

OLD STORIES RETOLD:
THE ADAPTATION OF TRADITIONAL STORIES
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FANTASY NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the process by which contemporary Chinese authors and film directors reshape traditional fantastic tales to develop new narratives. In order to interrogate the ingrained hierarchy of male over female, adult over child, and Chinese culture over foreign influence within traditional Chinese stories, contemporary adapters employ innovative narrative techniques to create transgressive space. To better scrutinize these narrative innovations and their thematic significance, this project brings together a range of methodologies that include textual analysis, concepts from cognitive studies, especially conceptual blending and script and schema theory, Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony, intertextuality and carnivalesque, and, more generally, cultural studies and ideological criticism. The study of adaptation in Chinese fantasy, as an interactive dialogue between studies of adaptation and retelling in the West and East Asia, contributes to the academic examination of the complicated negotiation between the past and the present, tradition and the modern, the elite and the popular, the East and the West, and text and reality in a globalized and postmodern world.

The focus of the thesis on fantasy narratives entails a primary corpus that ranges from contemporary film adaptations addressing an adult or young adult audience to **children's fiction and picture books. Approaching fantasy fiction as a literary** subgenre, my project situates the genre studies of fantasy developed by Western critics within a Chinese context. However, academic discussion of fantasy fiction in **China tends to emphasize the "imported" and "Westernized" components of this** genre, ignoring the rich and long history of local fantastic traditions. By bridging contemporary fantasy and classical canonical works, modern commercial texts and ancient high culture works, my project enacts a dialogical mode of discourse based on local cultural traditions and global influences, and thus crosses boundaries between studies of classical and modern Chinese literature, and between Western fantasy theories and Chinese fantasy texts. The investigation of the process of textual transformation also takes into consideration shifting social-historical contexts and seeks to discover the changing and unchanging metanarratives behind stories and their ideological implications for modern society. My examination of the relationship between fantasy and reality in the adaptation process focuses particularly on the

potential of some retellings to interrogate and resist the conservative ideologies of their pre-texts.

The first chapter lays the theoretical basis for the whole project by providing a literature review of adaptation studies and then introducing other analytical frameworks that are part of the methodology. The next five chapters are case studies, in which each chapter deals with a separate subgenre of traditional tales and their contemporary adaptations. Chapter 2 addresses the transformation of Chinese mythology, as represented by *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, in modern texts **including picture books, blockbuster films, and children's fantasy novels**. By virtue of the fragmental nature of Chinese mythology, bricolage adaptation based on a practice akin to Hiroki **Azuma's "database mode"** prompts readers to excavate a **myth's multiple pre-texts** and compare the difference made by authors. During this process opportunities arise to expose and interrogate the metanarrative implicit in the myth. Chapter 3 focuses on the metamorphoses of a folkloric script of interspecies romance, as exemplified by *The Cowherd and The Weaver Girl* and *The Legend of the White Snake*. Particular attention is paid to feminist revisionist retellings of this folklore material and the radical or compromised ways they dismantle the male-centered and adult-centered metanarratives. Chapter 4 turns to **ghost stories epitomized by the Qing dynasty author Pu Songling's tales**. This chapter reviews the multiple cultural meanings behind the ghost, both as a literal entity and a metaphor, and then discusses how contemporary adaptations construct analogies between ghosts and such marginalized members of society as women and children. Chapter 5 takes up the classical novel *Journey to the West* and examines how two contemporary young adult adaptations use the Monkey King figure to symbolize both youth identity and national image. Chapter 6 addresses a local literature genre, martial arts fiction, and its modernization and transformation in a global era. As a Chinese indigenous genre corresponding to Western fantasy, the recent reshaping of martial arts novels and films functions as a good example through which to inspect the confrontation between the two generations of young and old and the two cultures of East and West. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are thematically linked by their focus on the feminist revision of patriarchal ideology and on the promotion of a more equal relationship between repressed child subject and adult authority. Chapters 5 and 6 are also concerned with intergenerational conflict between youth and adults, and

they further call attention to the opposition between nationalism and multiculturalism in contemporary China.

STATEMENT OF CANDIDATE

I certify that the work in this thesis entitled **“Old stories retold: the adaptation of traditional stories in contemporary Chinese fantasy narratives”** has not previously been submitted for a degree, nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree, to any university or institution other than Macquarie University.

I also certify that the thesis is an original piece of research and that it has been written by me. Any help and assistance that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself have been appropriately acknowledged.

In addition, I certify that all information sources and literatures used are indicated in the thesis.

Yue Wang (Student ID:)

INTRODUCTION

The modern and contemporary adaptations of traditional stories enjoy constant popularity all around the world, to the extent that every generation tends to produce their own version of the most beloved stories and tales. Among the many modern genres, fantasy may be the one that has the closest relationship with old stories.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, especially after 2010, China's bustling film industry has experienced a boom of fantasy blockbusters based on classical literary novels and tales.¹ The classical literary works these films are based on embrace a wide range of historical periods and a diverse range of genres, from the legendary story of White Snake, which originated in a Song Dynasty *huaben* (话本) and circulated mainly in vernacular stories and dramas in the Ming and Qing eras, to the masterpieces of the Ming Dynasty vernacular novels *Investiture of the Gods* (封神演义) and *Journey to the West* (西游记), to Pu Songling's (蒲松龄) *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (聊斋志异), a tale collection dating back to the Qing Dynasty written in Classical Chinese and which has been influential in its time and afterwards.² From this list, we envisage that it is the familiar stories that often adapted. However, as Linda Hutcheon notes, they are adapted not only because they *are* familiar, but because they *should be* familiar (“Harry Potter” 173, original italics). They are stories that are worth knowing, for they are part of the cultural capital and social heritage of one culture, “transmitting many of a culture's central values and assumptions and a body of shared allusions and experiences” (Stephens and McCallum 3).

¹ The big screens in myriad cinemas have been occupied by these films: Cheang Pou-soi's (郑保瑞) *The Monkey King* trilogy (西游记, 2014, 2016, and 2018); Stephen Chow and Derek Kwok's (周星驰, 郭子健) *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons* (西游降魔篇, 2013) and its sequel, *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back* (西游伏妖篇, directed by Tsui Hark 徐克, 2017); Ching Siu-Tung's (程小东) *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* (白蛇传说, 2011); Wilson Yip's (叶伟信) *A Chinese Ghost Story* (倩女幽魂, 2011); Gordon Chan's (陈嘉上) *Painted Skin* (画皮, 2008) and its sequel *Painted Skin: The Resurrection* (画皮 II 转生术, directed by Wu Ershan 乌尔善, 2012); Koan Hui's (许安) *League of Gods* (封神传奇, 2016); and the list goes on. In 2019, the third film of *Painted Skin* is confirmed for release, and Wu Ershan's ambiguous *Fengshen Trilogy* (封神) is intended to screen in 2020.

² In this project, names of Asian origin are listed surname first. For works published in English, names are listed as they are published, typically in Western form. Author names such as Jin Hezai and Li Duan are Internet pseudonyms and transliteration will be used. If a novel or a film has been distributed internationally with an English-language title, I will use that title, with original titles following. Non-English words and phrases are italicized.

Besides being lucrative, retold classics bear significant cultural and ideological functions. The values and ideologies which implicitly prescribe the parameters of traditional stories are historically contingent and culturally constructed entities. In the Chinese context, traditional stories are nevertheless produced and circulated under male-, adult-, and Chinese culture-centred metanarratives generated by **Confucianism. This value system was centrally concerned with the question of “how to establish a harmonious secular order in a man-centered world” (King 65). In other words, the belief in the superiority of male over female, of adult over children, and of Chinese culture over other cultures are the three metanarratives ingrained in the pre-modern stories and tales from myths to folktales to full-length genre fictions. These metanarratives, when confronted with globalized impact brought by the narratives of feminist, children’s well-being, and multiculturalism in a postmodern world, are under severe challenge. In the meantime, traditional stories also provide a counter voice for people who wish to formulate and propose a local identity without imported influence, in an attempt to resist the unbalanced cultural exchange brought by globalization. Therefore, adaptation becomes a battlefield where conflicting powers are engaging and contesting. In the postsocialist Chinese context, such contestation is complicated and intensified by a social background composed of an economic capitalist system (a fiercely competitive society and corresponding high expectation on the intellectual and profit-making ability of new members in society) and political dictatorship (a largely normative society and rigid cultural censorship). The newly adopted market system and its pursuit of profit is part of the reason why so many film and other media adaptations of classical literature have appeared recently, and the political and cultural factors are responsible for the changed, or unchanged, messages conveyed by these adaptations.**

This study engages with three power relationships visible in the adaptation of old materials in contemporary society: male and female, child and adult, and local and global. The power struggle within the three domains is manifested in the textual transformation from ancient tradition to modern and contemporary discourse. In foregrounding the centrality of ideology in the transformations of stories, I aim to offer a critical reflection of adaptation works in the contemporary Chinese context. According to John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, “the ideological effect of a retold text is generated from a three-way relationship between the already-given story, the metanarrative(s) which constitutes its top-down framing, and its bottom-up

discoursal processes” (4). To better unravel the power relations in the top-down ideological frameworks, I focus on the bottom-up production of narrative discourses. The formal and aesthetic aspects of narrative discourses, including both the cutting and expansion of characters, story events, and the shift in chronotope, focalization, and language style, have an impact on the **readers’ comprehension and** understanding of the stories as well as the reinforcement and contestation of the grounding metanarratives. In delineating the transformation of traditional stories across a wide range of genres and mediums, this dissertation hopes to shed new light on issues such as gender and status hierarchy, marriage and family life, in-group/out-group distinction, authority, fate, heroism, loyalty, duty, and the moral binarism of good and evil. In combination of ideological interrogation and formal and aesthetic analysis, this study seeks to provide an empirically as well as theoretically rigorous examination of adaptation in a Chinese context. On the one hand, the cultural and historical specificity of Chinese examples are fully acknowledged, while on the other hand, the Chinese adaptations are integrated into a world history of adaptation rather than held apart as unique. This study of adaptation in Chinese fantasy, as an interactive dialogue between studies of adaptation and retelling in the West and East Asia, contributes to the academic examination of the complicated negotiation between the past and the present, tradition and the modern, the elite and the popular, the East and the West, and text and reality in a globalized and postmodern world.

Methodology

Existing studies of adaptation in Chinese context have generally failed to emphasize the crucial role readers have played in the story understanding process. They are either medium-centred or text/author-centred. Many studies of the film adaptation of literature have been devoted to the specific relationship between two mediums and they usually tend to emphasize medium specificity even though not prioritizing one over the other. Other studies may provide an extended and detailed case study of one specific story cycle. Such diachronic readings offer meticulous examinations, but are sometimes inclined to ignore the synchronic relationship between contemporary adaptations of other works. As Hutcheon remarks on various adaptations of one specific text, multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically (*A Theory of Adaptation* xv). Even though these versions are produced chronologically, readers and audiences

do not necessarily experience them in the same order. Similarly, many adaptations of different works also exist laterally, and to better understand adaptation in contemporary China as a creative art as well as a cultural practice, we need more inclusive methods and more general scope. A more nuanced and balanced method is required in adaptation studies, as Kamilla Elliott aptly articulates,

Formal and cultural, textual and contextual approaches to adaptation need to be synthesized rather than existing side by side if we are to develop any adequate understanding of adaptation, because formal and cultural and textual and contextual aspects inhere in each other complexly and inextricably (584).

The concepts from cognitive literary criticism are a good tool to achieve synthesized formal and cultural, textual and contextual approaches suggested by Elliott. The compatibility of cognitive literary criticism with adaptation studies is discernible in many levels. Theories of scripts and schemas are effective because they capture the amorphous and multiple forms of one particular traditional story and compress them into a recognizable action sequence. Such a sequence is conceptual rather than **materialized, since they are embedded in readers' minds instead of being recorded in documents**. Therefore, a change in the script functions as a purposeful play with **readers' cognitive recognition, and meaning is born out of readers' negotiation** between old and new inputs. In the comprehension of adaptations whose narrative discourses are explicitly distinguished from their source materials, **readers' "intertextual expectations about certain medium and genre, as well as about this specific work, are brought to the forefront of our attention"** (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* 22). This is in no way passive reading and reception. Instead, readers are cognitively active in their comparison and making sense of a new narrative which both resembles and departs from the narrative they know and are familiar with. The **deviation from an expected sequence has the potential to unmask the familiar script's hidden normative force, and thus "the ability of master narratives to occlude the contingency and variability of norms for conduct" will be exposed** (Herman, *Narrative Theory* 173). Deviation instead suggests new possibilities: if not necessarily progressive in ideology, it will nevertheless bring to light the capacity of the human mind to **"imagine other possibilities for action"** (Herman, *Narrative Theory* 173).

Conceptual blending in general and glocalization in particular prove to be helpful because the modern and contemporary reincarnations of fantastic narratives are nevertheless prompted by the imported and highly popular works produced in the Western fantasy tradition. Therefore, a project on adaptations of ancient classical literature not only entails a negotiation between literary inheritance and contemporary concerns but also indigenous tradition and global influence. Blended and hybrid texts result from such an interaction of different cultures and traditions. Blending is also a primary means of script refreshment and update. Adaptations as reversions do not usually entail a full-scale changeover of the old story; rather, they are inclined to blend old and new scripts to produce narratives both familiar and defamiliarized.

The role emotion plays in the process of adaptation is especially significant. For Hogan, the sequence of **a story and a certain genre is “inseparable from the operation of our emotion systems”** and **“the structures of stories and works are largely incomprehensible without reference to those systems”** (*Affective Narratology* 124). **Readers’ engagement with adapted** works are inseparable from their affect towards the original work, and professional adapters may be driven by the same affective impulse to retell their favorite story. The application of affective narratology into adaptations works to enrich the understanding of **“adaptation as a more subjective, fannish process”** (Louttit 181). **Being affective does not necessarily mean being** uncritical and unreflective; instead, the process of the production and reception of adaptation works in the interaction between an incisive critical reading and a subjective and affective appreciation of both the adapters and audiences.

Cognitive literary criticism provides heuristic tools to examine adaptation in a deeper and more nuanced way. This interdisciplinary perspective locates this study at the intersection of China studies, adaptation studies, media and communications studies, and East Asian pop cultural studies. The broad array of materials from diverse genres and periods enables this study to traverse the divide between modern and pre-modern in Chinese literary studies and bridge genre studies and ideological critics.

Chapter Overview

The structure of subsequent chapters is broadly around crucial genres in folk narrative and literature: adaptations of myths, folktales, classic literary texts, martial arts fiction, and so on. I am not attempting to produce a comprehensive and encyclopedic research into adaptation, and my corpus could not include all the contemporary fantasy narratives which include elements from traditional resources. Instead, my discussion will limit itself to the detailed analysis of several key texts which adapt traditional genres.

In Chapter 1, I delineate a Chinese literary tradition of the fantastic and supernatural before the notion of fantasy as a modern Western genre came into China. This tradition starts from ancient myths, then goes into strange tales in the Six Dynasties, Tang tales *chuangqi*, vernacular novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties represented by *Journey to the West*, and martial arts fiction which flourished in the Republican Era. Among this Chinese fantastic tradition, I choose several seminal canonical works which are most popular and influential among generations of readers and thus **become part of the nation's cultural capital. They are either incorporated into the** educational curriculum or are upheld as the cultural icon of Chinese identity (Monkey King or the martial arts and kung fu films), and are naturally retold and adapted endlessly. They also embody significant ideological values and expectations that legitimate certain preferred actions and attitudes. I choose these works for their popularity as well as their profound cultural and ideological influence.

As for the modern and contemporary adaptations of these canonical works, which are the primary corpus under examination, I have selected a group of titles that have achieved notable local and global fame and texts that have attained cult status among contemporary audiences. I tend to choose materials that are symptomatic of the ideological negotiation between the old and the new, the progressive and the conservative. My principal purpose is to disclose the ways contemporary adaptations of traditional stories either repeat and reinforce the metanarratives or resist and change them. To serve this purpose, I choose works whose thematic concerns differ in nuanced ways in order that my analyses trace some of the diverse means by which popular culture has been informed by the traditional narratives as well as to illuminate the different strategies adaptations have employed to encourage audiences to reflect upon the conservative metanarratives. Therefore, I include broad materials

across genres and reader age groups. Apart from retold fantasy fictions, I also include picture books, films, and TV series. Although my primary concern is focused on Chinese works produced by Mainland Chinese authors in the Chinese language, occasionally I do include some works from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Chinese diasporan communities written in either Chinese or English. I also try to situate my research within the broader context of East Asian popular culture and even the global cultural field and thus try to engage in a dialogue between China, East Asia, and the West on topics of adaptation studies and fantasy literature.

The first chapter lays the theoretical basis for the whole project by providing a literature review of adaptation studies and then introducing analytical frameworks that are part of the methodology. After a brief review of the genre studies of fantasy in Western academia, the latter part of Chapter 1 provides a contextualisation of Chinese fantasy tradition and its status quo. At the end of Chapter 1, I argue that the three power relations between male and female, adult and child, Chinese culture and foreign culture are the grounding metanarratives of traditional stories under examination, and the following chapters provide illustrations of the contestation of these metanarratives in contemporary adaptations.

The next five chapters are case studies, in which each chapter deals with a separate subgenre of traditional tales and their contemporary adaptations. Traditional genres are generally presented in a chronological order. The chapters are organized by thematic concerns. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are thematically linked by their focus on the feminist revision of patriarchal ideology and on the promotion of a more equal relationship between repressed child subject and adult authority. Chapter 2 on the transformation of Chinese mythology touches these two power relations. The discussion of the retelling of the story of Nüwa in picture books examines the patriarchal ideology at work, while the discussions of Li Duan's myth-retelling series and Peng Yi's children fantasy novel investigate the generational continuation and conflict between young and old members in Chinese society. Chapter 3 focuses on the metamorphoses of a folkloric script of interspecies romance, as exemplified by *The Legend of the White Snake* (白蛇传). Particular attention is paid to feminist revisionist retellings of this folklore material and the radical or compromised ways they dismantle the male-centered and adult-centered metanarratives. Chapter 4 turns to ghost stories epitomized by the Qing Dynasty author Pu Songling's tales.

This chapter reviews the multiple cultural meanings behind the ghost, both as a literal entity and a metaphor, and then discusses how contemporary adaptations construct analogies between ghosts and such marginalized members of society as women and children.

Chapters 5 and 6 are also concerned with the intergenerational conflict between youth and adults, and they further call attention to the opposition between nationalism and multiculturalism in contemporary China. Chapter 5 takes up the classical novel *Journey to the West* and examines how two contemporary young adult adaptations use the Monkey King figure to symbolize both youth identity and national image. Chapter 6 addresses a local literature genre, martial arts fiction, and its modernization and transformation in a global era. As a Chinese indigenous genre corresponding to Western fantasy, the recent reshaping of martial arts novels and films functions as a good example through which to inspect the confrontation between the two generations of young and old and the two cultures of East and West.

This study of adaptation in Chinese fantasy, as an interactive dialogue between studies of adaptation and retelling in the West and East Asia, contributes to the academic examination of the complicated negotiation between the past and the present, tradition and the modern, the elite and the popular, the East and the West, and text and reality in a globalized and postmodern world.