Lighting up the Stars: Myth archetypes Reimagined for the Times

Yina Sun

Hainan University, Haikou 571100, China

2423499659@qq.com

Abstract. Monkey King and Nezha have long been the most widely used myth archetypes in Chinese film and television, and their rich rewriting was seen in animated and fantasy films in the past. In July 2022, the feature film Lighting up the Stars also completes a period reimagining of the two myth archetypes. The film's protagonists, Mo Sanmei and Wu Xiaowen, correspond to the characters of Monkey King and Nezha respectively. In the interplay of sorrow and joy, they call on the audience to think of he meaning of life and ponder the value of life, conveying a strong sense of human warmth.

Keywords: Lighting up the Stars; Myth archetype criticism; Image reinvention; Monkey King; Nezha.

1. Introduction

Produced by Han Yan, written and directed by Liu Jiangjiang, and starring Zhu Yilong and Yang Enyou, Lighting up the Stars has grossed over $240 million since its release in July 2022, making it the biggest "dark horse" of this summer. The film won the 35th Chinese Golden Rooster Award for "Best Director's Debut", and Zhu Yilong also won "Best Actor" for the film. The film presents the funeral customs of Chinese society and explores the Chinese concept of life and death through the tragicomic tender story between Mo Sanmei, an undertaker, and Wu Xiaowen, an orphan who lost her grandmother. In terms of characterization, the film gave the two main characters mythological prototypes of "Monkey King" and "Nezha", leaving a deep impression on the audience. Throughout the history of Chinese cinema, there have been numerous adaptations of Monkey King and Nezha. Audiences have long been familiar with their distinctive rebelliousness and legendary stories. From Journey to the West (1999) to Monkey King: Hero Is Back (2015); from Prince Nezha's Triumph Against Dragon King (1979) to Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), all of which are representative works of domestic animation films and typical examples of the reinvention of traditional myth archetypes. The release of Lighting up the Stars this year completes a salutary attempt to rewrite myth archetypes in realistic drama films. The movie reshapes the image of specific mythological character archetypes who have a personality and spiritual charm by preserving the similar image characteristics and rebellious spirit of the archetypal characters while giving them profound and moving modernistic connotation, which embodies a stronger aesthetic spirit of the times.

2. Marking and hinting: the image authentication of the source myth archetype

From the characters' first appearance the director's intention to set up Mo Sanmei and Wu Xiaowen's characters is already obvious. As recorded in The Legend of the Gods, Nezha stepped on the Wind Fire Wheels and held the Fire-tipped Spear. In the film, Wu Xiaowen, with her hair in a double bun and red tasseled spear in her hand, is a fiery, impetuous, troublemaker who does not care about the rules, disciplines, and instructions of adult world. Journey to the West describes Monkey King's golden band as "It was like a golden thread, tightly strung on his head", while Mo Sanmei in the film wears a bracelet shaped like Monkey King's golden band. He is impulsive and stubborn, often dissatisfied with his father's reprimand and the constraints of the industry's rules. The two characters' identities are also identified with each other in the course of the film's story development. For instance, in the film, Mo Sanmei gave Wu Xiaowen's phone number with the note "Little Nezha", while Xiao Wen blurts out "Qi Tian Da Sheng" in response to Mo Sanmei's question of "Who am I? " The album

cover of the film's theme song Up Sky is directly painted with Wu Xiaowen holding a red tasseled gun and Mo Sanmei carrying a golden hoop stick. Even Liu Jiangjiang, the writer and director of Lighting up the Stars, admits that "The story begins with a child's perspective. For Chinese audiences, the Monkey King and Nezha are two characters that affect everyone's childhood.'The myth archetypes of Monkey King and Nezha are thus certified both inside and outside the film. The main characters' outward appearances, their movements and mannerisms, their character traits, and the rich metaphorical details of the film's design are marked and implied by the director to their myth archetypes.

3. Continuity and Reconstruction: A Narrative Focus Based on Myths and Legends

Frye argues that general statements about the heroic narrative are consistent with the cyclical changes of nature. In Anatomy of Criticism, he mentions that "these cyclical symbols are usually divided into four main phases, the four seasons of the year being the type for four periods of the day (morning, noon, evening, night), four aspects of the water-cycle (rain, fountains rivers, sea or snow), four periods of life (youth, maturity, age, death), and the like "[1]. The narrative of the hero's birth and the comedy of resurrection corresponds to spring; summer depicts the growth and triumph of the hero; autumn shows the end and death of the hero; and winter tells the world after the hero's death. In other words, mythical heroes who follow the general paradigm of mythical narratives often go through the stages of birth and growth, triumph, end and death, and finally rebirth. In Lighting up the Stars, the director continues the "typical" legendary narrative based on the myth archetype in a modern context. At the same time, he also presents a certain degree of reconstruction, weakening the "birth" of the hero, focusing on the "growth in the legend" and "rebirth after the end" paragraph.

3.1 Birth

In the film, the director gives a brief account of the characters' former beginnings: Mo Sanmei, who grew up in a funeral parlor, claims that he could dress the dead when he was Xiaowen's age. As for Xiaowen, it is revealed at the beginning of the film that her grandmother died. The director does not explain much about who her parents are, why she lives with her grandmother, and how her quirky personality is formed. Xiaowen is like Nezha popping out of a meat ball, as if she was born with such a sassy, daring look.

3.2 Growth

"Agon or conflict is the basis or archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvelous adventures." In the case of Sanmei, his "legend" is the strange encounters he experiences in his work. A messily painted urn that turns out to be a favorite; an unexpectedly large deal of $300,000 for a funeral for the living... In these strange encounters, the conflict between Sanmei and his father, as well as with the concept of the industry, has also been reflected. The legendary experience of Xiao Wen carrying a red tassel gun and trying to bring her grandmother back, as well as making a scene at the funeral hall not only highlights his brave and fearless side as "Nezha", but also reflects the conflict between Xiao Wen's innocent child's perspective and the secular norms.

3.3 The Dead End

After having some legendary experiences, the hero often comes to the end of the road: "the pathos or death, often the mutual death of hero and monster… Sparagmos, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent". The film's portrayal of this part is tragic: Sanmei's end comes from the rupture: The death of her father leaves the position of the career guide vacant; the appearance of Xiaowen's birth mother cracks his identity as Xiaowen's father; Jianren and Bai Xue express their anger at Sanmei's unauthorized sending away of Xiaowen and thus break with him. The collapse of his identity as a son, a father and a friend makes Sanmei's life slip down to a low point and towards

the end. For Xiao Wen, being sent to her birth mother's car in her sleep not only separates her from her original emotional support, Mo Sanmei, but also changes her fate without her knowledge and without resistance.

3.4 Rebirth

"Forth, the reappearance and recognition of the hero". In the narrative logic of mythology, heroes are often reborn after death. But in this film, differ from the mythical heroes, the dramatis personas do not have supernatural powers and immortality. For them "rebirth" does not refer to the extinction and regeneration of physical life, but to the completion of self-knowledge and reconciliation. After his father's death, Mo Sanmei and Jianren, Baixue began to work together again. Besides, Mo Sanmei organizes a special farewell ceremony for his father. As for Xiaowen, she escaped from her biological mother's house and said, "My father's name is Mo Sanmei. My home is Up Sky, No. 73, Huai'an Road, Yuhua District, Yanjiang City. " Xiaowen's words let Mo Sanmei regain the recognition of his self-identity. Just as Monkey King returned to Mount Huaguo in anger for many times and then returns to the path of scripture, after these incidents, Mo Sanmei also realized that his identity is irreplaceable. Thus, Mo Sanmei regained his identity in the face of his father, his friends and Xiaowen, and reconciled with the norms of the profession she did not recognize before, achieving a spiritual "rebirth". Just like Monkey King, who initially needed the regulation of the golden hoop for his mischievousness, and then accepted the restraint of the golden hoop and eventually became a Buddha and removed it, Mo Sanmei has also achieved a metamorphosis. Wu Xiaowen fled from her biological mother's home, but also a regained the initiative of their own destiny. She formed a bloodless kinship with Mo Sanmei therefore she once again chose to cut with the world norms. In the book The Legend of Deification, Nezha cut his bones and flesh and gave it to his parents. Just like him, Xiaowen resolutely departed from their blood relatives, independently choose her own identity and the life she wanted.

4. Breakthroughs and Innovations: Expressions beyond the Spirit of the Archetypes

As household folk tales, the archetypes of Nezha and Monkey King are supported by the local Chinese cultural matrix, making them easy to recognize and resonate with audiences. However, they also pose a challenge for contemporary spiritual reinvention of mythological images.

In The Anatomy of Criticism, Frye mentions ‘‘the displacement of myth", that is, "the adaption of the myth and metaphor to canons of morality or plausibility"[2]. Rather than presenting a heroic lifetime, the film focuses on the smallest characters in the Chinese society, telling their lives' ups and downs, their sorrows and their joys. In the film, Mo Sanmei was jailed for his girlfriend but was abandoned. He is serious about his work but always has trouble getting his father's approval. He seems indifferent but has a simple kindness. He is the "Monkey King" with a rebellious spirit, but also a poor man controlled by the secular. Wu Xiaowen grew up without the company of her family of origin, she is uninitiated and mischievous, a quirky "Nezha", but also deeply desires the warmth of family. The film does not give a character shield for the dramatis personas, but portrays both the glittering points that cannot be ignored and the unavoidable flaws of the characters.

Mo Sanmei and Wu Xiaowen are different from the "solitary" heroes commonly found in mythological stories at home and abroad. In Journey to the West, four people traveled together on the way to get the scriptures, but only Monkey King had the golden eyes of fire and 72 transformations. Similarly, Prometheus stole the heavenly fire. He ignored the advice of Hephaestus and kept the fire. Prometheus was eventually bound alone on the Caucasus Mountain by buzzards pecking at his liver year after year. In Lighting up the Stars, two heroes meet unexpectedly, one is "Monkey King", who uproars in Heaven, the other is "Nezha", who makes a scene in the sea. They both used to be 'individuals' with a rebellious spirit, which is an important gene for the success of their heritage and integration into a "group"[3].

More prominently, the film let the two heroes' warm each other up to touch on human morality and reflect on the concept of life and death. The film makes several dramatic presentations on the topic of death. For example, Xiao Wen chased the funeral parlor car to find her dead grandmother while Mo Sanmei threw a big funeral for a live person. One of them wanted to bring the dead back to life, and the other put the living to "death". They are not only representatives of rebellion against authority and convention, but their actions are also a bold rebellion against the natural law of life and death. These actions also indirectly reflect the character's attitude toward life and death, Wu Xiaowen and Mo Sanmei's view of life and death was originally at two extremes, Wu Xiaowen was too young to accept the loss of her grandmother. She followed Mo Sanmei all the way because he promised to take her to his grandmother. On the contrary, because of his profession, Mo Sanmei has become accustomed to death. He was even kind of indifferent, too. But with the development of the plot, the two in the process of companionship for the life and death of the view has changed, Wu Xiaowen was influenced by the shroud store. Now she believes that the deceased will become stars and gradually accept the loss of grandmother. After experiencing the death of people around, Mo Sanmei gradually understood the preciousness of life. In the end, the concept of life and death of two main characters went from opposites to fit, that is, to live hard, to cherish life and the people around us, and to face death equanimity.

5. Conclusion

Monkey King and Nezha, the characters from Journey to the West and The Legend of Deification, have become two distinctive cultural symbols on the Chinese landscape after thousands of years of oral propagation. The film Lighting up the Stars puts the two mythological characters into a contemporary context, reflecting the preciousness of human nature through the tragicomic stories of Mo Sanmei and Wu Xiaowen. It is an innovative presentation of the classic archetypes and gives them a powerful energy of the new era. "Lighting up the Stars is about death, a ritualized farewell to life, and a sincere questioning of life"[4]. The undertaker is not common in real life. However, the film inevitably provokes the audience to think about life and death through this special group, awakening the audience's collective unconscious and touching on human morality, reflecting valuable "humanistic care". As an art form, film can transcend the heaviness of 'death' itself and the confinement of time and space, resolving our fear of death and the sorrow of parting. In the post-epidemic era, the healing power of humanistic movie will bring relief to the collective emotions of society[5].

References

[1] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism[M]. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971:160.

[2] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism[M]. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971:365.

[3] Tian Huiqun. "Life Events": The Discipline and Inheritance of Father and Son [J]. Film Arts, 2022, (05): 60-64.

[4] Yang Zihui. From Spectacular Narration to True Expression: The Content Strategy of the Film "Life Events" [J]. News Research Guide, 2022, 13 (20): 236-238.

[5] Song Zhanling. "Life Events": Humanistic Care in the "Post pandemic Era" [N]. China Film Daily, 2022-07-06 (007).