

The new era of Sino-American coproduction “Chinese national culture” in “White snake” (2019) and “Over the Moon” (2020)

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Mythologically-themed animations are ideal texts to discern many issues related to notions such as cultural and social identity, collective memory and nationalism. In the case of coproductions, a locus where different national interests ideally cooperate, the investigation of these aspects allows not only to confirm how myths perpetuate their crucial role in modern societies through intertextuality, but also to elucidate how their usage changes according to communication targets and purposes. In the present essay, I address the new era of Sino-American coproduction from the perspective of Chinese mythology and discourse on mythological animation. Two case studies, *White Snake* (Baishe yuanqi 白蛇: 缘起, Light Chaser and Warner Bros, 2019) and *Over the Moon* (Feibenqu yueqiu 飞奔去月球, Pearl Studio/Netflix/Glen Kean Productions, 2020), have been chosen to elucidate one specific aspect of this complex phenomenon, i.e. how, despite the “homogenizing effect” of globalization (Dégh 1994: 23), cultural and national orientations emerge from different textual choices. After providing necessary literary-historical (Zhou 2020; Du 2019; Kokas 2017; Chen 2016; Yang and Zhen 2015), discursive (Wang 2024; Zhao and Zheng 2023; Tang and Gong 2021; Wu and Wang 2020; Dong 2020) and institutional (Brzeski 2017, 2018; Frater 2015) backgrounds, the textual analysis demonstrates that the Sino-American US-lead coproduction (OtM) follows Hollywood traditions and established coproduction trajectories, while the PRC-lead one (WS) responds more closely to national official discourse on *guochan* 国产 (national cultural production). The analysis and comparison are carried out in the framework of Folklore and Popular culture studies (Leskosky 1989, 2020; Koven 2013; Bird 2006) and apply content and visual/multimodal tools (Whyke 2024; Kriss 2016).

Keywords: Animation; Sino-American coproduction; mythology; popular culture studies; Chinese Animation; Chinese national culture.

1. Introduction

Folklore and Popular Culture Studies have been “spotting” myths and legends in modern texts to investigate how they transmit and *embody* folklore for many decades (Koven 2003: 190).

Since, “at the level of communal consciousness and collective memory [...] myth turns out to be a fundamental and unique means of storing and using aggregate social experience, a guarantee for social identity” (Baklanov et al., 2018: 44), mythologically-themed animations are ideal texts to discern many issues related to notions such as cultural and social identity, collective memory and nationalism. Especially in the case of coproductions, a locus where different national interests ideally cooperate, the investigation of these aspects allows not only to confirm how myths perpetuate their crucial role in modern societies through intertextuality, but also to elucidate how their usage changes according to communication targets and purposes. In this respect, we should consider that “popular culture forms succeed because they act like folklore,” because of their “resonance” and “appeal to an audience's existing set of story conventions” (Bird 2006: 346).

In the present essay, I will address the new era of Sino-American coproduction from the perspective of Chinese mythology and discourse on mythological animation. Two case studies have been chosen to elucidate one specific aspect of this complex phenomenon, i.e. how, despite the “homogenizing effect” of globalization (Dégh 1994: 23), cultural and national orientations emerge from different textual choices, or, conversely put, how it is possible to retrace the institutional background of a Sino-American movie according to textual choices.

“White Snake” (*Baishe yuanqi* 白蛇: 缘起, Light Chaser and Warner Bros, 2019) and “Over the Moon” (*Feibenqu yueqiu* 飞奔去月球, Pearl Studio/Netflix/Glen Kean Productions, 2020), hereafter mentioned as *WS* and *OtM* share core features, both being inspired by or incorporating Chinese traditional narratives, i.e. popular myths and legends, and being feature-length and wholly CGI films.¹ I maintain that the Sino-American coproduction that is US-lead (*OtM*) follows Hollywood traditions and established coproduction trajectories, while the PRC-lead one (*WS*) tends to respond more closely to national official discourse on *guochan* 国产 (national cultural production).

In the first part of the essay, I adopt a literary-historical approach to sum up the history of Chinese animation with a focus on the transnational origins of Chinese animation,² and on the main phases and features of Sino-American coproduction. Major trends and keywords of contemporary discourse on the role of myth in Chinese national animation are hereby presented to outline the field in which the Chinese component of Sino-American collaboration operates.

¹ “Computer animation, or CGI animation, is a process used for generating animated images. [...] Computer generated imagery (CGI) encompasses both static scenes and dynamic images” (Jiang 2016: 37).

² For detailed information regarding the transnational origins of Chinese animation, see Du (2019). In this section, I intertwine the information provided by her study with other sources.

In the second part, the institutional perspective provides key information to understand the following analysis and comparison carried out in the framework of Folklore and Popular culture studies. At a textual level, I apply content and visual/multimodal³ tools for analyzing the plot structure, intertextual relationships and the way each text deals with a common set of elements that have been previously coded, such as the setting, the characters' gender, their main physical features, and other visual/multimodal features such as tactility⁴ and 2D animation inserts. A general focus on “Chinese elements” is proposed due to their central role in official discourse on national animation.

2. Transnational flows and Myth-driven success

2.1 Transnational...flows

The Wan brothers (*Wan xiongdi* 万兄弟), founders of “national animation,” did not hesitate to admit the influence of Fleisher and Disney on their work. The first Asian feature-length film, “Princess Iron Fan” (*Tieshan gongzhu* 铁扇公主, 1941), draws from Disney’s “Snow White” (1937) both from a technical and a character perspective. As for the former, they employed rotoscoping animation, the same way Disney did for his *Snow White*. As for the latter, the Wan brothers chose an episode of “Journey to the West” (*Xiyouji* 西游记, XVI century) that they could build around the character of a mean princess, i.e. Bull Demon King’s wife. Wan Laiming 万籁鸣 (1907-1997), the most famous of the brothers, openly compared the two animations, projecting their relationship into both a national(istic) and a transnational scenario:

I was thinking that if Americans can demonstrate their ethnic or national style in *Snow White* and the *Seven Dwarfs*, certainly, we can develop our own ethnic features through *The Princess of the Iron Fan* (Wan in Zhou 2020: 19).

Although being generally received as a piece of “resistance art,” the movie was treated as “being symbolic of the victory of Greater East Asian cinema over Hollywood” (Du 2019: 48) in 1942 Japan.

³ A “mode” is a semiotic resource. Analyzing multimodal features means taking into account different modes (such as visual and audio resources) and their combination.

⁴ Laura Marks maintains that “tactility is created by the viewer’s ability to sense touch – not by actually touching the film, but rather through the film’s ability to appeal to sense” (Kriss 2016). According to Kriss, filmic tactility “affords the viewer greater access to a ‘felt’, rather than simply an ‘ocular’ experience of cinema. The close-up enables the viewer to feel cinema; to penetrate the film’s skin, in order to experience its tactility and its full affect” (2016).

Osamu Tezuka, the “God of manga,” reportedly understood and appreciated the political nuance of the movie, and confessed its deep influence on his work (Du 2019: 58).

After a period of well-funded (mainly propagandistic) production in Japanese-controlled Manchuria from the late 1930s-mid 1940s, artists and animators of the newly born People’s Republic gave rise to the so-called “golden era” of national animation, which ended by the late 1980s.⁵ During the early years of PRC, the Soviet Union was the main aesthetic reference for animated production (besides Hollywood), while in the second half of the 1950s cultural actors succeeded in finding a “national style” that made animated movies more internationally recognizable.⁶

Sino-American coproductions virtually started in the 1980s, when a new mediascape urged many young artists to work at foreign animation houses in Southern China. According to Yang and Zhang, in the “first phase” co-production meant providing “labor, venues, equipment and other paid services for the US.”⁷ From a wider standpoint, it also meant appropriating marketing models and subsuming styles from Hollywood.

In 2004, new Regulations on the Administration of Chinese-Foreign Cooperative Film Production (*Zhongwai hezuo shezhi dianyingpian guanli guiding* 中外合作摄制电影片管理规定) were introduced. Afterwards, Hollywood’s interest in the Chinese cinema market grew, giving way to a “Chinese stories” (*Zhongguo gushi* 中国故事) phase. A “strategy of Chinese elements” (*Zhongguo yuansu zhanlüe* 中国元素策略) was applied on joint investment projects (Chen 2016:176),⁸ although many of them were criticized for allegedly employing an Orientalist point of view that simply “placed Western stories in the Chinese context,” or/and “presented the ignorant and backward ancient eastern country (*yumei, luohoude dongfang guguo* 愚昧、落后的东方古国) from a Western perspective” (Yang and Zhang 2017: 66).

⁵ It is also possible to distinguish a first golden era, related to the production of the late 1950s- early 1960s, from a second golden era, which spans from early to late 1980s.

⁶ For an archeological retrieval of the “national style discourse”, see Macdonald (2015).

⁷ This three-phases categorization is drawn from Yang and Zhang (2017). See Kokas (2017) for an in-depth analysis of Sino-American co-operation in the film industry.

⁸ According to Chen, the Chinese elements strategy means inserting into US movies the following elements: Chinese (not only, but especially Chinese movies stars’) faces, cultural elements (“Chinese symbols, landscapes, clothes, and kung fu”) and the national image of China (*Zhongguo de guojia xingxiang* 中国的国家形象). The last aspect deals with the representation of China as the “savior of the world” (*shijie zhu* 救世主) or, at least, as a powerful ally in many Hollywood movies (Chen Y. 2016: 176-177).

In 2015, the “Cooperation 3.0” phase started.⁹ Due to the increasingly central role of the PRC in the global political scenario, a deeper integration in the US-market of many Chinese realities, such as Wanda Group 万达集团 and Huayi Brothers 华谊兄弟, and the raise of the imported film quota in light of further Sino-American agreements (Yang and Zhang 2017: 67), have been accompanied by other, contradictory drives. In 2017, Kokas argued that “Hollywood dream factory and the Chinese Dream work together, while mired in a state of perpetual negotiation” (Kokas 2017: 20). Sino-American animated coproduction synecdochically represents this larger phenomenon. Successful features such as “Kung Fu Panda 3” (DreamWorks and Oriental DreamWorks, 2016), “Abominable” (DreamWorks 2019) and the two case studies hereby selected, could conceal complex textual dynamics that long to be disentangled by analytical scrutiny.

2.2. Mythological tradition and trajectories

Between 2015 and 2016, the 3D animation *Xiyoujizhi Dasheng guilai* 西游记之大圣归来, known globally as “Monkey King: Hero is back,” achieved unprecedented box office results and brought Chinese animation to a so-called *xin shidai* 新时代 (new era) of national and international success (He 2021; Li 2021). When *Nezha* 哪吒 crushed every record in 2019, it became clear that animation had to be interpreted as a critical asset for national production.¹⁰

These being notable, isolated episodes, revealed that the problem of Chinese animation “going out” (*zouchuqu zhanlüe* 走出去) (Yi 2019; Lin 2021) was more structural than expected, with “the performance and quality of Chinese animations [...] being considered of mild or unsatisfactory level if compared with Japanese or American production” (Pellitteri, cit. in Feng, 2021). Since the globally successful movies both adapt mythological characters/themes, mythological animation has been put at the core of the official discourse pertaining national and international production to solve this and other “bottlenecks” (Wang 2024).

⁹ For a general view on Sino-American (and Sino-European) cooperation in the film market by 2015, see also Richeri (2016).

¹⁰ Animation and comics have been considered as a key cultural industry as early as in 2009, i.e. during the implementation of the 11th five-year projection for social and economic development (2006-2010). That year the Ministry of Culture began overseeing their development and the government provided “technological innovation funds, preferential income, and value-added tax policies to small- and medium-sized enterprises” in the field (Lent 2017: 371-372). However, the support did not prove effective—as far as both national and international audiences are concerned—until the 2010s.

According to Tang and Gong, by adapting myths, animations reflect “Chinese’s original understanding of the world” (2021: 417). This conviction, based on “the romantic idea of an access to primitive, original Chinese thinking” through myths, is still widespread (McNeal 2012: 686). Many scholars confirm this view by entitling mythological animations to be the “driving force” of national animation (Shen and Lin, 2024; Wang 2024; Zhao and Zheng 2023; Tang 2021; Wu and Wang 2020).

Even though the presence of mythology is an element of continuity in the history of Chinese animation (Wang writes about a “mythological animation lineage,” 2024), its recent manifestation is discursively related to the formation of Chinese modern identity. The core idea is that film-makers should “creatively integrate the ‘essence of Chinese culture’ within the movies” (Tang and Gong, 2021: 424), “to promote a sustainable development of the Chinese School so as to reinvent the form of cultural identity in film-making” (Tang and Gong, 2021: 427). How the Chinese “essence” is constructed represents a key discerning issue. As noted by Wang and Whyke (2023: 64), it is mostly conceived as “an entity that needs to be confined to certain attributes in order to genuinely encapsulate ‘itself.’” An “evocative use of traditional imagery” (Wang and Whyke 2023: 68), which include traditionally-bound color schemes and “symbolic symbols” (Wang 2024), is suggested as a means of integrating this “essence” in the movies. Another option is working on traditional characters, by “adding new roles” (Tang and Gong 2021: 423). The success of “Monkey King” (2015) and *Ne Zha* (2019) can be explained by their portraying “ordinary individual instead of a perfect hero [...], who could be suffering, struggling and hesitating in his daily life” (Tang and Gong 2021: 424-425).

The usage of Chinese myths in coproductions engenders an intratextual coexistence of national and international drives.

Zhou Tiedong, former director of the China Film Group, maintained that, “besides martial arts, animation is (our) only commercial opportunity” (Yi 2019). Some Chinese analysts have been promoting animation for it offers “natural advantages for an intercultural communication”, since it helps hiding cultural identities and avoiding the “cultural discount” (Yi 2019).¹¹ However, the great majority of commentators build on very different premises. In contemporary discourse on Chinese animation, culture is conceived as something instrumental (a “tool”), therefore, it is vital to integrate national tradition in current, technologically and interculturally savvy production.

A few, selected aspects of foreign animation should be entitled of a guiding role: Wu and Wang mention “American animation pragmatism” and “utilitarianism” (2020: 288), while Japanese

¹¹ When a product considered (highly) valuable in one country becomes lowly valuable in a target market because it is not understood, a “cultural discount” happens. The value is lost in the cultural translation. See Lee (2006).

animators' experience in "rationally using national cultural styles", their respect of their folk culture, is underlined in Tang and Gong (2021: 426). The employment of Hollywood-derived techniques, initially welcomed, opened a path that eventually brought to a fixation on aesthetics at the expenses of other "foreign" aspects now deemed as more crucial, such as the formation of IP characters (Wang 2024; Shen and Lin 2024).

In this context of national recognition and ideological competition, such terms as "transculturality" and "transnationalism" are deemed ambiguous, thus these phenomena, together with "cultural transfer," should be prevented (Wu and Wang 2020: 287).

3. "Over the Moon" and "The White Snake"

3.1 "Over the moon:" a "reforming" myth

3.1.1. Institutional perspective

OtM was produced by Pearl studio and Netflix, with the cooperation of Sony Pictures, Dreamworks and NBCUniversal.

In 2018, CMC Capital Partners (CMC), previously known as China Media Capital,¹² took full ownership of Oriental DreamWorks (*Dongfang gongchang* 东方梦工厂) and relaunched it as "100% Chinese-owned" (Amidi 2018). Oriental DreamWorks, founded in 2012, thus became Pearl Studio, a successful venture that produced, as its first release, the animated movie *Everest*, also known as *Abominable* (*Xueren qi yuan* 雪人奇缘) in 2019. Li Ruigang 黎瑞刚, CMC's chair, declared: "With full ownership, CMC expands its commitment to build Pearl Studio into one of the world's leading creators of high-quality animated content for every screen and platform" (Brzeski 2018).

Netflix is a subscription streaming service, which became a production company after 2007 and continues to expand transnationally and transmedially. Netflix started working with DreamWorks Animation in 2013, when they co-produced an animated series for kids: "Turbo: F.A.S.T. (Fast Action Stunt Team)"—based on Dreamworks' film "Turbo" (Lieberman 2013).

For this Sino-American co-production, Peilin Chou (chief creative officer at Pearl studio and producer at Netflix) selected many renowned figures for the most prominent creative positions. First

¹²CMC (China Media Capital), now called CMC partners, is one of the most active private investment institution, which is interested mainly in the fields of culture and entertainment. Among the most renowned and influential companies iQiyi (Aiqiyi 爱奇艺), Bili bili 哔哩哔哩, Mango TV (Mangguo 芒果 TV), Ele.me (E le me 饿了么).

of all, Glen Keane, former director of “Frozen” (2013) and “Big Hero 6” (2014).¹³ Due to her “deep roots in China”, Janet Yang, the movie’s executive producer and current president of the Film Academy, had invested in the movie as part of her project of bringing Chinese themes to Hollywood.¹⁴ Notably, the whole cast is of East-Asian descent.¹⁵

As far as matters of its dissemination/reception are concerned, OtM is animated in English. Netflix’s involvement in the project ensured a more pervasive dissemination and an easier accessibility for viewers all over the world. The movie was nominated for the Academy awards and Golden globe awards in 2021.

3.1.2. The plot

The story, set in a small and beautiful Chinese fantasy town, revolves around a girl named Feifei, who loses her mother at a young age and tries to cope with the loss. Her mother used to tell her the story of Chang’e, thus she grows fond of the Moon goddess and of the idea of becoming an astronaut. A few years later, her dad introduces his new lover and her son Chin to Feifei, who vehemently opposes the relationship. When her dad arranges a Mid-Autumn festival dinner for the enlarged family, Feifei expresses her disappointment in the outsiders’ presence. Therefore, she decides to ask for the help of her beloved Chang’e and starts building a “rocket to the moon.” She succeeds in reaching the Lunaria, Chang’e’s reign, Feifei finds out that her stepbrother sneaked into the rocket and that Chang’e was not how she had expected. The goddess is vain and self-centered. However, after a series of adventures, Feifei accomplishes two tasks: first, she manages to accept the new asset of her family; secondly, she convinces Chang’e to “let go” of Houyi, whose memory had turned her into an obsessed woman. At this point, Feifei and Chin can go back home and start a new phase of their lives as brother and sister.

The analysis of plot structure inspired by Leskosky’s *Reforming fantasy* (1989), allows to identify three macro-segments: an “initial negative behavior” (Feifei’s opposition to her “new” family and her father’s reaction), a “fantasy sequence” (over the moon), and a “reformed behavior” (Feifei back home,

¹³ OtM was the first animated movie he made without his friend animator and writer Mel Shaw, who had been a long-time partner of Kean’s.

¹⁴ She is reportedly developing “projects with Asian themes.” See her official webstise: <https://janetyang.com/>

¹⁵ Philippa Soo, the voice of goddess Chang’e, is of half-Chinese descent, while Cathy Ang was born to Chinese-Filipino parents. The most famous actors involved (Sandra Oh, Ken Jeong and Margaret Cho) are of Korean descent. Notably, the moon goddess is celebrated during the Mid-Autumn Festival, which belongs to the traditions of many East-Asian countries such as China, Korea and Japan.

“reformed”) (Leskosky (1989: 53). This “morphology” and other features,¹⁶ allow *OtM* to be considered as a Reforming fantasy cartoon, a subgenre which demonstrates enduring consistency and presence in Hollywood animated cinema throughout the decades (Leskosky (1989: 64).

Another important aspect of this movie’s diegesis is linear time: despite the initial “time jump,” the events are narrated diachronically.

3.1.3. Intertextuality

*OtM*¹⁷ is a contemporary original story that offers an updated interpretation of the legend of the moon goddess Chang’e 嫦娥, one of the “four most important myths” in China.¹⁸ Chang’e was the wife of Archer Yi (Houyi 后羿), a demigod who saved the world by shooting and destroying nine suns. Raising all at the same time, the suns were turning the world into a desert, barren land. His intervention led the Queen mother of the West (*Xiwangmu* 西王母) to bestow the immortality potion upon him. However, it was Chang’e the one who drank it, ending up living on the moon and becoming its goddess. Two explanations have been given for this conclusion: either she wanted to prevent her husband’s apprentice to exploit it for evil purposes, thus performing the role of a loving wife, or she was just being curious and selfish, thus acting as an evil woman. Since retracing the genealogy of the myth through literary intertextuality is beyond the scope of this essay, it will suffice to mention the *Huainanzi* 淮南子¹⁹ as the most ancient version of the text, and Lu Xun’s satirical rendition, published in his late collection *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (Old tales retold, 1936), as the most influential in modern times. As for its cinematic adaptations, two recent works can help understand the pervasiveness of Chang’e’s presence in the East Asian imaginary: Hong Kong movie *Chang’e* (1954) and the Sino-Singaporean tv series “Moon fairy” (*Benyue* 奔月, 2003).

¹⁶ Leskosky lists the following features of the *Reforming fantasy*, all present in *OtM*: “the protagonist is physically or mentally immature”; “fantasy setting iconographically linked to the protagonist’s [negative] behavior;” “music plays an integral part in the fantasy milieu in sound cartoons;” “the fantasy menace is always either human or anthropomorphic never simply an object or animal” (1989: 56-57).

¹⁷ The Chinese title of *OtM*, i.e. *Feibenqu yueqiu* 飞奔去月球 (flying to the moon/Fei goes to the moon), plays with the Chinese name of the legend, i.e. *Chang’e benyue* 嫦娥奔月, Chang’e flies to the moon.

¹⁸ The other three being the interrelated “Gonggong hits the mountain” (*Gonggong chushan* 共工触山), “Nüwa amends the sky (Nüwa butian 女娲补天),” and Houyi shoots the suns (Houyi sheri 后羿射日).

¹⁹ The myth of Houyi is reported in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing* 山海经), while only in Eastern Han notes on in the *Huainanzi*, Houyi and Chang’e are discursively connected as husband and wife. (Sun and Chen 2009: 27).

Being the first animated feature on Chang’e, *OtM* successfully embeds the story’s alternative versions by offering a synthesis through the character of a modernized Chang’e, presented as Feifei’s antagonist, her “menace” in the fantasy sequence.



Fig. 1. Fei Fei with her bunny pet, Bungee, set off to the Moon (copyright: Creative commons).

Feifei is a caring and passionate teenager. Her name is a reference to the myth (“fei” means “fly,” as Chang’e literally flies to the moon), and her attachment to the past and traditions reflects a stereotypical Chinese attitude. She is stubborn and scientifically smart: one of the best students in her class to the point that she even succeeds in building a spaceship to reach the moon.

Chang’e embodies the ambivalent nature of femininity as represented in traditional literature and mythology. When the viewer finds out the reasons of her evil actions, it is harder to frame her as an enemy: simply put, she misses her husband, Houyi, and manages to meet him again by exploiting Feifei’s arrival. Two choices conceptually relate the goddess to the *xin shidai*: firstly, a reference to the Chinese space mission to the moon, which was named after her;²⁰ secondly, idol culture, which, while permeating the whole character’s aesthetics, is especially resonant on her first appearance, when she is portrayed as a fashionable singer in front of a huge crowd of minions.

²⁰ The Chinese Lunar Exploration Program (Zhongguo tanyue gongcheng 中国探月工程) was launched in 2007 and is still ongoing. In January 2019, Chang’e 4 touched down on the far side of the Moon.

The other main character, Feifei's stepbrother, Chin, embraces the role of mediator between past and present lives, Self and Other. Chin is a funny, cheerful boy who helps Feifei both on a practical level, with the many difficulties faced in Lunaria, and emotionally/psychologically, with the processing of her grief. Many other characters are less important, but well-constructed, such as Feifei's aunts, who are instrumental in telling the two versions of the story to the unaware viewer, or Gobi, the friendly monster Feifei meets on Lunaria, who is a phantasmic version of Chin himself.

3.1.4. Visual and multimodal elements

OtM is set in an imaginary Chinese town, where the houses are built in traditional-style architecture, and a small river runs through its streets. A high pagoda on the adjacent hill perfects the traditional style of the landscape. The familiar and cozy urban atmosphere is juxtaposed to the thrill of a nearby construction site, where a high-speed magnetic train is being built. The site symbolizes the new, technological and even futuristic China. Lunaria, the other major setting, displays a psychedelic, mobile-game aesthetics, packed as it is with small creatures that are part of the scenery itself. Many "Chinese elements" are integrated in both the city and Lunaria landscapes, as visual bits carrying emotional weight (e.g. "festivity food" and the two guardian lions). The Chinese language is also present, in the visual as well as in the audio modality.

From an animation-as-narration standpoint, the story displays cohesion and coherence. The change of settings is rare and the few transitions from one time/place to another occur smoothly. The major narrative/visual partition occurs when the characters leave the earth.

Close-ups and tactility are fully exploited in the first part, to increase the emotional power of these scenes, e.g., when Feifei is portrayed with her mother or her family, and in the last section, for stressing the solution of the conflicts during the family re-union. Notably, many close-ups are devoted to food, to exploit the multiple comminglings of family and food culture.

The use of 2D animation builds an additional narrative layer, when employed, for instance, to tell the story of Chang'e and Feifei's planning and building the rocket. It also contributes to modulating the tone and enhance polyphony.

The audio modality is crucial in this movie, which has been defined as "musical animation", following the classic Disney-Pixar (i.e. Hollywood) model. In this regard, two songs are worth mentioning: the first one is sang by Feifei the moment she climbs up the hill, reaching the pagoda and voicing out her intention to build a "rocket to the moon". This particular scene resonates with at least two other classic Disney-Pixar scene, when Belle ("Beauty and the Beast") vocalizes her desire of adventure and when Elsa (*Frozen*), having "let go" her responsibilities to the kingdom. Equally

noteworthy is the song “Yours Forever,” performed by Phillipa Soo and Comrad Ricamora both in English and Chinese, thus *translating* the Sino-American cooperation into music form.

3.2. “The White Snake:” metanoia revised

3.2.1. Institutional perspective

Light Chaser Animation (*Zhuiguang donghua 追光动画*) was founded in 2013 to “create world-class animated films with a Chinese cultural touch.”²¹ Before 2019, it had already produced “Little Door Gods” (*Xiaomen shen 小门神*, 2016), “Toys and Pets” (*Atang qiyu 阿唐奇遇*, 2017) and “Cats and Peachtopia” (*Mao yu Taohua yuan 猫与桃花源*, 2018).²²

Warner Bros. has a long history of filmic cooperation with China, since it had opened a regional office in Shanghai as early as in the 1930s. In 2015, they launched Flagship Entertainment, a partnership with China Media Capital,²³ and in 2017 opened a “full-fledged joint venture studio in Beijing” (Brzeski 2017). On this occasion, Warner Bro.’s CEO Kevin Tsujihara declared that “in the spirit of true cultural exchange,” they were “eager to learn from our partners and share great Chinese stories with audiences around the world” (Brzeski 2017)²⁴.

WS was the first co-production for Light Chaser and one of the first releases after Warner Bros.²⁵ deepened their involvement locally. Therefore, it represented a crucial step for both Light Chaser’s internationalization and Warner Bros’ “animated” venture in China, and surely carried the weight of addressing international audiences.

However, when getting to the credit sections of the film, we learn that Warner Bro’s actual involvement was not extended to crucial creative roles, all played by Chinese creatives. For instance, the directors are Amp Wong 黄家康, who had worked for other Light Chaser titles (“Little Door Gods,”

²¹ See their official website http://www.zhuiguang.com/?page_id=22&lang=en

²² Interestingly, the English titles of two out of three movies, which were all distributed in the US, lose many of their cultural references. A Tang adventure becomes Toys and Pets (probably echoing the globally famous Pixar movie Toy story). The reference to Tao Yuanming’s 陶渊明 Peach blossom spring (Taohuayuan 桃花源), an important literary work of the Six Dynasties, is completely lost in translation.

²³ China Media Capital owned the 51% of the share, Warner Bros the 49% (Frater 2015).

²⁴ Xi Jinping expressed the necessity of “telling Chinese stories well” (jianghao Zhongguo gushi 讲好中国故事) at the launch of New Silk Road project in 2013. See Szcudlik (2018).

²⁵ Beijing Joy Pictures co., ltd, is an “entertainment company that focuses on film Acquisition marketing, distribution and content development” is also credited in the production on IMDb. For additional info see their official website https://cinando.com/en/Company/beijing_joy_pictures_co_ltd_105301/Detail

“Tea Pets,” “Cats and Peachtopia”), and Zhao Ji 赵霁, with no previous noteworthy experiences, while the almost unknown Damao 大毛 was selected for screenwriting. Perhaps, Amp Wong carried the weight of transnationalizing the movie, since he had already taken part in successful Hollywood animation series (e.g. “Astro Boy”, “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles”).

As for dissemination/reception, WS is animated in Mandarin Chinese. It was intended to be displayed in movie theatres, both nationally and internationally. It was award-nominated at the 29th Annecy International Animation Film Festival, and won the award for “outstanding feature-length productions” and for its musical score at the 19th Golden Dragon Award Original Animation & Comic Competition (*jinlong jiang* 金龙奖) in 2019.

3.2.2. Plot structure

In the opening scene, Blanca (*Xiao Bai*, in Chinese, lit. Little Bai), a good-hearted snake-demon, and her sister Verta (*Qingshe* 青蛇, in Chinese, lit. Blue-green snake) are shown meditating and then bathing in a beautiful garden. Blanca faints during a terrifying vision and then, woken up by Verta, complains about not being able to reach immortality, even though she “practiced” meditation (*xiulian* 修炼) for 500 years. Verta hands a jade hairpin over her sister, giving way to a flashback that informs the main narrative section.

The “core” story is set during the downfall of the Tang dynasty, in the whereabouts of what would become the city of Hangzhou. Bai is a skillful demon who works for a Shifu 师傅 (master), a more powerful female snake-demon who is fighting against a Daoist *guoshi* 国师 (grandmaster), who has the official authorities on his side and is killing snakes to plunder their vital energy and become immortal.

While Blanca is on a mission to kill the Grandmaster, she loses her memories and wakes up in a small village of snake-catchers. The person who has found her is Xu Xuan, a sweet pharmacist who offers to accompany her to the fox-demon magic shop, where she can retrieve her memories. During a boat trip, Blanca reveals her true (snake) shape, but he doesn’t care. Shortly after, Verta joins them with the mission of bringing Blanca back to her kins, just to discover that her sister loves the man. The couple physical bond is followed by the comeback of Blanca’s memories and Blanca’s decision to end their relationship. While Xuan chooses to become a low-level demon to be with Blanca, she has to confront the Grandmaster, first, and Shifu’s greater ambitions, later. Xuan, who rushes to her aid, is killed, but she manages to save his soul before fainting.

At the end of the movie, the audience is brought back to the “present,” when Blanca can finally remember her lover and decides to reincarnate in Song time China (960-1279 AD).

The analysis of the plot shows a tripartite structure (a short introduction to entice the viewer, the main storyline, and an open conclusion). Notably, this organization of the plot is circular: the introduction opens a flashback, which is constituted by the main storyline, while the open conclusion is located in the present (500 years after the events of the main storyline).

The plot can be analyzed more fruitfully in the light of the character’s arc, following Leskosky’s comparison between Hollywood and Japanese animation (2021). Leskosky (2020: 81) proposes using the notion of “metanoia,” which means “a change of mind” in ancient Greek, to define a typical moral conversion of an evil character. Metanoia sets the two traditions apart, since, in Japanese animation, “it is not unusual to see even demons and devils reversing their moral compass and operating on the side of the good” and it happens “more seriously, and with greater import for the overall narrative” vis-à-vis Hollywood animation (Leskosky 2020: 85).

In WS, the tension between the main characters informs the narrative drive and derives from the fact that in WS love means denying pre-ordained notions of identity (and morality). In the “heart” of the movie, Blanca, despite her memory loss, somehow feels she is not human: scared of being rejected, she tries to warn Xu, just to hear these words repeatedly: “Ni bu shi eren 你不是恶人 (you are not evil).” Similarly, when Verta reminds Blanca that Xu is a man, she responds that he “is different (ke ta butong 可他不同)”. In the last sections, Xu proves Blanca right by becoming a demon. Xu’s sacrifice was not in vain: to save him, Blanca sacrifices herself by giving up meditation to meet Xu’s reincarnation in Hangzhou.

WS is thus built as a metanoia, being Blanca an evil character (snake-demon) who chooses romantic love over her species and her own sake.

3.2.3. Intertextuality

Baishhe zhuan (The Story of the White snake) is one of the four most popular love stories in Chinese folk culture (*sida minjian aiqing chuanshuo* 四大民间爱情传说).²⁶ As with the great majority of popular

²⁶ The other three being “The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl” (Niulang zhinü 牛郎织女), “Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai” (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯与祝英台), and Meng Jiangnu weeps the Great Wall (Meng Jiang nü ku Changcheng 孟姜女哭长城).

"matters," it has a long and intertextually complex history,²⁷ which will be reduced here to include only the most influential texts and those most closely related to the animated movie discussed in this contribution.

The earliest known written version of the legend was published in 1624 by Feng Menglong 冯梦龙 (1574-1646) in his "Stories to Caution the World" (*Jingshe tongyan* 警世通言) with the title "Madam White is Kept Forever under Thunder Peak Tower" (Bainiang yongzhen Leifeng ta 白娘子永镇雷峰塔). Even though stories of a shape-shifting female snake-demon had already been recorded by that time, Feng Menglong presented an original depiction of the white snake as a "sincere and straightforward" character (Liu 2021), who did not (want to) kill the male lead, loving him instead (Feng *et al.* 2005: 499). This oeuvre represented an important step in the white snake's discursive transformation from snake-demon (*she* 蛇, *yaoguai* 妖怪) to Madam (*niang* 娘). Feng's Madam White is a woman with a strong sense of independence and self-respect, who is able to fight for her love and freedom, even though she is doomed to fail because, at the end of the day, she is still a demon in a Ming dynasty literary text.²⁸

The themes of predestined love and the birth of the couple's child can be found in a parallel, "theatrical thread"²⁹ (Varriano 2014: 821-822), modernized by Tian Han 田汉 (1898-1968) in the XX century.³⁰ The theatrical versions perfect the literary trope Madam Bai 白娘 in opposition to Snake Bai 白蛇: she is a good and devoted wife to Xu Xuan 许宣 who, instigated by the Buddhist Monk, tricks her into revealing her true nature only to be scared to death by Baishe's demonic countenance. She saves him, gives birth to his child but still ends up being trapped under the Leifeng pagoda (*Leifeng ta* 雷峰塔)³¹

²⁷ For a comprehensive view on the story and its global adaptation see Liang (2021).

²⁸ In Feng Menglong's version, Madam Bai ends up being exorcised by a Buddhist monk and imprisoned under a pagoda. Feng could not depart from the standard *huaben* 话本 (vernacular short story) narrative: "the demon stories normally tell how a young man encounters an animal spirit or a ghost in the guise of a young girl, makes love to her, discovers his danger, and calls an exorcist to subjugate her" (Wu 2001: 597-598).

²⁹ The Qing theatrical versions (i.e. the *juben* 剧本) are generally linked to a manuscript by the playwright Fang Chengpei 方成培 (1713–1808) titled *The Leifeng Pagoda*. Based on previous *juben*, Fang's work shows a series of new elements that would become canonical in the re-telling of the story, such as the meeting at the bridge, also found at the end of WS as a explicit intertextual reference (Liu 2021).

³⁰ According to Idema, this work is particularly influential because many modern texts this theatrical adaptation of from the late 1940s and early 1950s as their basis (2012: xxiv-xxv).

³¹ Madam Bai's imprisonment is followed by a narratological bifurcation: in the "traditional" interpretation their son, Xu Mengjiao 许梦蛟, saves her; while in the "modern" interpretation (i.e. Tian Han's), she is saved by her friend, the Green snake (Idema 2012: xxv).

Among the many cinematic adaptations, *WS* represents the first Chinese feature-length animation, after the release of the Japanese cel animation in 1958. While the Japanese text adds a new, happier ending to the “theatrical thread”, *WS* creates new possibilities by building on the origins (*yuanqi* 缘起) of the love story (Wang 2018). This adaptation is conceived as a “prequel” that explains why Bai and Xian became pre-destined soulmates (*qianshi yuanfen* 前世姻缘), i.e. by fighting evil forces together.



Fig. 2. *WS*, Official poster. Notably, the two protagonists are portrayed while looking at each other (copyright: Creative commons)

WS focuses on the three main positive characters: one male (Xu Xuan), and two, more powerful, females (Blanca and Verta).

Xu Xuan’s personality and features show major intertextual changes. Yuan, who draws from the lexicon related to ACG culture,³² describes him as follows: Xu “became a lively teenager” (*huopo shaonian* 活泼少年) who lives freely in the mountains; kind-hearted, brave but also naughty and cute (*tiaopi keai* 调皮可爱)” (2019). Xu is not portrayed as a weak scholar, but as a lively, brave, naughty and “cute,”

³² ACG stands for Anime, Comics and Games. ACG culture comprises the production/dissemination/reception of these products. For a short introduction to the phenomenon see Bell (2016).

teenager, shows a tuning on the tastes of contemporary society, from an aesthetic and a discursive standpoint.³³

Blanca is rendered as a positive character, her naiveté conveyed by the aesthetics of “cuteness” (big head and eyes, small nose), while also echoing classical representations of female beauties’ elegance. Compared to other contemporary visual renditions, such as in the Korean and Chinese *webtoons*, she represents a mediation between a child with exaggerated features and a mature and sexy woman.³⁴ Blanca’s looks are more delicate and sweet than Verta’s, and her contention more demure. Verta is in fact depicted as a sexier, more ambiguous character through graphic choices that span from facial features (smaller, horizontally-cut eyes, thinner and raised eyebrows) to movements (her body language is very similar to a snake’s). However, naming her Little Qing helps the viewer empathizing with the character.

As is the case with many other Chinese versions of the story, this movie does not relinquish the sexual allure of its female characters and includes one (censored) nude scene and a (censored) sex scene.

3.2.4. Visual and multimodal elements

Because the movie is set in ancient times, hairdoes, clothes, buildings and tools are rendered in conformity with the relevant archeological and philological information of the era. A frame showing a long shot of the Leifeng pagoda is repeatedly used, to visually sustain the connection with the hypotexts. Calligraphy, especially in the form of seal script, and *shanshui* (山水) panoramas slid into as well, as clear references to traditional arts. While the original stories are equally rooted in Buddhist religion and Daoist folklore, *WS* displays a greater number of references to Daoist symbolism/symbology, since *daojiao* (道教, Daoist religion) is linked to *mofa* (魔法, sorcery).³⁵ This

³³ For a dissertation on the impact of “cuteness” on transnational aesthetics, see Pellitteri (2018). For the affects of cuteness, see Dale *et al.* (2017).

³⁴ A “cute” rendition of the white snake as Lady White can be found in the Korean webtoon (web cartoon) by Joo Ho Min and Cheng Hui (2017). Here, the demon is a Japanese inspired childlike character, half human, half snake. The webtoon was redrawn by Mr. Tomato 番茄君 and published as a Chinese webcomic (Yiwen zhi Bingtang hulu) on Dongman manhua 咚漫漫画 in 2019. As pointed out by Liang, although the hairstyle of this Chinese “reincarnation” of Baijiang is “still somewhat reminiscent of the Japanese-inspired Korean webtoon, she has been transformed from a cute girl with disproportionately large head to a charming woman” (2021: 246).

³⁵ I refer to Yijing’s 已经 exagrams, yin/yang symbols, and such notions as vital energy and cultivation, which are crucial narratological elements. For a definition and a short historical account of Daoist religion see Pregadio (2020). Buddhist iconography is present too, e.g. in part five they hide in a Buddhist temple, crowded with statues from the Buddhist pantheon.

reveals a lesser interest in religion, and a greater interest in exploiting the renewed passion for popular daoist aesthetics displayed in contemporary (and especially ACG) culture.

From an animation-as-narration standpoint, despite the narrative coherence of the main theme, the passage between the parts and the changes of settings are not smooth, as there are black intersections, most probably due to a lack of skills. This scattered mode influences the viewers' perception of continuity.

As for other visual elements, there are two cel animation inserts: the first one (animated lanterns and shadow play effects) enhances the visual appeal of the fox-demon magic shop by drawing on traditional material culture; the second (2D animated characters in the final credit frames) creates a comical effect. Additionally, in the first scenes the use of CGI ink-painting allows to visually recreate an additional narrative layer to portray Blanca's unstable consciousness by employing technically enhanced traditional tools.

Tactility is low and close-ups are avoided. Notably, there are two close-ups of Blanca at the beginning and in the end of the movie, which aim at establishing and consolidating the emotional bonding with the viewer. As for other multimodal elements, the only song performed by intradiegetic characters³⁶ is aimed at highlighting the growth of Xu and Bai's connection and framing it as love. However, the soundtrack is integrated with the sequence in a way that creates a sense of detachment: we hear their voices, but they are not in sync with the animation.

4. Comparison

OtM and WS are CGI animations that adapt mythological material. Both the texts display the interpolation of Chinese cultural symbols that (should) work metonymically and result in an exaltation of ancient and modern China.

OtM updates the myth by setting it in a globally attractive scenario (Lunaria) that chooses East-Asian idol culture over traditional aesthetics. Modern China is celebrated by the character of Feifei, whose personality encompasses the dreams (and obstacles) of the *xin shidai*, and by accurately selected visual elements, according to a more refined version of the “Chinese elements strategy.”

But the myth is included following a well-established type of plot, the Reforming fantasy cartoon. Thus, the movie is not so much a hypertext of Chinese mythological material as it is a Hollywood movie that *fantasizes* about Chinese mythology. OtM global audience most probably does not know about the

³⁶ The song's title is “No need to ask” (Hexuwen 何须问).

legend, hence the necessity of “containing” it, as a section of a standard morphology: by framing it in a contemporary context, the movie shows that past legends, if read correctly, can work in the present by contributing to the formation of strong characters.

WS clearly poses itself in another (East-Asian) tradition, more familiar to Sinophone audience, it appeals to the audience’s existing set of medially and culturally specific conventions.

WS should be located within the whole history of national animated cinema, which exhibits a strong tradition of myth and/or legend based texts. The choice of selecting a traditional (love) story and its ancient past setting as the main reference, the “scattered” animation and its arranging of comical, tragic, and sexually-charged scenes into a same sequence, clearly respond to and pattern after Chinese folk literature and traditional narrative.

Furthermore, circular time, meditation and reincarnation, as well as the porous relationship between demons, animals and humans are linked to East Asian tradition especially through the notion of Dharma, which “binds human beings to each other and to the universe” (Shani and Navnita 2022: 844). The others “include not only living human beings, but also ancestors, gods, plants, animals, earth, sky, and so on. The concept is wide enough to include all realms” (Shani and Navnita 2022: 844).³⁷ These elements do not emerge in OtM, where the “magic realm” is confined over... the moon, past should be left behind and people will not come back, coherently with a Judeo-Christian idea of time.

Both the movies modernize mythological characters but while Chang’e is only instrumental for the protagonist’s growth, Blanca is at the narrative core. Besides, with WS, filmmakers “update” the characters and create the basis for an IP project: this “prequel” conforms to guochan standards.

As for its relationship with foreign models, WS offers a version of Japanese metanoia based on the theatrical/performative tradition of the legend. The movie preserves metanoia fundamentally “serious” nature, in contrast with “Hollywood films [that] play their comedy as their primary function and main attraction for the audience” (Leskoski 2020: 88). However, the revolutionary trajectory of the character’s arc is mitigated by aesthetic qualities that metonymically refer to Blanca’s (and Chinese) moral stance: she is portrayed and narrated as a “good” demon since the beginning (as it is in the heart of the audience). Her “moral” conversion is, actually, an awakening to love.

While exhibiting the recent technical improvements of “national animation”, WS doesn’t follow the rules of mainstream international animation, in terms of musical inserts or intertextual references, and the use of other animation techniques to mimic shadow play and ink-painting is obviously

³⁷ The inclusion of the “oriental romantic color” (*Dongfang langman seci* 东方浪漫色彩) given by this coexistence is explicitly suggested by Chinese critics (Wang 2024: 183).

culturally charged. Conversely, OtM displays more narrative fluidity and an expert use of international animation features such as 2D inserts and tactility to modulate the tone and involve the viewer. Besides, it refers to Hollywood formats/traditions through more frequent and consistently integrated “musical scenes.”

5. Conclusions

The analyses and the comparison showed that Sino-America animated coproductions can reveal diverse, even contradictory, discursive intra- and intertextual dynamics.

WS clearly responds to national(ist) call to action to reinvigorate national animated cinema by adjusting characters on the modern era *within* tradition, looking for the “essence” mentioned by Chinese national discourse on mythological animation, thus rebuilding folklore. It does so by working intertextually, at the expenses of global attractive power, since it mainly talks to Sinophone and the Sinosphere, not to “the West”.

Conversely, OtM brings tradition into modernity while fantasizing about it. It poses itself as a transnational animation that speaks to a Hollywood-accustomed audience. Its mission is illustrating Chinese culture, telling a “Chinese story” through myth-picking, mostly aiming to connect modern China to the world by containing its fantasy, following the general path marked by the history of Sino-America coproduction.

These contradictory textual drives, explained by the institutional context of production, reveal more about how myth and legend still represent a powerful meaning-making process that shapes national narratives.

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