

Original Article

The Fengshen Universe: Transmedia World-Building and Cultural IP of Fengshen Yanyi

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Abstract - This study surveys the ongoing adaptation of Fengshen yanyi (Investiture of the Gods) in China's changing media ecology and offers the working concept of a "Fengshen Universe" to make sense of a new pattern of overlapping film, animation, and digital projects with cross-media engagement. Grounded on a literature review and a case-based exploration of some recent titles, it argues that two primary modes of adaptation have come to the fore, a blockbuster mode centered on a historical-fantasy world and a remake mode driven by the reproduction of key characters in animation; and that these two modes are influenced by three dynamic and mutually reinforcing forces, social changes, public taste, and new media. The study maps out what is carried over or redefined in the canonical cosmological framework, value system (agency, filiality, pedagogy), and plot configuration, and how publics are accommodated by selective re-employment. The role of transmedia strategies and fan engagement is highlighted in the extension of coverage and maintenance of public interest. The study also has implications for the industry as the adaptation of a popular classic into a shared universe could form a strong cultural IP, and that studios with transmedia planning and coordination are more likely to establish strong brand; but it is also found that in general, limited by worldbuilding, intertextual coordination, and lack of experience in IP governance, the story world of Fengshen has yet to reach its full potential. Based on these insights, this study proposes an interdisciplinary research agenda, including comparative media studies, reception studies across cultures, and industry-scholar collaboration for theoretical inquiries and practical designs to nourish a dynamic Fengshen Universe.

Keywords - Fengshen yanyi (Investiture of the Gods), Transmedia storytelling, Chinese mythology, Cultural Intellectual Property (cultural-IP).

1. Introduction

In the rapidly changing media culture, most of the traditional stories are not only being distributed through all kinds of media channels, such as magazines, newspapers, novels, stage plays, films, animations, television series, etc., but also transforming the ways of audience reception. In modern media culture, the media of story presentation have provided the readers with more options for story reception. The Fengshen story and its variations have always influenced the Chinese and the world audience who are interested in Chinese traditional culture.

With the development of media, some classics will also be reinterpreted and presented in different media. This will not only offer audiences a better reading experience but also a multi-dimensional appreciation from different angles. In the meantime, many classic literary works are being reedited based on the different needs and demands of society. This will

make it necessary for traditional literature to be further re-read and represented in media culture.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to Chinese mythological adaptations, there remains a limited understanding of how Fengshen yanyi (Investiture of the Gods) is being reconfigured as a coordinated transmedia story world. Existing studies tend either to analyze single works (for example, Nezha, Yang Jian, or Jiang Ziya films) or to focus on industrial case studies without synthesizing a cross-media account of world-building processes. This paper addresses that gap by proposing the "Fengshen Universe" heuristic — a framework for mapping recurrent adaptive modalities, transmedia strategies, and cultural-IP dynamics across film, animation, and digital platforms. The central research questions are: (1) What adaptive modalities shape contemporary Fengshen adaptations? (2) How do transmedia practices and audience participation contribute to the



formation of a Fengshen story world? (3) What industrial and cultural mechanisms enable or constrain Fengshen's development as enduring cultural IP?

2. Novelty and Contribution

This research makes three contributions to transmedia and adaptation studies. First, the article develops the heuristic of "Fengshen Universe," which integrates analysis of transmedia storytelling with cultural-IP theory to understand how mythic materials are modularized and circulated in media. Second, the article offers a comparative classification of two key modes of adaptation (historical-fantasy blockbuster versus character-centred animation), explaining how each modality eventuates in different industrial and audience outcomes, an analytical maneuver not previously articulated in recent single-title case studies. Third, it surfaces pragmatic industry obstacles (partial grand-world construction, loose IP governance, uneven intertextual coordination) and advocates research and design interventions accordingly. In contrast to previous research, the present study provides a cross-media synthesis, which situates textual strategies in relation to IP formation more directly than single-media approaches.

Mythological narration is equally as coherent a hermeneutic system merging the findings of mythology, anthropology, history, narratology, and stylistics in the interpretation of mythic text. Contrast with conventional narrative, myth-influenced narrative comes from various academic backgrounds and is abundant in the types of forms its mythic materials assume and in the geographical reach of its storytelling value (Zhang, 2022). The Chinese mythological stories are a treasure house of history and cultures, which can be used as materials for shaping a potential "story universe". The academic thinking about mythological storytelling and its narrativity is still underdeveloped (Zhang 2022). Recently, it has been proposed that "transmedia storytelling" is a useful methodological framework for analyzing the contemporary restructuring of Chinese mythology (Shen et al., 2020; Wall, 2019). According to Jenkins, *"Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story."* (Jenkins, 2011)". According to transmedia storytelling theory, each medium ideally contributes uniquely to the overall development of the narrative (Jenkins, 2007). This theoretical approach thus offers a critical perspective for interpreting the evolving meanings of Chinese mythology in contemporary contexts.

This research investigates some important features of the Fengshen cycle in contemporary media, presenting the concept of a "Fengshen Universe" to account for its unique narrative qualities. Several key research areas are organized into more specific subthemes to assist in delineating certain

phenomena and to offer a methodical description and narrative interpretation of the transmedia materializations in the tale. This analysis may also support the cultural and theoretical significance of creating a story universe of the Fengshen tale. In the past few years, many influential works in the Chinese film industry have appeared, which provide a very good case study for this project. Through the study of such Fengshen adaptations, this article argues for the necessity that interdisciplinary research arising from the interface between Chinese myth and transmediality has provided, as well as explores new ways to update and rejuvenate a Chinese myth-based tradition in an emergent media ecology.

3. Fengshen Yanyi: Narrative Features and Cultural Values

Fengshen yanyi (Investiture of the Gods or Fengshenbang) is a Ming-dynasty (1368–1644) vernacular canonical novel integrating historical episodes (chiefly, the Shang–Zhou conflict) with a large body of mythic material and a vast cast of supernatural and human characters (Haase, 2008). Like other texts with deep roots in Chinese mythic tradition, the Fengshen story is encoded with particular ideological registers and narrative conventions resulting from distinct historical and cultural trajectories (Chen & Zhang, 2022). It has long been a popular resource for literary and artistic production, providing stock motifs and materials that cultural industries continue to rework today (Shen et al., 2020). Studying Fengshen yanyi thus provides two types of value: a window onto a horizon of early Chinese social imagination, and a view of formative elements of Chinese cultural identity (Lei, 2024). Studies that recenter the mythical in film and new media production further show that the symbolic resources of such myths can be extracted to reveal changing cultural meanings (Zhang et al., 2021). Characterized by genealogies and textual transmission that are widely dispersed and often fragmentary, Chinese mythological narratives are not always systematized into a singular corpus (Yang et al., 2008; Zhao & Dolah, 2024). Fengshen yanyi draws from this deep well: incorporating older sources (e.g., the Nüwa myth in Classic of Mountains and Rivers) and reassembling their motifs and characters in a novelistic ecosystem, the book's dramatis personae are unusually numerous (the "investiture" itself enumerates over 365 deities, in addition to various mortal and semi-divine figures). This narrational density has supported multiple reworkings and reinterpretations over time. Historical processes of transmission and retelling have changed characterizations and plot details such that a figure may come to embody different values in different tellings; these variations add to the intertextual depth of each retelling (Zhao & Dolah, 2024).

The intertextual links between Fengshen yanyi and other classical novels are interesting. To take one example, though the Fengshen and Journey to the West occur in two different

chronological strands within their fictional location, with roughly 17 centuries separating them in time, individual actors will reappear across these cycles but reconfigured through rival ideological needs. The figure of Nezha is a case in point: Fengshen's juvenile martial hero serving the Zhou and receiving a ceremony as deity exemplifies righteous model heroism in *Journey to the West* (notably in the chapter "The Monkey King: Uproar in Heaven"), whereas Nezha becomes a bureaucrat of heaven who resists Sun Wukong's revolutionary disregard for celestial chains of command. This divergence shows how the single mythic figure can "be borrowed to express different moral and cosmological positions".

The modern practice of conceptualising these as part of a coherent "Chinese Mythology Universe" or media product "Story World" arises from industrial practice and academic borrowing of franchise lexicons. The term 'universe,' as in fan universe, is often used by scholars and industry commentators for such big, interconnected narrative systems originating with mythic properties (e.g., "Mythology Cinematic Universe," (Judge, 2022; Paprocki et al., 2023); "God Universe," and "Coloroom's Apotheosis Universe," (Chen & Zhang, 2022))—popscience fiction culture does that because it is popularised selfconsciously in reference to Marvel's Cinematic Universe (the MCU). This is an appropriate description, given that the programmes create large narratives comprised of multiple subplots, recurring characters, and cross-textual relationships packaged in modular yet connected narrative universes. To read Fengshen as a possible 'Fengshen Universe' thus offers a useful heuristic for understanding how its individual tales, character networks, and symbolic registers are organised differently across media forms, and how such recompositions might impact upon the social and psychological experience of modern publics (Whyke & Mugica 2021).

4. Adaptation Modalities And Renewal Strategies

The Fengshen story has been adapted to different forms from the classical stories to popular culture, especially in television series and feature animations that have had an indisputable role in shaping modern public (re) reception. Some adaptations seek to narrate the novel's story lines as closely as possible (including TV series *The Investiture of The Gods* (1990), *The Legend and the Hero* (2007, 2009)), while other works choose to only selectively appropriate primeval mythical elements in order to refractionalize them into largely new narratives, a pattern that is observable in recent independent or purely commercial blockbuster films with a focus on individual mythic dramatis personae who are larger than life only insofar as their screen size is concerned (e.g., *Nezha in NeZha* (2019), *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), and *NeZha* (2025); *Jiang Ziya in Jiang Ziya* (2020); and *Yang Jian in New Gods: Yang Jian* (2022)). Contemporary

adaptations that gesture toward a coherent "Fengshen Universe" can be usefully divided into two broad types. The first comprises historical-fantasy blockbusters that reutilize canonical plots and settings without radically altering the novel's structural framework (for example, *Creation of the Gods*, *The author: Kingdom of Storms* (2023), *Creation of the Gods II: Demon Force* (2025), and the projected "Fengshen Trilogy"), a mode sometimes compared to large-scale epic franchises. The second type consists of animated reworkings that construct new storylines around traditional motifs and characters, such as *Ne Zha* (2019), and the so-called "Coloroom's Apotheosis Universe" exemplifies this approach (Chen & Zhang, 2022). In the current Chinese film market, these two modalities (historical fantasy and animation) have emerged as the dominant commercial strategies for reintroducing Fengshen material to mass audiences.

One key approach is mixing the old and the new: keeping a similar cosmology and narrative setting of the original source, the film version replaces the original specific storylines, characters' psychologies, or social topics with others that speak to a more contemporary audience (Lv, 2019). In this sense, some established background elements, such as the well-defined power relations between the gods and humans or the formalized dynamics between the king and the people, are more likely to be kept to maintain a degree of continuity with past interpretations (Xu, 2023). In contrast, the moral binaries are less likely to be clearly defined in many of the adaptations, where the struggles of power are sometimes expressed in an ambivalent and even Daoist manner instead of a strictly good-versus-evil mode (Xu, 2023). Thus, for example, the adaptation of key iconic scenes (e.g., the well-known "tossing the sea" scene can be reimagined as new challenges for the characters, such as "saving the village"), in a novel way, creating a different emotional response and another layer of interpretation for modern audiences (Lv, 2019).

In turn, such formal and narrative changes may have accompanied shifts in value-orientations and social meanings. Since the social and moral issues in daily life in contemporary Chinese society tend to take a more prominent role in people's everyday lives than the "purely" supernatural forces (Yang et al., 2008), the filmmakers may give more emphasis to the incorporation of themes that speak to the social context of the present day. Individualism, family relationships, and education are a few examples of such recurrent themes. To take Nezha as an example again: in the previous versions, he was often framed as a sacrificial rebel figure whose challenge to authority implicated ideas of filial piety or patriarchal power (Tang & Ma, 2021; Yu, 2023). In recent adaptations, however, his story was often used to focus on the child's independent character, the acceptance of social outcasts, and as an educative plot that offers some learning points both for the children and their parents (Lv, 2019; Tang & Ma, 2021). Since the social and ideological functions of

Chinese mythology have always been refracted through different historical conjunctures, the resulting adaptive diversity of values embodied by the characters also underlies the renewed relevance of the Fengshen story today (Zhao & Dolah, 2024).

5. Storytelling Practices and Audience Engagement

Media serve as influential carriers of social meaning: they construct public attitudes, transmit values, and reshape the context under which audiences receive and make sense of stories (Semetko, 2004). Modern media landscapes do not just change the way information is perceived; they also make it possible for integrated storytelling modes to simultaneously take place within different channels (Von Stackelberg & Jones, 2014). In the current Chinese film and media market, a variety of storytelling strategies are mobilized to represent mythic materials, and classical mythological resources are routinely redeployed for contemporary narrative purposes (Zhao & Dolah, 2024). Scholars have increasingly adopted the theoretical apparatus of transmedia storytelling to account for how Fengshen yanyi and its adaptations instantiate a mediated "story world" or nascent "Fengshen Universe" (Shen et al., 2020).

Henry Jenkins's central insight that a coherent transmedia experience requires each medium to contribute a distinct, additive element to the whole remains analytically useful for understanding these adaptations (Jenkins, 2007). Mythic content and media form are mutually constitutive: the performative dimension of mythic narrative finds new affordances when projected across film, animation, publishing, and digital channels (Blanariu & Popa, 2018). Successful transmedia practice thus relies on careful world-building, the strategic distribution of narrative assets, and mechanisms that deepen audience engagement; these processes have been invoked to explain the contemporary reconfigurations of Nezha, Jiang Ziya, Yang Jian, and other key figures from the Fengshen corpus (Shen et al., 2020; Atarama-Rojas, 2019). Practically, this could work for some spectators: transmedia techniques can enlarge the imaginal spaces of those watching (and therefore their interest). For instance, the post-credits Easter-egg scenes and cross-context references act as extrinsic motivation to delve deeper into the world (Wang & Xin, 2024). As such, industrially and culturally, transmedia storytelling thus not only provides a descriptive model and a prescriptive blueprint of expanding the Fengshen narrative across media systems and fan-based publics (Granitz & Forman, 2015; Park, 2022).

In this seminal creation, character-centredness becomes a fundamental organizing principle of a new universe. Specific personae, such as Nezha or Jiang Ziya, are prototypical, serve as focal nodes to enter the broader story world, and are revisited, reworked, and expanded on various media platforms

(Shen et al., 2020). Character adaptations embody local aesthetic decisions and transnational transfers of technology (CAM production level), style, and narrative technique to generate hybridised media forms addressed at multiple aesthetic audiences within the people illustrated (Whyke et al., 2021). While the Chinese animation and film mediums have started stringing together character-based works to form intertextual networks, the complexity of these networks is remarkably uneven when compared to established franchises such as the MCU in areas such as textual reflexivity or the invention of empathic and multi-layered characters (Zhao & Dolah, 2024).

Fan cultures also play an essential role in the process of meaning-making. Through the acts of producing, distributing, and contesting interpretations of mythic texts, they create differentiated cultural levels that change the way the Fengshen narrative is conceived and appropriated (Schiller, 2018). Hence, audience studies, which include studies of demographic preferences (Ye, 2021), consumption of texts in cross-platform modes (Breen et al., 2017), and regional or age segmentation (Shen et al., 2022), are important to know how the story world resonates in heterogeneous publics. User-Generated Content (UGC) platforms such as Bilibili, Wechat, Youku, or Douyin enable a low-barrier space through which fans can co-create and reimagine Fengshen material, and thus form part of an emergent participatory ecology (Wang et al., 2023). Producer-fan interactivity, which ranges from official collaborations to grassroots remix culture, affects both the direction of the franchise and its socio-cultural legitimacy (Ryan, 2015; Schiller, 2018).

Overall, these dynamics suggest clear directions for practice and further research. Transmedia storytelling is not simply a mode of distribution for content, but rather an interactive enterprise in which producers' methods of world-making are equal to fan creativity and participation; this reciprocity deepens the richness of narrative and produces multiple points of access to the Fengshen Universe (Atarama-Rojas, 2019). In order to maximize this potential, future efforts should explore the motives that stimulate certain groups of fans to contribute creatively, and evaluate how special design features (characteristic use, intertextual linking, platforms) impact long-term engagement and cultural outreach. Such a study will both refine theoretical models of transmedia adaptation and give practical advice in building a sustainable and pluralistic Fengshen story world.

6. Cultural Symbolism, Branding, and Industry Dynamics

Branding and advertisement change the audience experience, extending story narratives and blurring boundaries (Gu & Zhao, 2021). As the global animation and film industry continues to grow, the interest in revamped versions of the story has also made "Fengshen" a cultural IP, becoming a hot

spot. As the modern re-creation and meaning reconstruction of traditional stories, Sichuang is not only a new story that can be written, but it can also transform criticism (whether explicitly or implicitly) on traditional stories. Furthermore, mythical IPs can express modernity through the adaptation of ancient texts (Chen & Cho, 2024) or "postmodernism" via the addition of spiritual elements to characters (Tan, 2023). According to the cultural content of the product and brand in the new context, it was embodied, "Fengshen Universe" would become a new cultural symbol between the future and the past.

Since transmedia strategies help narrative and symbolic elements circulate over multiple platforms, this is particularly suited to the mythic IP. Cumulative recognition and affective attachment are thus generated by one device, facilitating both discursive transference (Fan et al., 2022). High-profile producers and creative teams can speed up audience trust and thus brand formation. Studios with strong resources are in a better position to produce coherent narrative worlds and carry through cross-media campaigns that subsequently give the IP an established footing in the market (Fan et al., 2022). However, the Chinese industry currently furnishes few ready-tried examples of successful transmedia and IP governance, which remains arbitrarily Neolithic in many authors (Gilardi & Lam, 2021). This gap points up the fact that constructing cultural symbols deliberately is imperative now, not just doing promotional activities for any single piece of work. Both industry and academia need to recognize this.

Market research has demonstrated that viewers tend to reward cultural industry products which are of high quality, promote culturally resonant themes, and display originality in form heart; emotional commitment links these perceptions together, leading subsequently to compound forms of participation in a public sphere co-created with off-screen parties (Fan et al., 2022). On the creative front, outfits like Coloroom Pictures and Light Chaser Animation have gone about forging Fengshen stories into 'Chinese-style superhero' narratives in their own distinctive ways; by playing off popular themes against traditional backgrounds, these firms try to bring more people into this general category (Whyke, 2023). In contrast, though, historical fantasy productions on a grand scale may be hampered from effectively linking modern values back to parallel feudal times if everything is somewhat lost within the scope of storytelling; The Classics of Mountains and Seas: Thunder King Rising (2023) has been critiqued for splitting character roles and multi-leveled claims on value (Zhao, 2024).

Analyses of recent Chinese fantasy cinema identify both advantages and bottlenecks in current IP development, and propose remedial strategies—most notably, creating a unified narrative ecosystem and deliberately deepening character relations to sustain transmedia extension (Zheng et al., 2024). At present, the Fengshen brand remains nascent: the grand worldview is incompletely constructed, and interactive

channels between producers and audiences are underdeveloped (Wu et al., 2024). Advancing Fengshen as a durable cultural symbol, therefore, requires integrated efforts in world-building, audience co-creation, and institutional mastery of transmedia IP practices—measures that together will strengthen audience engagement and stabilize the brand's cultural meaning.

7. Comparative Value and Advantages of the Present Study

Unlike single-case treatments that focus on a single film or series, this study synthesizes textual, industrial, and audience perspectives to produce a cross-media heuristic for world-building. The "Fengshen Universe" heuristic enables three analytic moves beyond the existing literature: (1) it maps modalities across platforms to show how character-centred animation and large-scale historical fantasy perform complementary functions in audience engagement; (2) it links textual strategies to downstream IP formation and branding outcomes (thereby bridging textual and industrial research agendas); and (3) it proposes targeted interventions for producers (coherent narrative ecosystems, improved IP governance) grounded in the analysis of recent case examples. These contributions collectively offer a more operationalized framework for researchers and practitioners than prior work, which often remains either strictly textual or narrowly industrial.

8. Conclusion and Discussion

This study shows that contemporary adaptations of Fengshen yanyi and the attendant reconfigurations of its characters are shaped by three interrelated forces: shifting social contexts, audience preferences, and the affordances of emergent media cultures. There is now a range of adaptation practices—from something like faithful historical-fantasy retellings all the way to creative animated rewritings. They are types of devices that incarnate traditional myths into present-day semantic systems.

A Fengshen story universe: This is a theoretical framework of our own making. In our view, the Fengshen corpus should be understood in terms of two prominent theoretical discourses: transmedia storytelling and cultural-IP theory. Its value as such comes from three sources: (1) an inexhaustible supply of mythic material, (2) characters who can readily be molded into new shapes, and (3) events which invite reorientation to suit not otherworldly fantasy but the cares and worries of our common daily life (Shen et al., 2020).

Practically, the findings help show how the two combine to produce a modern masterpiece. Animated films and historical-fantasy films have different approaches, with an emphasis on individual characters and, hence, more emotion than ever before. The second stresses spectacle or epic scenes. Each provides different routes into a wider transmedia

ecosystem. These modalities, therefore, produce complementary rather than identical cultural effects: animation may foreground identification and pedagogical value, whereas large-scale fantasy may consolidate brand recognition and institutional prestige (Fan et al., 2022; Chen, 2024; Wu et al., 2025). However, the current industrial landscape also exhibits substantive constraints, including incomplete grand-world construction, limited intertextual coordination across media, and uneven industry expertise in transmedia IP governance (Gilardi & Lam, 2021; Wu et al., 2025).

Two significant research gaps arise both methodically and theoretically. Firstly, audience research is still underspecified among existing work, which focuses primarily on Chinese audiences or ethnic Chinese diasporic communities, resulting in a limited empirical foundation on which to base claims about reception and meaning-making (Chen et al., 2022). To explore how Fengshen works as a cultural indicator beyond regional and linguistic boundaries, comparative and audience-oriented studies are needed where surveys, in-depth interviews, ethnography of fan spaces (for example, Bilibili), and experimental designs can be applied, revealing motivational structures and participatory practices (Ye, 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Subsequently, the intermingling of media forms requires systematic exploration, especially animation and historical-fantasy live-action film. The differences inherent in the narrative architecture, character development, and symbolic frame of the media lead to a different connotation of world-building in Chinese culture and ramifications for IP sustainability. (Zhao and Dolah 2024; Zheng et al. 2024)

The study therefore proposes three aims to be pursued by future research and action: (1) Empirical extension: Carry through cross-cultural reception documents and multilevel audits of audience to ascertain what various publics think of Fengshen motifs and discover the train of impulse behind fan creativity. (2) Comparative media analysis: Carry out a series of fine-grained case comparisons, tracing back how media-specific facilities (animation techniques, episodic television, gaming mechanics) serve to reshape plot logic, character Identification, and transmedia expansiveness. (3) Industry engagement: Use academic findings to draw up guidelines for building a unified fictional world, to win greater collaboration between buyers and sellers, and devise a more intelligent system of IP governance that encourages long-term narrative Ecosystems (Fan et al., 2022; Gilardi & Lam, 2021). Last but not least, approaching Fengshen conceptually as a “universe” is both analytically and practically important: it affords a heuristic to understand complex intertextual relations and provides a model for strategic IP development. But this heuristic has to be applied critically, with a sense for cultural difference, audience diversity, and the ethical stakes of rebottling inherited stories. Should researchers and practitioners make interdisciplinary, audience-conscious, media-appropriate inroads into the Fengshen Universe, it could evolve from a marketing logo to a fertile space for cultural experimentation, scholarly interpretation, and cross-media narration, receiving more than one hearty cheer.

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