

Modernizing Chinese Mythological IP: A Defamiliarization Analysis of "Nezha: I am the Destiny"

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Abstract: The connection between Chinese animation and mythology has existed since the beginning of its development. Mythological thinking is free and has a strong national color. This attribute provides sustained and long-term content productivity for Chinese animation creation. However, the limitations of traditional texts and the solidification of character images tend to deprive films of freshness. Excessive adaptation and innovation also make films deviate from the original cultural intention. Therefore, how to coordinate the relationship between tradition and innovation and maximize the advantages of both has become a key issue to be considered in the process of mythological IP adaptation. In the twentieth century, Russian formalism put forward the theory of "Defamiliarization" (отстранение), which was used to break down the conceptual understanding of literature. It requires things to constantly appear in a new perspective. Break the inherent understanding of art and pursue defamiliarization in the process of artistic expression. This study used the literature research method and comparative research method to gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical connotation of defamiliarization, combining the extension of defamiliarization theory by other scholars and the analysis of the current practice of defamiliarization theory in the animated film industry. The results showed that defamiliarization theory can be well extended to the field of animation film to balance the problem of the ration between tradition and innovation. With the help of the case analysis method, it showed that Chinese animated films can use the defamiliarization theory to express the contemporary characteristics of traditional texts from three aspects: artistic language, character image, and narrative theme. It hopes to provide some reference for the IP creation of animated films adapted from Chinese myths.

Keywords: Defamiliarization, Formalism, Modernization, Mythological IP, Nezha

1. Introduction

Chinese animation has experienced a glorious period of fine art films and also experienced a low period of industrial transition. Early Chinese animation blindly imitated the advanced technology and creative style of other countries, and ignored national characteristics. After 1957, the older generation of Chinese artists, mainly Shanghai Animation Film Studio, used traditional Chinese folk arts such as puppets, paper-cutting, and ink painting to create many animation works with oriental aesthetic characteristics. Since then, the Chinese animation industry has officially begun to explore the road of national style.

Due to the influence of social and economic factors, coupled with national industrial policies, an increasing number of Chinese animation films are now delving into mythological themes.

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Mythological IP has gradually shown its strong commercial value. According to the film box office statistics in mainland China, in 2015, "Monkey King: Hero is Back" won a box office of RMB 956 million by virtue of its creative adaptation of mythical stories. In 2019, the film "White Snake" based on the story of "Legend of the White Snake" (白蛇传) earned a box office of RMB 452 million, and the second part of the series "White Snake 2" had a total box office of RMB 580 million. In addition, the "FengShenYanYi" (封神演义) myth IP film "Nezha: I am the Destiny" had achieved a box office of RMB 5 billion, broke the box office record once again. However, despite the fact that traditional mythological IP has a good audience base and is easy to use as movie material, it faces a unique dilemma of survival in contemporary culture and aesthetics[1]. While only a handful of works have discovered a viable creative model, the majority are still in the exploratory stage. Therefore, it is crucial to find a method that is really suitable for the adaptation of Chinese mythology.

At present, most of the research on Chinese mythological IP focuses on the evolution of characterization, and there are few studies on the modern expression of IP as a whole. There are more studies on Nezha IP in China and fewer in other countries. Moreover, most of them focus on religious beliefs, character images, and other fields. Scholar Weiqing Zhu analyzed the evolution process of Nezha's image from different stages[2]. Scholar Yuzhe Zhou explored the epochal changes of mythological IP and analyzed the development of Chinese mythological animations in the new century with the help of multiple examples[3]. Most of the studies on defamiliarization theory analyze Shklovsky's poetics and the evolution of defamiliarization theory in the context of Russian formalism. In the field of modern expression of mythical IP, there are few articles that systematically introduce the defamiliarization theory and analyze it in combination with mythological IP adaptation cases.

It can be seen that the development of China's animated film industry is not easy to come by. There are a lot of animated movies adapted from national traditional stories. Nevertheless, such works fail to be satisfactory in the proportion and reconciliation of innovation and tradition[4]. This paper starts from the perspective of Chinese mythological IP. In the second part of the article, basic theoretical concepts and theoretical directions are identified. In the third part, by analyzing the extended research of other scholars on the defamiliarization theory, it is demonstrated that the defamiliarization theory has scalability. By comparing and analyzing current popular films, it is evident that more and more mythological IP is using defamiliarization theory to express the modern characteristics of texts. Finally, in the fourth part of this article, the most popular mythological IP film "Nezha: I am the Destiny" is used to illustrate that in the field of animated films, the modernization of mythological IP can be achieved through the defamiliarization of artistic language, character image, and narrative theme. This article aims to expand the theoretical boundaries of defamiliarization and provide certain reference significance for the development of Chinese mythological IP.

2. Literature Review

2.1 IP

"IP" is the abbreviation of "Intellectual Property" in English. It is a copyright protected product. IP can be a character, a sound, or other central object. The series of derivatives generated around this center can also be called IP.

2.1.1 Animated Film IP

Animated film IP is not equivalent to intellectual property rights, it is more like a special idea and content expression, and even reflects a value preference[5]. Animation film IP can be formed by transforming traditional IP content into the film industry, or it can be a brand-new IP developed from a

film that has been tested by the public. The essence of IP is the emotional bearing of users that has been verified by the market, or in the creative industry, the needs of users that have been verified by the market[6]. In the study of animation film IP, this paper is more inclined to define IP in the field of animation films transformed from traditional mythological texts.

2.1.2 Mythological IP and Animated Film

Chinese mythology contains a rich cultural value, and it can reflect the cultural memory of a period. The early myths were spread in oral, murals, texts, sculptures, and other ways, and after continuous improvement and reshaping, the original myth IP was formed. Myths plant the initial cultural factors for national culture, set the tone for the group's world outlook, and moral and ethical regulations in the future, and continue to mold the group's character and spirit in the inheritance of the times[7]. The rapid development of information technology in the new media era has brought a brand new development space for mythological IP. In the film and television industry, mythological IP, represented by The Monkey King and Nezha has become a popular creative material for many animated films. Returning to cultural classics and exploring national memories have also become a brand-new development trend for Chinese animation films. Mythological IP has been better disseminated with the help of animated films, and animated films have also opened up new creative ideas because of mythological IP. The combination of modern technology to develop traditional mythological IP and contemporary culture to create animation images with oriental aesthetic characteristics has become a brand new development era for China's animation industry after the era of fine art films.

2.2 "Defamiliarization" Theory

Defamiliarization theory was one of the crucial theories in Western literary theory in the twentieth century. It emphasizes the creative nature of art. The characteristic of defamiliarization is to break the automatic understanding in the aesthetic process again and again, helping art to build a new bridge of perception.

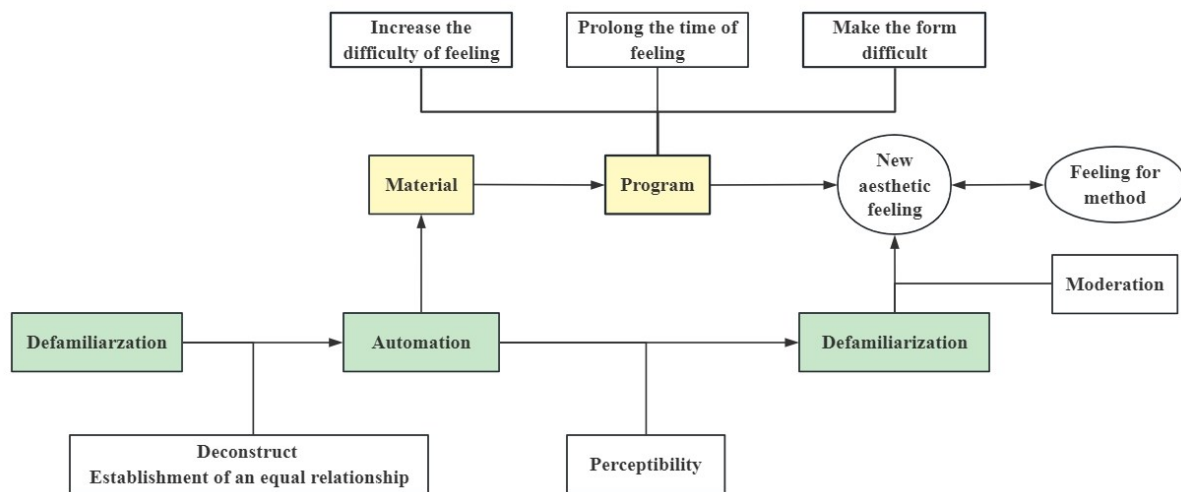
2.2.1 Defamiliarization and Formalism

Russian formalism was one of the most important theoretical schools in the West in the early 20th century. The defamiliarization theory proposed by Viktor Shklovsky was an important theoretical viewpoint of Russian formalism. In 1914, Shklovsky initially proposed the concept of "Defamiliarization" in "The Resurrection of the Word" (Воскрешение слова). In 1917 he formally expounded the "Defamiliarization" theory in his article "Art as Technique". He emphasized that the purpose of art is to make the feeling of things observable, not cognitive. The methods of literary and artistic expression are methods of making things strange, that are meant to increase the difficulty of feeling, prolong the time of feeling, and make the form difficult[8]. From the perspective of formalism, the process of defamiliarizing things is art. To put it simply, it is to break people's original feelings about things, and change the original things, feelings, and cognition through certain methods so that they appear in new forms, thereby generating a new sense of experience. The emergence of defamiliarization has successfully shifted the field of vision of literary criticism from external research to internal research[9]. It is of great significance in the field of literary criticism.

2.2.2 Theory Structure

Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory is essentially a multi-dimensional structure [Fig. 1]. It turns from defamiliarization to automation and finally returns to defamiliarization. The whole process is integrated. The defamiliarization of artistic methods attracts the appreciators to establish an equal relationship and

enter the stage of automatic communication. The creators process the materials procedurally such as deformation, destruction, and expansion, so that the materials get a sense of strangeness, thereby stimulating a new aesthetic effect and gaining artistic experience. The process of defamiliarization practice is not only a process in which materials are processed into works of art through programming, but also a process in which creators establish contact with recipients through works of art to promote their aesthetic perception[10]. The essence of defamiliarization is the embodiment of creativity. Through the encryption or decryption of materials to achieve the creative deformation of reality, and the "blocking" and "delay" of the artistic perception process. In the process of procedurally changing materials, it is crucial to maintain the perceptibility of art and control the degree of cognitive bias. The existence of art is to restore the feeling of life[8]. The meaning of defamiliarization is to awaken people's perception of old things, so the object of defamiliarization is the content associated with the past, not a brand-new object.

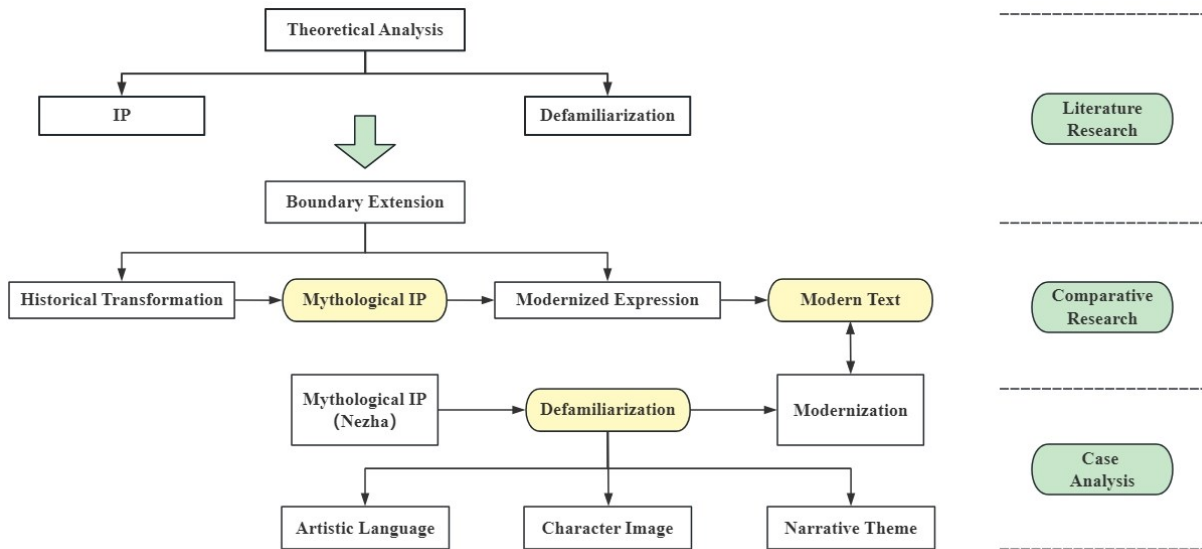


[Fig. 1] "Defamiliarization" Theory Structure

3. Boundary Extension of "Defamiliarization"

3.1 Research Methods

The paper began by identifying the basic theoretical concepts with the help of literature research method and defined the connotations and conditions of application of the theory of defamiliarization in the period of Russian formalism. The main logical framework of the process of theoretical practice was also sorted out. With the help of the comparative research method, the theoretical boundaries were extended. The historical transformation of defamiliarization was analyzed by comparing the secondary elaborations of defamiliarization theory by scholars in different periods. Then, combined multiple popular mythological IP works to compare the performance differences between the source text and the movie text. Based on the above characteristics, it was shown that the defamiliarization theory could be well adapted to the artistic expression method in the modern context. The addition of modern elements helped traditional texts achieve the defamiliarization in artistic expression. Finally, on the basis of the research results, combined with the case "Nezha: I am the Destiny", the application strategy of defamiliarization theory in the modern context was discussed in depth from three aspects: artistic language, character image, and narrative theme. It further verified that in the modern context, defamiliarization theory gave traditional texts new modern features [Fig. 2].



[Fig. 2] Research Process Framework

3.2 Research Process

3.2.1 The Historical Transformation of Defamiliarization

The discussion about "Defamiliarization" first appeared in the Poetics of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. In 1917, Shklovsky systematically expounded the defamiliarization theory, and applied it in the field of literary criticism, highlighting the artistic characteristics of literature. Defamiliarization theory, as the core theory of Russian formalism, is not only used in literature. With the development of the times, defamiliarization theory has been continuously researched and improved by many scholars, and it has also played an important role in other fields.

The "Defamiliarization Effect" (Verfremdungseffekt) proposed by the German dramatist and poet Bertolt Brecht in the field of drama has a strong connection with Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory. Its emphasis is on stripping away the self-evident, well-known and obvious things of events or characters, so that people will be surprised and curious about them[11]. He extended the defamiliarization theory to drama art, and focused the theoretical focus on artistic expression and skills. The distance between the audience and the stage is treated with the defamiliarization effect, so as to obtain a real aesthetic judgment.

Inspired by the defamiliarization theory, Herbert Marcuse, the main figure of the Frankfurt School, put forward the "New Sensibility" theory, emphasizing the negative function of art. This is the redevelopment of the defamiliarization theory in the dimension of Marxism. He linked defamiliarization with the negative function of literature, negating the current highly rationalized social system with the aesthetic form of culture and art[12]. Through the method of defamiliarization, the public's perceptual knowledge can be liberated and a new space for thinking can be obtained.

Defamiliarization theory has gone through multiple periods of absorption and improvement, breaking through the initial field of literary criticism and entering a more open theoretical space. The rapid development of information technology has provided a new stage for the practice of defamiliarization theory. More and more scholars have combined defamiliarization with current media art for research, realizing the expansion of theoretical research and the exploration of practical research. Traditional mythological IPs, as objects of defamiliarization, restore the "Sensibility" of thinking with the help of defamiliarization theory, thereby obtaining a new artistic effect. This process is a process of artistic aesthetics, and it is also a process in which traditional culture obtains new opportunities for development.

3.2.2 The Modernized Expression of Defamiliarization

The advent of the new media era has provided a new stage for media convergence. More and more traditional texts are presented in the public eye in a new way. The following table lists the more popular animated films adapted from mythology IP in recent years [Table 1]. By comparing the characteristics of traditional texts and film texts, the reasons why classic mythological IP can still gain super popularity after many adaptations were analyzed, and the modernization characteristics of mythological texts under the background of defamiliarization theory were studied upon.

[Table 1] Content Comparison

	Film Name	Main Character	Source Text Characteristics	Film Characteristics	Artistic Change
Journey to the West	Monkey King: Hero is Back	The Monkey King	An oriental hero with strong fighting power and a strong sense of justice	Find your original heart in the adventure journey and complete self-salvation	Combining with the times to recreate the characters and plots, emphasizing the process of returning from devilish to humanity
	Monkey King Reborn			Emphasis on the battle with the demon ancestors on the way to learn the scriptures	An extension of the story with new emotions
Legend of the White Snake	White Snake	Xiao Bai, Xiao Qing	A love story between a snake demon and a human	Five hundred years ago. The love story between Xiao Bai and Xu Xian's previous life	The great transformation of the character image, the modern expression
	White Snake 2			Xiao Qing's experience and growth in the process of saving lives	A new perspective of characters, adding modern scenes
Feng Shen YanYi	Nezha: I am the Destiny	Nezha	Heroes of justice	The characters are demonized, highlighting the resistance to fate	Both the characters and the story have added modern elements to achieve the defamiliarization
	New Gods: Nezha Reborn			In modern society, the confrontation between Nezha and the Dragon Clan	Added elements of modern society and cyberpunk style
	New Gods: Yang Jian	Yang Jian	Three eyes Handsome god of war	The image of a down-and-out handsome guy under the aesthetics of the modern public	Costumes and scenes have been changed in a modern style
	Legend of Deification	Jiang Ziya	Wise Almighty savior	Lose powers Find himself	Add the workplace status quo in contemporary society

The comparison of the above films shows a common feature. The creators have more or less added modern elements on the basis of the source text of the myth, breaking the audience's inherent understanding of the mythological IP and enhancing the fun. The cultural background possessed by the mythological IP makes it easier to shorten the distance between the film and the audience and achieve better publicity effects. The visual expressiveness of the film and the anthropomorphism of the animation fully restore the audience's imagination of the mythological story.

3.3 Research Results

Different eras can feel different things[13]. The addition of modern elements breaks the audience's automatic cognition, pulls the gods in the audience's inherent consciousness from the altar into real life, creates a sense of strangeness in art, and thus obtains a new aesthetic experience. Replace "cultural traditions and habits" with "originality and defamiliarization"[14]. This is the same core concept emphasized by the defamiliarization theory. The adaptation and creation of Chinese animated films is based on the source text, taking the social life and the spirit of the times of the contemporary people as the reference point, and based on the traditional mythological originals for "defamiliarization" adaptation[15]. It shows that in modern society, the boundary of defamiliarization theory can be extended to the field of animated films. Helping traditional mythological texts to exercise their freedom of thinking, liberating the audience's rational understanding, and feeling the charm of mythological texts in a more emotional way. The reasonable use of defamiliarization theory makes mythological IP present certain modern characteristics on the basis of retaining the cultural core of the source text.

4. The Modernized Expression Strategy of "Nezha: I am the Destiny"

4.1 The Defamiliarization of Artistic Language

When talking about defamiliarization, Shklovsky once pointed out that artistic language is an important condition and guarantee for realizing defamiliarization[16]. In films, artistic language can be divided into non-natural language dominated by shots and music, and natural language dominated by dialogue and narration.

4.1.1 Non-natural Language

The movie incorporates a large number of modern elements to help mythological IP achieve defamiliarization. In the film, in addition to using the "Eight Diagram"(八卦图) to unlock the password, the "Seven-colored Lotus"(七色宝莲) can also be unlocked with fingerprints. In the "Shanhe State Drawing"(山河社稷图) you can not only experience the roller coaster but also the whitewater rafting. In terms of music, different instruments are used to highlight different characters' personalities. Adding western music elements to traditional Chinese music broke the audience's "Automatic" thinking and gained a new aesthetic experience. When Nezha is playing hide-and-seek with the villagers in the village, the movie borrows a classic scene from the game "Whac-A-Mole" to enhance the effect. In the "Shanhe State Drawing", the movie also borrows a classic scene from the game "3D Pinball" to emphasize the intensity of the fight [Fig. 3]. These images show a perfect combination of traditional texts and modern elements, awakening a sense of familiarity in the viewer's memory.



[Fig. 3] Game Scenes Featured in the Film

4.1.2 Natural Language

In Chinese mythology, "Taiyi Zhenren"(太乙真人) is a god image with high mana, but it is given comedy in the film. Unlike other characters, his lines are presented in Sichuan dialects. Compared with dialects in other parts of China, Sichuan dialects are easier to understand. The unique affinity and appeal of dialects create a relaxed and happy atmosphere for the film. In addition, Qianyuan Mountain, where Taiyi Zhenren is located in the original story, is in Sichuan Province. Therefore, this movie adds brand-new elements of the era to the historical background of the original character, highlighting the defamiliarization effect.

Shen Gongbao(申公豹) has a constant problem of stuttering from the very first words of his appearance. The speech defect makes him miss many opportunities and creates many misunderstandings. At the same time, the incoherence of the language creates an imaginative space for the audience, and the fragmented language provides a sense of anticipation in the aesthetic process. This trait of the characters contributes to many of the movie's famous scenes. Anarthria is a habitual speech defect, a complex speech disorder involving genetic predisposition, psychological pressure, and many other aspects[17]. The film weakens the language function in him in such a way and indirectly reflects his inner insecurities, low self-esteem, and stress. The language defamiliarization processing fits well with the character's image and suggests the prejudice and unfair treatment he has experienced, which echoes the theme of the film.

4.2 The Defamiliarization of Character Image

The whole story of the film revolves around gods. In the inherent understanding of mythology, gods should be high, majestic, and serious. However, in the film "Nezha: I am the Destiny", the characters have been given modern emotions, weakening the divinity, and highlighting humanity.

"Nezha" in the traditional myth text is a god of war that represents justice. He's a handsome young boy with an iconic magic weapon. The film "Nezha: I am the Destiny" broke the audience's inherent understanding of Nezha with the added modern elements such as shark teeth, smoky makeup, and straight bangs to the character design. In the film, Nezha reverts to his handsome teenage image after his transformation, but he still has certain modernized features in his body. The entire figure is surrounded by flames and his eyes reveal a murderous aura [Fig. 4]. In the character image, the spirit of resistance is added. In the face of unfair fate and the prejudice of the world, Nezha dares to fight. In terms of character quality, the nature of goodness is retained. Even if it is born into a demon, it has never harmed anyone, but is just eager to get the recognition of the world. The correct ratio of tradition and innovation has created the image of a successful modernized Nezha.



[Fig. 4] The Image of Nezha in Different Periods

In portraying Mrs. Yin, Nezha's mother, the film retains the traditional background of the character and adds the good qualities of a modern woman. The change in Mrs. Yin's image strikes a great balance between tradition and innovation. In the film, Mrs. Yin represents not only a mother, but also a female image of the new era. As a mother, she can bravely protect her child. As a wife, she can bear the responsibility of guarding the people. In her, one can see not only the sense of independence of women in the era of gender equality but also the difficulty of balancing family and career as a mother in modern society. Mrs. Yin's modernized image not only realizes the defamiliarization of mythical characters, but also accelerates the manifestation of perceptibility in the aesthetic process.

4.3 The Defamiliarization of Narrative Theme

4.3.1 Changes in Emotional Expression

In the mythological source text, Nezha and Aobing are absolutely hostile. However, in the film, they become each other's only friend. Aobing shoulders the mission of national rejuvenation. Similar to Nezha, his life is also surrounded by prejudice. Nezha and Aobing are two sides of the same coin, they are friends, brothers, and comrades in arms[18]. The film weakened emotional conflicts and highlighted brotherhood.

In the original, Li Jing is stubborn and feudalistic, willing to kill his son to quell the conflict. There is an irreconcilable conflict between the two. However, the film has a defamiliarization take on the mythological father-son relationship, weakening the conflict between father and son. Transforming Li Jing from a stereotypical cowardly feudal parent to a stern but loving father. The image of the father, who is inexpressive but quietly giving, is in line with the real family relationship in contemporary Chinese society. The defamiliarization treatment of the character's emotion is infused with the aesthetic characteristics of contemporary art, making the mythological IP more realistic. As Chinese society grows with time, so does Chinese mythological IP. The defamiliarization treatment of the characters' emotions exceeds the audience's aesthetic expectations, yet arouses the audience's emotional resonance, highlighting the love between father and son.

4.3.2 Changes in Content Positioning

"Nezha: I am the Destiny" gives full play to Chinese Taoist thought. Instead of the traditional story of obedience to fate, it emphasizes the spirit of resistance to the injustice of fate. "I am the Destiny" is the core idea of the whole film, which is the same as the Taoist concept of fate. The film gives Nezha the spirituality of subjectivity, that is, the human subjective initiative, or the individual's "Cognitive Ability"[14]. It injects contemporary characteristics to the mythological IP. Nezha's courage and perseverance in resisting fate is not only a sublimation of Taoist spirituality, but also a reflective image of contemporary society. There is no absolute good and evil in the world. The right direction for education and a relaxed growth environment are the fundamental conditions for the achievement of goodness. The whole film, broke the audience's automated understanding of mythological stories, injected the contemporary elements of the times. It embodies the defamiliarization of the traditional text and highlights the familiarity of the social scenes. Modernization and defamiliarization are used to replace tradition and custom. Elevating the height of artistic aesthetics to the spiritual level, and achieving the effect of both familiar and unfamiliar artistic expression.

Traditional Chinese animation mostly focuses on children as the main viewing group, and has certain limitations in content creation. On the contrary, animation works in the United States, Japan, and South Korea have long broken through the age limit and entered a brand new creative space. They reserve the fun of the source text and use the defamiliarization theory to join a modernized language and cultural background to meet the demand for film viewing at all ages. In the eyes of children, it is a

wonderful scene and an interesting plot. In the eyes of adults, it is a reflection of reality. The modern performance of the film has expanded the scope of the film viewing group. It helps more audiences transform from the "companion" to "experienter", and from the dependent group to an independent film viewer[18]. On the basis of respecting traditional culture, the defamiliarization of the film and the highlighting of the modernization effect have become an important reason for its success.

5. Conclusions

Chinese mythology is the origin of Chinese national spirit and culture and is a treasure trove of excellent materials in the process of artistic creation. As an emerging art media, animated films have become a good medium for retelling myths. However, the lack of theoretical guidance and the difficulty of grasping the boundaries between tradition and innovation have become the main problems in the development of mythological IPs. A modernized application of defamiliarization theory can balance these issues greatly. With the help of Shklovsky's defamiliarization theory, this paper links the mythological text with the modernized context. Combining the historical development of defamiliarization theory and its current use in animated films show that defamiliarization theory can be well extended to the field of animated films. The inherent background of mythological IP ensures the perceivability of art, and the addition of modernized elements brings the aesthetic distance closer. Hence, applying defamiliarization theory in a modern context effectively balances tradition and innovation, shaping the aesthetic appeal of art to align with contemporary society.

The analysis of "Nezha: I am the Destiny" confirms the above viewpoint and provides a method for the modernizing practice of defamiliarization theory. Mythological IP can express modernity with the help of the defamiliarization of artistic language, the defamiliarization of character images, and the defamiliarization of narrative themes. The modernized use of the theory of defamiliarization provides room for the modernization development of traditional texts. Of course, this study still has certain shortcomings. There are still some limitations in the selection of cases, the manifestation of the zeitgeist, and the correlation effect of theories. Future research could benefit from integrating other theories to conduct a more comprehensive study from various perspectives.

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