is normally regarded as an evil monster in Western cultures. Volume 16 of *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Eliade, 1987, p. 433) records that in ancient Greek myth and legends, the dragon is the embodiment of evil and a greedy robber or occupier who often guards the tree of life or treasure; the *Bible*, a Christian classic, even compares the dragon to the incarnation of Satan, so it can be noticed that this animal is the representative of evil in the western religious culture, which is feared or spurned by the westerners (Xi, 2015, p. 14–16). In the film, the legendary dragon, originally born of an immortal family in Chinese myth, is set as a demon, and the Dragon Palace in the East China Sea becomes a purgatory for imprisoning the dragon family. The flashpoint of the storyline is also triggered by the dragon family’s collusion with Shen Gongbao to snatch the Pearl. This plot design is similar to the story of the dragon occupying treasures in Greek myth, which Western audiences could better accept.

In addition, the film has blended diversified elements in the designs of characters, costumes, props, and makeup. In terms of character design, the image of Nezha retains the classic features, such as a red Chinese riding jacket with lotus patterns and a bun, but also adds some alternative mixed elements, including smokey-eye makeup and flat bangs in Western punk style. As for the characters’ subtitles

and performances, the film also uses the experience of the humorous style of Hollywood movies for reference. About props, for example, Treasure Lotus, the instrument of Taiyi, possesses modern functions, which require a password or authentication by fingerprint to open up. Also, the scenes on the map displaying Taiyi's and Nezha's travels appear exactly like the visual effects of a playground. Above all, these Chinese and Western integration and modern elements are familiar and kind to audiences from different cultures.

2.2.2. *Narration on the Emotions of Universal Values*

One of the strategies to realize the intercultural communication of films is to “aim at human natures and pay attention to other common human experiences, values, and demands including the individual growth” (Liu & Zhang, 2019, p. 55). For one thing, the spiritual core conveyed in the film is mainly the spirit of resistance and heroism. The leading role of Nezha, the reincarnation of Demon Orb, was considered a monster by the folks of Chentangguan. So he had gone from a wasted man to a great hero who subdued demons and monsters and even saved the town at a critical juncture to get rid of prejudices and fight for validation. All this is to create a personal hero who dares to fight against fate. In real life, being free from prejudices and changing destiny also represent everyone's spiritual pursuits. Heroism is also an eternal and classic topic in Western films. Moreover, in the process of the hero's growth, his persistence and help from his relatives and friends are also highlighted. The final battle against the lightning bolt, where Nezha fought side by side with Ao Bing and Taiyi even sacrificed his hundred-year attainments to keep the two's primordial spirit, was a hybrid of Western individualistic heroism and oriental collectivism. The film also focuses on the common emotional demands of human beings, ranging from the paternal and maternal loves of Li Jing and Mrs. Yin, the affection between master Taiyi and his apprentice Nezha, to the friendship between Ao Bing and Nezha.

3. STRATEGIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF CHINESE MYTHOLOGICAL ANIMATION WHITE SNAKE

3.1. *Co-production Pattern of Chinese and Foreign Producers*

Co-production refers to films jointly invested and co-produced by production organizations in two or more countries (or regions). In this post-globalization era, Chinese-foreign co-productions usually are not only based on local cultures but also compatible with foreign cultures because of the cooperation mode of investment, creation, and distribution between two different production sides, thus expanding the audience range and enabling the Chinese cultures with oriental characteristics to go global through film mode. Specifically, the animated feature, co-produced by Chinese and foreign producers, serves as a special type of artistic animation in co-productions, which can better absorb the core cultures and wisdom of both parties and strive to create the cinematographic works recognized by Sino-Western viewers.

White Snake is an animated feature produced by Light Chaser Animation Studios (China) and Warner Bros (one of the six major Hollywood studios). Adapted from *The Legend of White Snake*, one of the four great folk love legends in China, the film follows the story of an emperor obsessed with cultivating himself into immortality in the late Tang Dynasty (A.D. 755–A.D. 907). At the same time, the National Master forced common folks to catch snake to help himself cultivate skills, and regain the emperor's favour. Xiaobai, a white snake who had cultivated into a human shape and went to assassinate the Master at the behest of Snake King, however, lost her memory accidentally after the assassination failed and was saved by Xu Xuan (originally named Xu Xian in *The Legend*), a young mortal person in Snake-catching Village. At this point, since both the Master and snake family began to hunt Xiaobai, she fought side by side with Xu, from acquaintance to love.

Chinese and American teams jointly produced White Snake. Zhao Ji, the director, once said in an interview that “*Light Chaser did its creativity and production, but Warner offered many suggestions, especially concerning expressions and subtitles, which made great changes and improvements*” (Sanwen Entertainment, 2019, para. 15). Therefore, as a co-production, the film not only conveys the story of oriental charm but also contains the expressions of Western cultures.

3.2. *Modification of the Chinese Mythological Story*

White Snake has drawn its material from *The Legend of White Snake*, one of ancient China's four great folk love legends. According to historical records, this legend could be traced back to the incident about a giant snake in Luoyang City of the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618–A.D. 907), and then became popular from the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–A.D. 1279), which was originally recorded in *Three Pagodas in the West Lake* (a script for story-telling in Song and Yuan Dynasties); in the Ming Dynasty, the related basic story was established, namely the *White Snake Kept in Leifeng Tower Forever* of the *Stories to Warn Men* by Feng Menglong, which has also been found as the earliest complete story of this legend

to date (Li, 2017, p. 5–8). And it has always remained a popular IP for film and television adaptation. The scripts of these related works were mostly recreated based on *Meeting on the Broken Bridge*, *Borrowing Umbrellas on Dark-awned Boat*, *Flooding the Golden Mountain*, and so on. However, the film *White Snake* has changed the conventional pattern by taking the past lives of Lady White Snake and Xu Xian as the story's core to focus on the origin of their love fate. Directors Huang Jiakang and Zhao Ji once said, "What was the cause that made such a miraculous Lady White devote her whole life to Xu Xian, a weak scholar who was not strong enough to tie a chicken fast? So a story comes about the infatuated couple's desperate guarding in their previous lives." (The Paper, 2019, para. 7). In other words, the two directors blazed a trail by starting from the perspective of love committed to past life and created a new story of White Snake to refresh viewers.

The creation of the screenplay also draws lessons from the story background of *The Snake-Catcher* written by Liu Zongyuan, which narrates the experience of a snake catcher named Jiang in Yongzhou City during the Middle Tang Dynasty. At that time, the lives of common folks were miserable because they were weighed down heavily by exorbitant taxes and levies. The emperor ordered recruiting skilled people to catch snakes, which could deduct taxes twice a year. The article reveals that social tyranny even dwarfed the danger of snake venom. Based on this historical story, the film integrates it into the script creation by locating the story background in Yongzhou of the late Tang Dynasty and referring to the tyrannical phenomenon of catching snakes to pay taxes. Also, the film conveys many cultural elements of the ancient Dynasty.

3.3. *Transmission of Traditional Religious Elements*

Turning to the scenes and plots, the film also assimilates a plethora of elements rich in ancient religious colour. Firstly, as for the scene designs, the building plan of the towering Demon Suppressing Pagoda, with wind chimes swaying, not only draws lessons from the actual pagoda scene in the real Yongzhou City but also adds underground construction. Under the Pagoda is an underground Taoist temple, which corresponds to the background when Buddhism was destroyed by Emperor Wuzong in the late Tang Dynasty but restored with its temples after Emperor Xuanzong succeeded to the throne. Therefore, the religious factor of alternating Taoism and Buddhism is also reflected in the film. Taoism is also believed by the first major villain, National Master, in his cultivation. Secondly, in the plot advancement, the Eight Diagrams, the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), the art of invisible Taoist magic, the demon-trapped array, and the like embody Taoist culture. There is also the crane, a kind of mount ridden by the Master and his disciple, symbolizing longevity and good fortunes, confirming the immortal realm Taoism sought.

3.4. *Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures*

In addition to the designs of high-quality pictures, colours, and scenes, the factors, including narrative mode and conveyance of values, also play an essential role in achieving the global dissemination of the film. Whether the narrative mode of the film conforms to the aesthetics of foreign audiences and whether they accept the values conveyed serve as the key factors that affect whether those from different cultural contexts admire the film. Only when they accept and appreciate can this Chinese film better spread domestic cultures and achieve the best effect of cross-cultural communication.

3.4.1. *International Narrative Mode*

When the film follows the love story of Xu Xuan and Xiaobai 500 years ago before their present lives happened in *The Legend*, it adopts the structure of Hollywood's typical drama plot development. First, it leads to the incentive event that Xiaobai failed to assassinate the National Master and was stranded in a Snake-catching Village. Next, when it comes to the entanglement of the incident, Xu rescued Xiaobai beside the waterfall in the Village, began to be personally involved with her and then embarked on a journey to find her memories together. But such a journey was an adventure since Xiaobai and Xu had been hunted by other snake demons and Master's subordinates, and even Xiaobai's sister Xiaoqing (a green snake) had once intended to kill Xu with deep prejudice, which constituted a series of crises in the story. After that, the two sisters and Xu fought against Master and Snake Queen successively, which was full of dangers and ups and downs, triggering the film's climax. Finally, after the fierce battle, they defeat the villains. Still, Xu sacrifices his life to save Xiaobai, and thus, the happy ending is made 500 years later because Xiaobai repays his kindness and love.

3.4.2. *Expressions of Mainstream Emotional Values*

The first one is about the modern viewpoint of love. The affection between Xiaobai and Xu Xuan is similar to the love view of young people at the moment, which shows that love between men and women is simple and beautiful, and both sides delight in paying for each other. In front of the 'Golden Light Curse' monument of the Pagoda, the combination of Xiaobai and Xu is a resistance to feudal ethics.

It is said that “different routes of human being and demon” would be destined, but the combination of the two is a try to break through the shackles of destiny, actually conforming to the pursuit of free love in modern times.

Secondly, besides their affection as the main plot line, the emotional line concerning the values of good and evil is also portrayed. Specifically, the two edges could define both the demon and human race. Some demons are featured by goodness, like Xiaobai and Xiaoqing, while there are also wicked people in human beings, such as Master and his disciples who persecuted people and snakes. As Xu’s subtitles reveal, “*There are numerous two-legs villains in this world. How can it be different from us only because you have a tail.*” Virtue and vice are two sides of human nature. Punishing evil-doers and encouraging people to do good are also the common emotional appeals of mankind.

By adopting the consistent means of multicultural integration, American Disney movies, which started early, have created dozens of works with classic fairy tale IP, establishing the phenomenal industrial model. The success of Disney-style ones adapted from fairy tale IP lies in the perfect and rich synthesis of multi-cultures and the grasp of international narrative methods and universal emotional values. More often than not, what really contributes to successful communication depends on our similarities rather than differences, and these similarities are a part of cross-cultural morality (Samovar & Porter, 2010, p. 260).

3.4.3. Assimilation of Western Feminism

As regards the portrayal of characters, the creation of female ones in the film is similar to that in *Frozen*, where there is a certain perspective of two female leading characters, namely Xiaobai and Xiaoqing. First, the portrayal of Xiaobai and her emotions in the film differs from that in the previous films and television dramas. According to these past works, after cultivating into human form, Lady White Snake normally descended to the secular world by disguising herself as a mortal woman. She married Xu Xian to help him open a drugstore and save patients, thus repaying his kindness. In this relationship, she constantly served as the one who devoted voluntarily. This also reflects the higher social status of men in ancient Chinese patriarchal society. Many folk legends of Chinese mythology indeed have an edge of male chauvinism. For instance, exactly as in the legend of Dong Yong, the noble Seventh Fairy would fall in love with this ordinary man and descend to the mortal world to marry him. However, contrary to tradition, White Snake focuses on highlighting and bettering female status. After failing to murder the Master, Xiaobai was stranded in the village, lost her memory, and was wary of strangers everywhere. Even at the beginning, she was very indifferent to Xu Xian. Instead, Xu was portrayed as a sunny young man who was a lifesaver for Xiaobai when he appeared, caring for and helping her frequently. Later, facing the demon-trapped array in the ancient Pagoda and the Taoist array of the Master, Xu rescued Xiaobai several times with wisdom and courage and even became a monster, only to touch her indifferent heart. Ultimately, he even sacrificed his life, enabling her to remember this faithful love forever. As one of her subtitles goes, “*The taste of love has been kept in my heart for five hundred years.*” It is noticeable that Xu’s love for Xiaobai is unforgettable. In this affection, because of the man’s greater devotion, the heroine becomes the passive side and the receiver, so the legendary relationship between White Snake and Xu Xian is changed from a woman-dominated narrative to a man-dominated (Jiang, 2019, p. 129).

Next, as the second female leading character, Xiaoqing plays an indispensable role in this impressive love story. The film has also endeavoured to shape this role. For one thing, Xiaoqing was no longer the inherent impression of a small follower or a well-behaved younger sister, which was left to audiences previously, but had a unique personality and independent thinking, showing little blind obedience to her sister. As a snake demon, she hated the Master who had driven the snake clan to death and manifested a strong dislike for human beings. When she learned that Xiaobai was in love with mortal Xu, she tried her best to prevent and even threatened him to leave. But since Xu became a demon and did all in his full strength to rescue Xiaobai, Xiaoqing fought alongside him to defeat the evils and was eventually moved by his sacrifice. For another thing, her sisterhood for Xiaobai had been touching from beginning to end. When other snake demons of the same clan thought that Xiaobai had defected, she constantly believed in and was willing to protect her sister at the cost of her own life. After catching sight of the couple’s love, she was afraid that the different destinies between mortal and demon would harm her sister, so she tried to block it. But in the end, even when her sister wanted to find Xu, who was reincarnated, she firmly expressed her willingness to follow. Although snakes are cold-blooded animals, the touching affection depicted between the two sisters makes the female characters more dramatic and distinctive.

4. EFFECTS OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN NEZHA AND WHITE SNAKE

4.1. Successes

Nezha and *White Snake* have produced certain favourable comments from the international market. Regarding international awards, these two films were shortlisted for the 92nd Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film. Also, as for the global public evaluations, they have won much praise from the international media. Receiving an IMDb rating of 7.4, *Nezha* also achieved a Tomatometer score of 88% and an audience of 98% on the Rotten Tomatoes website, which was praised by 15 international media (17 comments). Many media acclaimed its picture effects for numerous dazzling scenes and the miraculous magic world presented. In addition, some media comments affirmed its humorous style for integrating whimsical imagination with entertainment, which was suitable for both young and old ([Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.-a](#)). *White Snake* earned an IMDb rating of 7, with the other two scores of 70% and 85%, respectively, which had received 16 favorable comments from global media (23 comments in total). They highly appreciated its designs of costumes, props, and scenes on account of exhibiting lifelike, romantic, and fantastic pictures, just like traditional Chinese calligraphy and painting ([Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.-b](#)).

An immediate area of success lies in innovations and emotional representations. The first strategy of successful external communication is that cinematographic and television works must win the favour of domestic audiences and lead the local market before they can face the world, which means the mature and prosperous domestic market is the prerequisite for gaining the appreciation of foreign viewers. The second one is directly focusing on human nature and conveying common human experiences, values, and demands such as individual growth ([Liu & Zhang, 2019](#), p. 55). For one thing, the two films have achieved breakthroughs and innovations in the IP of classic traditional culture. *Nezha* makes great changes to the traditional image and life story of the legendary hero Nezha. At the same time, *White Snake* takes a different approach to focus on the love committed in the past lives of Lady White Snake and Xu Xian. By these means, the familiar IP of Chinese myth and the innovative stories have enabled them to gain popularity among domestic audiences, achieving the first step of global communication. For another thing, films also convey the emotional appeal of universal values. Besides demonstrating heroism, *Nezha* contains the expressions of family bond and friendship. By adopting a narrative mode of Hollywood films, *White Snake* conveys the emotion of universal values, including modern love concepts and views of good and evil.

Secondly, since the two, based on Chinese mythology, have begun to go global, it is of greater significance for the spread of related IP concerning the myth. After their success in the domestic market and access to the international market, these two films vividly and intuitively show these national cultures to Western audiences. Many global media commented that *Nezha* created a magic world of Chinese traditional myth by integrating modern cultural elements, entertaining the whole people, and enabling Westerners unfamiliar with the myth to appreciate its mystery and legend. Further, the screen design with unique oriental charm in the co-production *White Snake* was hailed as “a painting typical of Chinese traditional calligraphy.” So, the traditional cultural elements and the legendary love story conveyed by it also refreshed many Western audiences.

4.2. Predicaments

Despite much international praise and commercial successes in China's domestic market, the two's international performances at the box office were not optimistic. According to the data published on the BoxOffice website, *Nezha* had only brought in 3.69 million US dollars at the highest box office in the United States, followed by about 1.56 million in Australia. At the same time, the American sales of *White Snake* totaled only about \$34,730. It is noticeable that there are great challenges for Chinese animated films to establish themselves in the global market. In addition to external and objective factors such as insufficient film scheduling and post-publicity and distribution of films in the overseas market, there tend to be shortcomings in their intercultural communication strategies.

Firstly, the myth stories as the basis of the two films have failed to enjoy great popularity in the international market. Unlike Greek and Norse myths, Chinese myths have not formed a complete system, with relatively less global publicity. Familiar and kind to domestic audiences, the legends concerning the character Nezha from Creation of the Gods and the love story of The Legend of White Snake are strange and difficult to understand for Westerners. As a kind of domestic animation themed on the classic myth IP, the film *Nezha* subverts the traditional image of the protagonist Nezha to bring uncharted experience to domestic viewers. Still, it is difficult for Westerners to understand the innovative design. Although *White Snake* is a co-production, it also focuses on the local cultures and innovates traditional IP. For example, at the end of the film, a dexterous turning point where the play about *Meeting on the Broken Bridge* was unfolding, which was accompanied by the soundtrack of a famous TV version and its classic modelling of Lady White Snake, instantly aroused the feelings of Chinese people, but less likely to find the same echo in the hearts of foreigners.

The second one concerns cultural differences. Chinese domestic animation is undoubtedly based on the local cultures. However, Chinese and foreign co-productions have a long-standing problem of “*Who is this movie made for?*” (Yang & Zhang, 2017, p. 67). Considering the cultural differences between China and the West, the orientation of cultural contents of the films co-produced is related to which side of the audience can accept the film. The story based on pure Chinese culture is unlikely to please Westerners completely. Nevertheless, the domestic film *Nezha* and the co-production *White Snake* both focus on stories of traditional Chinese culture. Due to the various cultural contexts between the two sides, the cultural symbols of Chinese myth conveyed by the films, including surreal elements such as ‘gods and demons,’ ‘instruments,’ ‘magic arts,’ and ‘exotic animals’ belong to high context culture that is turgid for western audiences to apprehend.

Last but not least is the problem of insufficient narration. Although the film *Nezha* depicts the heroic image of resisting destiny, which is the embodiment of Western heroism, it does not highlight the inner growth of the hero in this respect. In the whole story, Nezha is confined to the people’s views in Chentangguan from start to finish and finally comes to repent and mend his ways just because he is deeply affected by Li Jing’s paternal love. The teaching of Li Jing and his wife, combined with the help from Taiyi and Ao Bing at the crucial juncture, assisted Nezha in saving Chentangguan and changing his destiny. Therefore, some Western audiences would think that Nezha should not be a true and full-fledged hero. Besides, *White Snake* adopts the narrative styles of Hollywood and depicts a sad and romantic love affair between a mortal and a demon from the perspective of modern love. Still, it only takes a single love line as the main plot, and the expression related to the values of good and evil in the auxiliary line is somewhat straightforward. In addition to that, its story contents seem insufficient, and the details as connecting links for the coherent story structure are unfulfilled (Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.-b).

5. CONCLUSION

The animated films are an effective approach to achieving the cross-cultural communication of Chinese traditional mythology. Excellent myth stories could provide a rich source of materials for adaptation, which is also flexible for recreation. Showing the related surreal elements, including bizarre animals, gods, and demons, can create an imaginative and magical world. This imaginative power inspires animation creation, where surreal myth elements can also be achieved in the best interpretations. However, Chinese animation films themed on Chinese mythology are not in full reception internationally and have little international publicity. The Chinese animation producers can learn from some related internationally well-known IPs and find the matching points between Chinese and Western cultures in the production to achieve better cross-cultural communicative effects.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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