

Immersive Entertainment: The Reconstruction and Value Analysis of Chinese Mythology

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Abstract. As an integral part of Chinese culture, Chinese mythology embodies rich historical, cultural, and philosophical connotations. With the accelerated development of the cultural and creative industry, Chinese mythology, with its rich content, imagery, and narratives, has gained favor among practitioners. It is deconstructed and reshaped in contemporary contexts, showing a trend of pan-entertainment in the field of cultural consumption. The immersive real-scene entertainment industry, a nascent sector in China with just over twenty years of development, utilizes advanced technologies to create multi-sensory immersive experiences. This medium, following films, theater, and games, serves as another high-quality, high-density information dissemination channel and has unique advantages in the re-creation of original Chinese myths. This study explores the development of Chinese myths such as "The Legend of the White Snake" and "Dunhuang Feitian," analyzing immersive entertainment cases like "Seeking the Realm of Dunhuang - Digital Dunhuang Immersive Exhibition." Through textual analysis and comparative investigation, it examines the current status and future prospects of real-scene entertainment, and the historical tracing and restoration of Chinese mythology that can be achieved via the industry.

Keywords: Neo-Mysticism, Immersive Entertainment, Mythology, Communication, Chinese Culture.

1. Introduction

Chinese mythology is a crucial part of Chinese culture, containing rich historical, cultural, and philosophical connotations. The myths and legends passed down through generations reflect the collective imagination, values, and beliefs of the Chinese people. In recent years, with the rapid development of the cultural and creative industry, these ancient stories have found new life and relevance. Simultaneously, the mythological characters and story backgrounds have inevitably integrated into contemporary contexts, gradually deviating from their original forms in the process of information dissemination.

In the book "Research on Prehistoric Chinese Society," Mr. Lu Zhenyu commented on mythology: "Myths and legends themselves are a kind of tradition passed down from ancient times, formed by the actual lives of people from various eras [1]." Deconstructing mythology to reconstruct history, the evolution of mythological characters and stories should remain interpretable in terms of their historical and cultural significance while adapting to the new era. However, the entertainment consumption industry, often utilizes Chinese mythology on a superficial level, and due to the nature of games, it is challenging to fully interpret their profound story content.

Among various innovations, immersive real-scene entertainment has emerged as a powerful medium. What is Immersive Entertainment? As early as 1965, computer scientist Ivan Sutherland envisioned an "ultimate display" in his seminal paper "The Ultimate Display [2]." He described a system that could immerse users in computer-generated environments, perceivable not only through visual and auditory senses but also interactive through touch. This concept laid the groundwork for virtual reality (VR) and is considered an early prototype of modern immersive experiences.

In the context of today's rapidly advancing technological landscape over the past two decades, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR) technologies have materialized this vision. Immersive Entertainment has emerged as an industry that combines art, performance, and culture to create deeply engaging experiences. It not only provides high-quality, high-density

information dissemination but also creates multi-sensory immersive experiences, making it uniquely advantageous in reinterpreting traditional Chinese mythology.

This study aims to explore the adaptation and revival of Chinese mythology within the immersive real-scene entertainment industry. It will focus on the development and modern interpretations of iconic myths. Through case studies of immersive entertainment projects including "Seeking the Realm of Dunhuang - Digital Dunhuang Immersive Exhibition," the research will analyze how these ancient narratives are being deconstructed and reshaped in contemporary settings. Additionally, the study will investigate the current status and future prospects of integrating traditional culture with modern entertainment technologies.

2. Chinese Mythologies

2.1. Overview of Chinese Myths

Mythology and history are mutually constructing entities. Myths originate from human inquiries about their living environment, forming a theoretical consciousness to explain the world from simple questions like "What is the world made of?" and "Where do I come from?". These myths evolved collectively through oral transmission, performances, texts, and paintings, gradually forming unique images and characteristics. The gradual evolution of myths is intertwined with history, reflecting the social forms of specific eras. It is an important topic in Chinese historical and cultural studies.

The modern concept of myth was established by Xia Zengyou in 1905 in a Chinese history textbook. He stated, "China, above the Yellow Emperor, includes emperors such as Fuxi, Nuwa, and Shennong. Their appearances, careers, and longevity are all between half-human and half-god, all myths [3]". Since then, the concept of mythology has begun to have foundational connotations, supported by the historical framework of myths.

Under this framework, myth is not only a reflection of history but also a participant in it, showing rich dynamics and adaptability through different transmission methods. Mr. Yuan Ke mentioned in *The History of Chinese Myth* that after the primitive myths, mythology evolved in two directions: one towards literature, becoming mythological novels or literary works with mythological meanings; the other integrating with folklore and religion, becoming samples of local culture or folklore. Oral transmission, as the oldest form of dissemination, laid the foundation for the inheritance of primitive myths. Primitive myths have strong characteristics: their stories are often filled with numerous natural elements, focusing on depicting human worship, exploration, and conquest of unknown forces. Origin myths are a good example. After being orally transmitted for thousands of years, myths spread through songs and dances in specific regions, which, although not widely spread, maintained high information density and low separation. For instance, the origin story of Mother Butterfly in Qiandongnan, China, has been preserved in contemporary songs and reflects the rich metaphors and symbolism consistent with texts from Han Dynasty, which is almost 2000 years ago.

2.2. The Dissemination of Chinese Myths

The dissemination through books provided a platform for the fixation and standardization of mythological stories. The Legend of the White Snake is a famous love story in Chinese folklore, telling the tragic romantic relationship between the white snake spirit Bai Suzhen and the mortal Xu Xian. This story originated from oral, with no clear textual record of its earliest source. The article *A Study of the Evolutionary System of the Surviving Tales of the White Snake* points out that Feng Menglong's inclusion of "The White Lady Locked Forever in the Leifeng Pagoda" in "Stories to Caution the World" during the Ming Dynasty transformed the story from a theme of seduction to one that added "emotion" to the simple "desire", changing the female protagonist from an evil spirit to a righteous one, thus establishing the framework of "The Legend of the White Snake [4]". By the Qing Dynasty, the story was mainly expressed through operatic performances, which significantly broadened its reach.

Painting, as a visual art form, played an important role in the transformation of mythological images. As one of China's important cultural heritages, the Dunhuang murals in the Mogao Caves in Gansu Province are typical examples. The flying celestial beings (Feitian) frequently appearing in the Dunhuang murals showcase different artists' understandings and innovations of this mythological image. Through the ingenious use of color, lines, and composition, the postures and elegance of the Feitian are vividly portrayed. For example, in the mural of Cave 220, the Feitian are depicted with flowing garments and graceful postures, seemingly dancing in the air. This visual representation not only enhances the audience's direct perception of the Feitian image but also enriches the cultural connotation of this mythological figure.

Thus, we can see that oral, book, painting, and performance transmissions each play unique roles in the dissemination of myths, together constructing a multidimensional network of mythological transmission. Oral transmission, with its flexibility and immediacy, laid the foundation for mythological stories; book transmission, through detailed recording and widespread dissemination, ensured the long-term preservation and popularization of myths; painting transmission, through visual art, enhanced the directness and aesthetic value of myths; and performance transmission, through comprehensive artistic expression, enhanced the emotional expressiveness and interactivity of myths. These transmission forms, in different historical stages and cultural contexts, endowed mythological stories with new connotations and vitality, making them an important part of Chinese culture.

As we turn our attention to the contemporary era, dominated by digital media, we may ask: Is there a way to integrate multiple forms of transmission that allows mythological images and stories to adapt to the entertainment-driven development of the new era, while still tracing back to their cultural roots and historical significance?

3. Immersive Entertainment Industry

3.1. What is Immersive Entertainment?

Since 2013, following a decade of rapid development, immersive entertainment has evolved from a vague concept into a new driving force within the experience economy. In the early stages of the immersive industry in China, the concept of immersive entertainment was largely unknown to both the market and consumers. Chinese consumers were introduced into a new world through exposure to a series of internationally renowned immersive projects such as Sleep No More, Alice's Adventures Underground, The World of Money, TeamLab Borderless, ARTE MUSEUM, Avatar: Explore Pandora, and The Lost Pharaoh etc. They experienced the unique allure of immersive experiences and developed a clear understanding of what constitutes an "excellent immersive experience".

Immersive entertainment refers to experiences that deeply engage the audience, making them feel as though they are part of the story or environment. This is achieved through advanced technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR). What sets immersive entertainment apart is its ability to create a world that is both rooted in reality and independent of it, through the use of cultural themes, spatial design, sensory arts, and technological interaction. Participants in this "immersive world" gain a sense of control, security, and a desire for exploration through interactive storytelling, experiencing emotions, stories, and art in unprecedented ways. They are involved in shaping the "immersive world" or redefining their sense of self-worth. Common forms of immersive entertainment include live-action role-playing games (LARP), escape rooms, immersive theater, VR experience centers, new media art exhibitions, light and shadow art exhibitions, indoor immersive theme parks, immersive tourism performances, and edutainment.

3.2. Industry Status

By 2023, the total output value of China's immersive industry had reached an impressive 193.34 billion yuan, with expectations that it will surpass 240 billion yuan in 2024. According to the latest statistical methods from the "Fantasia International Immersive Industry Platform," among 26 countries with relatively mature immersive industries globally, China ranks first in terms of consumer

market size, investment scale, and total output value. Among the six major segments, the future of the immersive culture and tourism segment is the most favored, with its investment totaling 55.141-billion-yuan, accounting for 54.79% of the total investment in China's immersive industry (data from 2024 China Immersion Industry Report).

The user profile for immersive entertainment in China is primarily composed of individuals aged 18 to 35 in first-tier cities (data from 2024 China Immersion Industry Report). This generation has a strong curiosity and acceptance of emerging technologies and innovative experiences. They are willing to pay for unique experiences, especially those enhanced by high-tech means such as virtual reality and augmented reality. Other user groups include families, tourists, and corporate and brand clients. Families are the main consumers of immersive theme parks and parent-child entertainment projects, particularly among urban middle-class families, where immersive experiences have become a new trend in family outings. With the rise of cultural tourism, some of China's historical cities and popular tourist destinations have begun to introduce immersive performances and experience projects, attracting the attention of tourists. Additionally, some companies and brands are starting to use immersive entertainment as a means of marketing and brand promotion, using immersive experiences to attract and retain customers. For example, through immersive exhibitions or brand experience centers, user awareness and loyalty to the brand can be enhanced.

As of December 31, 2023, there were 329 types of mature immersive formats worldwide that fall within the monitoring scope of the "Fantasia International Immersive Industry Platform," 171 of which have emerged in China (data from 2024 China Immersion Industry Report). Despite the diversity within these niche markets, the immersive industry can be broadly categorized into two types: experience formats and spatial formats. The two categories are not antagonistic. They are interdependent. Experience formats are the core of immersive experiences, including performances, games, exhibitions, competitions, and music festivals. The focus here is on creativity and content creation, aiming to provide participants with unique experiences and sensations. Spatial Formats category emphasizes the physical carriers and environments of immersive experiences, such as scenic spots, neighborhoods, shopping malls, museums, and theaters. These spaces not only create immersive atmospheres but also serve as valuable assets for the industry's development.

4. Chinese Myths in Immersive Entertainment

4.1. Chinese myths as IPs

Regardless of whether it is an experience format or a spatial format, the shaping of IP (Intellectual Property) holds a crucial position. IP provides a strong content foundation for immersive entertainment projects. A successful IP usually has a rich story background, profound cultural connotations, and widespread recognition. These elements offer endless creative inspiration for immersive experience projects and establish emotional connections with audiences through familiar storylines and character images. At the same time, a successful IP can generate direct revenue through ticket sales and achieve diversified profitability through merchandise sales, content licensing, and brand partnerships. This successful business model has been fully realized in theme parks such as Disney and Universal Studios.

Myth, as an ancient cultural IP, holds significant advantages in the realm of immersive entertainment. These advantages not only enhance the appeal and cultural depth of immersive experiences but also present new opportunities for the dissemination of myths. Industry practitioners are more aware of this potential than anyone else. Within the vast market, two domains are particularly well-suited for the application and development of mythological IP: immersive cultural tourism and immersive art exhibitions. These two correspond to spatial formats and experiential formats, respectively, with mythological IP serving as the core content. The flexibility and adaptability of mythological IP allow it to shine across these different focal points.

Myths that have been passed down orally or preserved through song, dance, and theater hold unique advantages in the creation of cultural tourism IP. These stories, some of which have been

handed down since ancient times, often predate the cities in which they are told. The myths themselves carry rich historical significance, and in their places of origin, when combined with local customs, architecture, and natural landscapes, they can easily immerse visitors in a historical setting rich with legend. For example, The Elegance of Shexian, the first large-scale live tower light and shadow performance in North China, tells the story of the deep love and enduring spirit of those who protect Shexian through four chapters: "Nuwa Creates the World," "The Heroic Spirit of Zhao," "Heroes of Taihang," and "The Charm of Shexian." The performance takes place at the Wenchang Tower scenic area in Chishui Bay Ancient Town, utilizing live performances, acrobatics, theater, light shows, water screen projections, 3D mapping, flame, and fountain stage technologies. This attraction showcases how a scenic area can leverage immersive entertainment and mythological IP to create an outstanding multi-sensory cultural tourism experience.

Simultaneously, in immersive art exhibitions, mythological IP demonstrates its tremendous potential in both visual and narrative expression. Myths disseminated through painting and written texts serve as the best source material. Textually recorded myths possess several characteristics: wide dissemination, established narrative structures, and traceable evolution of character imagery. These myths provide extensive reference materials and ready-made story structures for exhibitions, leaving ample room for creative reinterpretation. For new-style art exhibitions seeking innovation within traditional culture, such content is particularly well-suited. The Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing) is a prime example. This ancient text, renowned for its geographical and mythological content, dates back to the pre-Qin period. Numerous practitioners of immersive entertainment have recreated the Classic of Mountains and Seas in the digital media space through modern artistic means such as digital projection, interactive installations, and virtual reality, underscoring the irreplaceability of such myths as content creation vehicles.

Moreover, myths primarily disseminated through painting are highly sought after in the immersive art exhibition market. Leveraging their inherent connection with art, immersive art exhibitions can comprehensively present complete mythological imagery at relatively low cost, further expanding their dissemination potential. For instance, the "Digital Dunhuang: The Flying Apsaras Myth" uses 3D light carving digital technology, 22 ultra-high-definition 4K projectors, and a projection area exceeding 1,300 square meters to present the art of the Dunhuang caves in a light and shadow format. This exhibition brings the Flying Apsaras murals out of the caves of Mogao and into the public eye, showcasing the power of immersive technology in mythological IP transmission.

4.2. New channel of communication

While myths bring exploitable content creation value to the immersive entertainment industry, a question becomes worth pondering: what can immersive entertainment bring to myths as a new type of communication medium? The dissemination of mythology faces two key challenges: traditional channels have limited reach and an aging audience, while new methods of communication, such as the internet, film, and games led neo-mysticism, retelling myths in ways that often fail to preserve the original narratives, imagery, and the historical and cultural significance of the myths [5]. In this context, the communicative value of the immersive entertainment industry may prove to be revolutionary [6].

Whether in cultural tourism or art exhibitions, immersive entertainment projects that utilize mythological IP are highly dependent on the original narrative structures and imagery of myths. This reliance allows immersive entertainment to stand out among other modern communication methods that primarily focus on deconstructing tradition and seeking innovation. Moreover, it provides a multi-sensory interactive experience that differs from traditional channels such as oral traditions, literature, and visual arts. This approach not only reinterprets myths within a contemporary environment but also expands their cultural and emotional resonance, making them more accessible and engaging to a broader audience. Traditional communication channels typically engage only one or two senses—visual and auditory. In contrast, immersive entertainment employs advanced

technologies such as augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and mixed reality (MR) to create experiences that engage multiple senses, including auditory, tactile, and olfactory [7].

For example, in immersive experiences like "Seeking the Realm of Dunhuang - Digital Dunhuang Immersive Exhibition," participants are surrounded by projections of Dunhuang's murals while also experiencing physical sensations such as soundscapes and temperature changes that simulate the desert environment.

Interactivity is another key focus of immersive entertainment. In immersive theaters or live-action role-playing games (LARP), participants can take on roles within the mythological narrative, influencing the outcome of the story through their decisions. This form of experience breaks the one-way interaction typical of traditional exhibitions, allowing the audience to become part of the story and to construct personalized interpretations and experiences through interaction with the mythological world [8].

More importantly, immersive entertainment can transcend the limitations of language, geography, and cultural context, further advancing the dissemination of mythology. By leveraging universal visual and sensory experiences, coupled with the accessibility of digital platforms, local myths can be shared with national and even global audiences. For instance, the "Digital Dunhuang" project not only allows those who cannot physically visit the Mogao Caves to learn about its art and mythology but also enables people from different cultural backgrounds to engage with and appreciate these myths. This global reach facilitates the preservation and dissemination of Chinese cultural heritage on an unprecedented scale.

5. Conclusion

This research delves into the intersection between Chinese mythology and the rapidly evolving immersive entertainment industry, highlighting the complex dynamics that arise when ancient narratives are reinterpreted through modern technology. The investigation into the adaptation of myths within immersive experiences has revealed both opportunities and challenges in preserving cultural heritage while appealing to contemporary audiences.

The study first discusses the origins of mythology and its traditional modes of transmission, followed by an examination of how myths are employed as creative material within the immersive entertainment industry. It also explores the advantages that immersive entertainment offers in the realm of communication. The research demonstrates that immersive entertainment provides a revolutionary approach to storytelling by offering a multi-sensory, interactive experience that traditional communication methods cannot match. This capability not only ensures that mythological stories resonate more deeply on an emotional and cultural level but also facilitates their dissemination to a global audience, overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers. Additionally, the strategic use of mythology in cultural tourism and art exhibitions illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of these ancient narratives within the modern entertainment landscape, ensuring their continued transmission and evolution.

In conclusion, integrating Chinese mythology into the immersive entertainment industry presents a promising avenue for both cultural preservation and innovation. As the industry continues to grow, balancing the demands of entertainment with the responsibility of preserving the integrity of these ancient stories is crucial. Future research should focus on developing frameworks that guide the ethical and culturally sensitive adaptation of myths in immersive contexts, ensuring that they remain a vital part of global cultural heritage.

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