

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

**A research on snake character mythologies and related
movie-making**

MA Animation

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Announcement on the Originality of Dissertation

Declaration: I declare that this thesis is my own original work, conducted under the supervision of my doctoral supervisor. All sources for reference work are identified to the best of my knowledge. No part of this research has been submitted in the past for publication or for degree purposes. I am legally responsible for the truthfulness of this declaration.

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Abwtract

The snake has been a highly symbolic creature since ancient times, playing an important role in myths and legends around the world, such as Nuwa and the White Snake Legend in Chinese mythology, Medusa and the scepter of the god of healing, Asclepius, in Greek mythology, as well as the Naga in Indian mythology. By comparing and analysing the images and functions of snake characters in these myths, this study will first reveal the multiple symbolic meanings of snakes in different cultures, such as wisdom and knowledge, life and death, temptation and destruction, regeneration and eternity, etc., and then extend the study to the use and transformation of snake characters in modern cinema through actual film and television cases. How snake characters can be re-endowed with cultural meanings by means of modern video technology and narratives will become the core issue of this study.

Key words: Snake character mythologies, mythological story, Mythological film, cross-media

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1. Introduction

At the mythological level, snakes, as cross-cultural symbols, appear widely in both Chinese and Western mythological systems. This project focuses on the image and function of snake characters in different cultural mythological systems, as well as their symbolism, role function and image transformation in related modern film and television works. Firstly, this paper will analyse the origins of various snake mythological characters, and then analyse snake mythological film and television works through examples, so as to refine and innovate new animation proposals related to snake mythological characters from a cross-cultural and cross-media perspective. This study not only focuses on the artistic evolution of the snake image, but also maps out the contemporary society's reflection on human nature, destiny and multiple values in the process of reshaping the image of the snake in film and television works.

2 Research

2.1 Religiological changes in the snake totem: from mother goddess worship to symbol of evil

The snake was once a sacred symbol in religions and myths around the world, seen as a representation of fertility, wisdom, regeneration and the cosmic cycle. However, as social structures changed, particularly during the expansion of Indo-European culture and the establishment of patriarchal societies, the image of

the snake was transformed from a sacred companion of the mother goddess to a monster that the male hero had to conquer. The snake was eventually characterised as a symbol of temptation and evil, and became the embodiment of original sin. This symbolic evolution is the result of the intertwining of religious beliefs, social power structures and gender cultural changes.



Figure 1: serpent-wielding goddess

The serpent was an important part of the matriarchal cult system. In the ruins of the Minoan civilization in Crete, archaeologists have discovered the famous statue of the 'serpent-wielding goddess'. The statue shows a bare-breasted woman holding up two snakes, which is widely believed by researchers to represent a sacred force of fertility and protection. In *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization*, Marija Gimbutas (1989, p.121) refers to the serpent as one of the oldest symbols of Mother Earth, symbolizing 'fertility', 'regeneration' and 'cosmic cycle'. This interpretation emphasizes the sacred attributes of the serpent in the belief in the Mother Goddess, rather than the later demonized image. Therefore, in film and television proposals, it is possible to think about how to express, in terms of visual art, the divine characteristics of 'fertility', 'regeneration' and 'cosmic cycles' of snake-related female characters.

The snake is not only a symbol of fertility and life force, but is also seen as a representative of wisdom and mystical knowledge. For example, in Mesopotamian mythology, Ninjizda, the god of wisdom, is often associated with the image of two entwined serpents. This image may have influenced the serpent staff of the later Greek god of healing, and the wisdom symbolism of the serpent has been preserved in ancient Western medicine and occultism.

2.2 The Two Faces of Snake: Creation and Destruction

Although the serpent is mostly portrayed positively in early religions, its divinity has a dual nature: it can represent creation as well as symbolize destruction. This duality is reflected in Hinduism, Norse mythology and the Mayan civilization. For example, the world serpent in Norse mythology, Ymengarde, coils around the world and will ultimately die with Thor, the god of thunder, at the twilight of the gods; and the feathered serpent god, Kukulcan, in Mayan mythology is regarded as a cultural hero, bringing about agriculture and civilization, but also possessing destructive divine powers.

After the expansion of Indo-European culture and the establishment of patriarchal societies, the negative symbolism of the serpent began to be amplified, especially in heroic narratives, where the serpent often became a monster to be vanquished. In Greek mythology, the figure of Medusa is clearly influenced by this cultural shift. The first to seriously explore its literary origin story was the ancient Roman poet

Ovid (2008) , who detailed Medusa's metamorphosis around 8 A.D.-Medusa, the only human of the three Gorgonian Demons, was a beautiful young woman of great beauty, and had also managed to enter the temple of Athena as a priestess. However, her beauty caught the eye of Poseidon, the god of the sea, who raped her in Athena's temple. Outraged by the desecration of her temple, Athena casts an evil spell on Medusa, turning her into a horrible monster: her bright blonde hair turns into a serpent, and any man who looks into Medusa's eyes will be petrified and turned into a stone statue.

But the real protagonist of the story is not Medusa, but Perseus, who is eventually killed by the male hero Perseus and becomes a symbol of male power over women. She is the ultimate embodiment of fatal attraction, a metaphor for both sex and death. The setting also alludes to the fear and demonization of female power in classical culture, and the character of Medusa in Ray Harryhausen's film *Clash of the Titans* is a character that adheres to this setting - her hair is in the shape of a serpent, and Medusa's sultry, powerful and seductive nature is a symbol of the power of the male over the female. And Medusa is demonic and seductive, with a serpent's tail. However, when Medusa uses her eyes to petrify human beings, she turns into the ugly face of a monster, which is an artistic film and television treatment by the director in order to fit the story of the movie and make the audience feel more immersed.



Figure 2: Medusa in the film *Clash of the Titans*



Figure 3: A scene of Medusa killing people with her eyes in the film *Clash of the Titans*

2.3 Deconstruction and Reorganization of Snake Mythological Stories in Film and Television

In the relationship between Chinese myths and films, there are also snake mythological female characters like Medusa. The early image of Nuwa still maintains a snake body. In ancient times, human beings, out of survival instincts, had a desire and admiration for procreation and reproduction. During the matriarchal clan period of Chinese primitive society, the combination of fertility

worship and women gave rise to the image of the snake woman, who could make man out of clay, laying the cultural foundation for the Chinese culture of serpent totem and serpent worship.

After the rise of feudal patriarchal society in China, women gradually became subordinate to men, and all powerful female mythological characters were no longer worshipped. Even in later Taoist and folklore, female serpentine creatures became bewitching demons, such as Bai Suzhen. And she eventually became a tragic character that also symbolized suppressed female intelligence and emotion.

Nevertheless, archaeologist Joseph Campbell (1949, p. 21) once remarked in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 'The multitude of men and women choose the less adventurous way of the comparatively unconscious civic and tribal routines. But these seekers, too, are saved by virtue of the inherited symbolic aids of society, the rites of passage, the grace-yielding sacraments, given to mankind of old by the redeemers and handed down through millenniums.' The hero expresses not the divided society or spirit of the moment, but the eternal source of social rebirth. Nowadays, through the animated films *White Snake*, *Green Snake* and *White Snake: Afloat*, the images of Bai Suzhen and her sister Xiao Qing are no longer the weak and spineless beings who need to depend on men in traditional myths. While retaining the original story framework and rich cultural heritage of the folklore, the character qualities of contemporary women are molded according to the modern

society's desire and pursuit of all kinds of emotions and equal relationships between the genders - courage, independence, love, resilience, and a certain kind of modern women's spirituality. Instead of the former female character, who threw away her nature because she fell in love with a male character and limited her self-worth even though she obviously possessed great power, she became a woman who changed from a harmful snake spirit to a woman who shone with the glory of human nature in the ancient Chinese society at that time. Movie and television works can be based on myths or national culture stories, but they do not all have to fit in with past myths or cultures.



Figure 4: Bai Suzhen (left) and Xiao Qing (right) in *White Snake*

In the new animation market environment, mythological stories with wide public recognition are more likely to gain the general emotional resonance of the audience, while brand-new story adaptations will stimulate the audience's psychological expectations. Thus, when creating animated movies, the creators organically

integrate the classic cultural narratives with the modern social atmosphere, which enhances the infectiousness of the movie while giving new vitality to the traditional folktales.

3 Proposal Plan

3.1 Evolution of Film and Television based on the Chinese White Snake Myth

‘A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, where each new text makes a unique and valuable contribution to the story as a whole. The optimal form of a transmedia narrative is one in which each medium brilliantly does its own job, each in its own way.’ (Jenkins, 2006) Compared to the adaptation of the same story told through different media, transmedia narrative emphasizes the realization of the complete construction of the story world by different media, and the derivation and isomorphism of story texts.

The proposed project will be based on the traditional Chinese love story of the White Snake as a narrative foundation, and through textual adaptation and expanded creation, the mythological story will be visualized in film and television. The story of the White Snake was first transmitted orally, then appeared in folklore in the form of commentaries, storytelling, play lyrics, and other forms, and then gradually evolved into theater performances.

Story of the Three Pagodas in West Lake is one of the earliest documents about

the White Snake in ancient China, and its story is significantly different from the later Legend of the White Snake, showing an early version of the image of the White Snake. *Story of the Three Pagodas in West Lake* tells of Xi Xuanzan, a young man from Lin'an Province, who rescued the female child Mao Nu when he was playing at the West Lake. After sending Mao Nu home, he was detained by Mao Nu's mother, the Lady with white clothes, and was prepared to marry her. However, when her friend captured a new handsome man, they were going to cut out Xi Xuanzan's heart and liver to make wine. Xi Xuanzan escaped to his home with the help of Mao Nu, but he was caught and escaped again. Later, Xi Xuanzan's uncle, Xi Zhenzhen, from Longhu Mountain, performed magic spells to bring the demon back to its original form. It turned out that the white lady was a white snake spirit, Mao Nu was a chicken spirit, and the woman who caught another man was an otter. So Zhenren built three towers in the West Lake and suppressed the three evil spirits under the three towers.

In this story, Xi Xuanzhan corresponds to Xu Xian, the male protagonist in the later popular version, and the lady with white clothes corresponds to Bai Suzhen, whose image still symbolizes the demonization of women's desires. 1992 version of the TV series *The Legend of the White Snake* is more in line with the later popular love story of Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen, and highlights Bai's spirit of fighting against destiny for her love, but it has not got rid of the feudalistic idea that women live for men. However, it still does not get rid of the feudal idea that women live for men.

The animated movie *White Snake: Afloat* takes the sad and happy love between Xu Xian and Bai Suzhen as a clue, and uses this clue to link the conflicts between human and demon, ruler and commoner, and the good and evil of human nature together, and jointly promote the development of the story plot. If the White Snake story system is taken as the original world of the story text, then *White Snake: Afloat* is a sub-world derived from the animation medium. It can be said that the White Snake myth has been passed down from word of mouth to movie and television, and the image of Bai Suzhen is constantly meeting the expectations of the times.



Figure 5: Bai Suzhen in The Legend of the White Snake

3.2 Storyline of *The Legend of the White Snake*

The film narrative for this proposal is still based on the traditional myth *The Legend of the White Snake*, but the actual writing focuses on writing the story of Bai Suzhen's efforts to cultivate herself, focusing on her obsession and growth. Below

is my outline of the story:

At the beginning of the story, Bai Suzhen is still just a small snake living with her clan, who live in seclusion in the mountains, never doing anything harmful and living a very peaceful life. However, one day, the emperor ordered to get rid of the demons, and Fa Hai Hui Yuan was so paranoid that even though they did no harm, they were all beheaded by Fa Hai, and she was the only one of the clan who survived. In order to avenge her family's death, she traveled to the Kunlun Mountains to train, and entered the "Illusion Trial", a level made of magic power, which no one had ever succeeded in passing in the past. She needs to overcome three emotional illusions: greed, dementia and anger. In the illusions, she experiences a desire for power (Greed), an obsession with an illusory scholar (Infatuation), and anger at the divine realm for wrongfully injuring her companion (Anger).

Level "Greed": In order to avenge her family's death, Bai Suzhen has a demon in her heart, and the devil in her heart keeps tempting her to practice evil arts. Eventually, even though she is awakened, she fights with the devil, who looks just like her, and finally defeats the devil. This level tells us to do it on our own, step by step, and not to rely on crooked methods.

Level "Infatuation": She meets Xu Xian, a scholar, but this Xu Xian is different from

the traditional image of Xu Xian, he tempts Bai Suzhen to be with him forever, and in the end, Bai Suzhen realizes that the prerequisite for loving others is to love herself.

Level “Anger”: She becomes a white snake fairy in heaven, and becomes best friends with a green snake fairy Xiao Qing. Xiao Qing was very young and could not understand the meaning of the natural cycle of heaven. She quietly canceled the plague of the God of Plague and was relegated to earth by the Jade Emperor, and then killed by Fa Hai. Bai Suzhen went to the Jade Emperor to plead with him in order to resurrect Xiao Qing, and in the end, the Jade Emperor made an exception and allowed Xiao Qing to return to the gate of the cycle of life, but at the cost of Bai Suzhen not being able to cultivate to become a goddess again, but she learned to dare to speak angrily with destiny about injustice.

In the end, Bai Suzhen returned to her hometown and lived with her sister Xiaoqing.

In adapting the myth, this proposal challenges the confined space of story setting and subverts the inherent characterization of Bai Suzhen. In the proposal plan, the character structure of the White Snake myth is roughly the same: the antagonistic relationship between Fa Hai and Bai Suzhen, the romantic relationship between Bai Suzhen and Xu Xian, and the sisterly relationship between Bai Suzhen and

Xiao Qing. However, the course of the story has changed. Instead of focusing on love, this story focuses on Bai Suzhen's self-growth and her search for her true purpose in life, but some classic episodes are still retained. First, this story honors the needs of the audience of the White Snake story. Secondly, "The essence of art lies in making things that people are used to and do not often notice novel and charming through the strangeness of forms, therefore awakening people's keen feelings about things." (Zhou, 2002)

3.3 Characterization

American narratologist Seymour Chatman, in his book *Story and Discourse: The Narrative Structure of Fiction and Film*, recognizes that narrative mainly consists of two parts: story and discourse, and story can be divided into plot, characters and scenes.

Characters are the key to attracting audiences to animated movies, clear, original, and intelligible characters all contribute to speeding up the fire of animation works. Therefore, this proposal re-casts the character of Bai Suzhen from the original gentle feudal woman to the occasionally rebellious, brave and strong Bai Suzhen. In addition, it has been redesigned in terms of appearance. A snake-shaped hair band wrapped around her head implies that Bai Suzhen's prototype is a white snake, with a human body and a snake's tail, in line with the original depiction of

Bai Suzhen in the Legend of the White Snake. However, I added a spine-shaped bony tail at the end of the tail that can attack to make Bai Suzhen more aggressive in appearance.

For the costume, I did some research on the classical underpinnings of ancient China. The patterns of women's traditional clothing are mainly based on peony, lotus, auspicious cloud and lucky patterns, etc. There are many patterns, but they generally follow the beauty of symmetry, roundness and regularity. So, I made pattern designs at sleeves, skirts and dresses respectively, all following this classical aesthetic law.

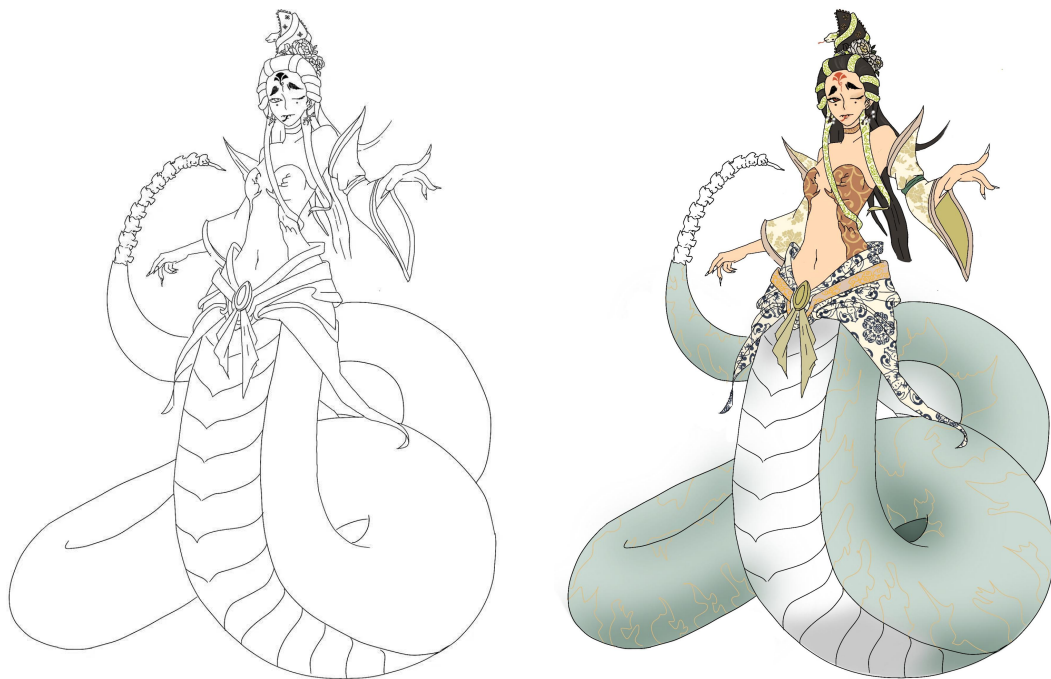


Figure 6,7: Bai Suzhen Character Design

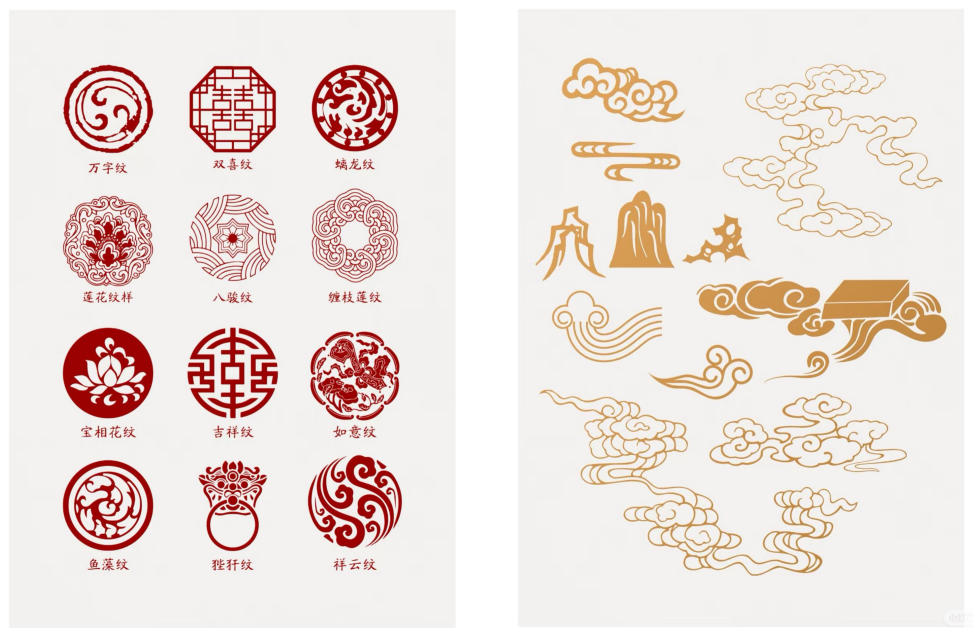


Figure 8,9: Common Patterns of Ancient Chinese Clothing



Figure 10,11: Clothing designs based on commonly used patterns

3.4 The scenes of the project plan

Scene is a specific space where the story takes place and develops, and 'animation is a coherent art with stylization, which must maintain independence within a single shot, i.e., with the visibility of the picture, and at the same time it

needs to maintain the coherence of the shot articulation.’ (Zhang, 2020)

When it comes to Bai Suzhen's hometown Hangzhou, reference will be made to the traditional residential architectural style of China's Jiangnan region, which is built along the river, with whitewashed roofs and stone-arched bridges, in line with the geographic location of the water towns of China's Jiangnan. The scene rendering can refer to the ink painting style. When it comes to the Kunlun Mountain Range, it is a vast snowy mountain scenery, which is more in line with the appearance of the legendary sacred mountain. All of the above scenes will be copied with the realistic ancient Chinese architecture, showing the classical Chinese aesthetic charm.



Figure 12: Reference for the ink-wash style of Jiangnan



Figure 13: The snow-capped scene design of Kunlun Mountain

4 Conclusion

As a cross-cultural and cross-media narrative resource, the snake character shows rich symbolic and narrative potential. It is not only a symbol of the mythological motif, but also a cultural code reactivated in modern film and television. Through in-depth study of the mythological roots and movie expressions of snake characters, it is possible to understand more comprehensively how cultural memories are perpetuated and evolved in art, and it also provides creators with visual and ideological resources for integrating tradition and innovation.

The use of snake characters in film and television not only perpetuates the symbolic value of the snake in ancient myths, but also gives it a narrative function in the modern context - not only as a tool for cultural identity and self-searching, but also for mapping human attitudes towards nature, the other and inner instincts.

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