Analysis of the Adaptation Potential of Storyworlds in Chinese Mythological Children's Theatre from a Transmedia Perspective

Yixin Bi*

Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110000, China

*787384271 @ qq.com.

Abstract

Transmedia storytelling is not the mechanical duplication of a single story across media; rather, it narrates different facets of a shared storyworld and expands the world's boundaries through intertextual relations. Chinese traditional mythology, with its deep cultural genealogy, rich fantastic imagination, and broad audience base, is an important resource for transmedia adaptations in children's theatre. Grounded in theories of intertextuality and transmedia storytelling, this paper asks whether a storyworld possesses adaptation potential and proposes four criteria: drillability, extendability, the potential of core elements for theatrical realization, and the depth of cultural grounding. It argues that children's-theatre adaptations should preserve the core rules and cultural connotations of the source storyworld while using narrative extension, low-threshold audience participation, theatre-specific affordances, and effective contemporary translation of values to become a productive piece of the original storyworld.

Keywords

Transmedia storytelling, storyworld, mythological children's theatre.

1. The Evaluation Logic from a Transmedia Perspective

Intertextuality theory holds that a text generates meaning through its absorption, adaptation, and mutual reference to other texts. Li Shiyu argues that transmedia storyworld construction is a psychological-model construction based on intertextuality: story texts in different media can be interconnected without contradicting one another, and can jointly create new meanings [1]. Accordingly, adapting mythology for children's theatre is not merely a matter of deciding whether a particular myth can be staged. The more fundamental question is whether the source text can provide a world that theatre can re-enter, re-experience, and continue to extend.

Wolf points out that intermedial relations involve crossings between media boundaries. Because media differ, adaptation cannot remain a simple substitution of content; it must attend to the specific meanings produced by different sign systems and modes of expression [2]. This point is especially important for children's theatre. Literature, animation, and film can present a storyworld through narration, camera work, editing, and digital effects, whereas children's theatre relies on actors' bodies, stage space, lighting and sound, props and costumes, and the co-presence of spectators to enable children to perceive, understand, and participate in a world within limited time and space.

Jenkins argues that different media texts in transmedia storytelling should make distinct and valuable contributions to a shared storyworld rather than repeat the same plot [3]. A single media text is only one piece of a larger storyworld: it draws on the source world while developing new territory on the basis of its original rules and logic. Chinese traditional mythology preserves pantheons of deities, landscapes and cities, relations between heaven and humanity, orders of gods and demons, and fantastic imagination, all of which provide abundant resources for children's theatre. Yet rich resources do not automatically equal adaptation

potential. It is therefore necessary, at the beginning of creation, to determine whether the original storyworld possesses an internal structure capable of sustained extension.

2. The Drillability of the Original Storyworld

Drillability is the primary prerequisite for a storyworld's adaptation potential. Jenkins stresses "depth" among the principles of transmedia storytelling and encourages audiences to explore background information and details. Ryan's discussion of immersion and interactivity likewise suggests that entering a fictional world depends not only on receiving plot information but also on world construction and mental simulation [4]. In mythological children's theatre, drillability means that the source world cannot be a closed narrative made up of a single event; it must contain narrative depth that creators and child audiences can continue to enter.

First, it is necessary to examine whether the original storyworld has a sufficiently layered structure. Temporal and spatial settings, rules governing the world, maps of character relations, sources of power, hierarchies of places, and the order of gods and demons together form the basis on which children understand a storyworld. If a story relies only on a predetermined plot or a completed ending for its meaning, theatrical adaptation easily falls into the pattern of compressing, disassembling, or repeating the source plot. By contrast, if a myth establishes stable relations among character identities, task objectives, causal events, and spatial relations, adapters can enter the world from different points and create anew without violating its core premises.

Such layering leaves room for narrative extension. Adapters may focus on a supporting character and present a growth process that the source has not fully narrated; they may trace the origin of a magic object, mythical creature, or mysterious place; or they may construct a plot around a new task permitted by the source world's rules. The value of such additions lies not in arbitrarily increasing characters and events, but in maintaining consistency with the original temporal-spatial rules, character relations, and value logic. Only when the new text remains subject to the internal order of the meta-storyworld does children's theatre become a supplement to the source world rather than an appendage detached from it.

Second, drillability requires a source world with conflicts that theatre can activate. Children's theatre needs clear character actions and comprehensible dramatic contradictions. Mythological actions such as journeying for scriptures, subduing demons, controlling floods, seeking treasures, guarding, and repaying gratitude have clear task structures; relations among gods, humans, demons, and beasts can also develop into conflicts understandable to children. However, adapters should not select merely exciting confrontations. They should ask whether the conflict reveals the rules of the storyworld and whether it enables children to understand why a character acts, how that character chooses, and how the action changes both the character and the order of the world.

Finally, it is necessary to consider whether the original storyworld already has a sound basis for audience participation. Before entering the theatre, children may have encountered a relevant myth through family storytelling, picture books, animation, film and television, games, or school education. Such prior experience forms a pre-understanding of the stage text and encourages children to seek connections among texts in different media. The core of drillability is not simply making a storyworld complex, but making its complexity accessible. Children familiar with a myth can discover new details and connections, while children encountering it for the first time can enter the world through clear character goals and stage situations. Drillability corresponds to the "meta-storyworld" and takes narrative extension as its principal strategy.

3. The Extendability of the Original Storyworld

Extendability complements drillability. Whereas drillability emphasizes entering deeply into a storyworld, extendability emphasizes its capacity to expand horizontally. It does not mean adding characters, places, and events without limits. Rather, it means that the source world can continue to accommodate new characters, situations, media texts, and modes of audience participation without damaging its core settings.

At the textual level, extendability is first reflected in the expansion potential of temporal and spatial structures. Whether a world has a spatial axis, temporal cues, and character genealogies that can continue to open up is an important basis for judging whether it can keep growing. Journey to the West, for example, takes the route to obtain scriptures as its spatial axis and the course of trials as its temporal thread. The mountains, kingdoms, caves, and divine and demonic figures along the route can all become sites for new narratives. Children's theatre need not reproduce the novel panoramically; it may develop a local story from one place, one event, or one character relation. So long as the task logic, character identities, and value relations of the pilgrimage world are retained, this local text can form a two-way complement to the larger storyworld.

The original storyworld should also be highly inclusive. Inclusiveness does not mean abandoning rules; it means that the rules can accommodate new characters and situations. An overly closed world usually can do no more than repeat its established causal chain. A storyworld with open time and space, shared rules, and a rich character network, however, permits creators to tell new stories from different perspectives. If a local play can stand independently while allowing children to sense a wider world behind it, it will stimulate their desire to continue reading, watching, discussing, and imagining.

At the audience level, extendability appears in a worldview's capacity for sharing, circulation, and even re-adaptation. Mythological figures, magical objects, strange beasts, scenes, and tasks should have clear recognizability, enabling children to remember, recount, and share them with peers. Children's participation in a storyworld may take the form of role-playing in games, the re-creation of scenes in drawing, the continuation of plots in family conversation, or repeated discussion of a character and the world's rules. The lower the threshold for children's participation and communication, the more readily a storyworld acquires new life beyond the theatre.

Low-threshold participation does not mean simplifying mythology. Children's theatre should establish layers between a clear entry point and rich connotations: children first enter through vivid character goals, explicit task relations, and perceptible stage situations, and then discover deeper connections through parent-child communication, repeated viewing, and other media texts. A vast mythological world cannot be transferred whole into one children's play; adapters must also decide whether it can be distilled into a stageable local world. This local world should have a complete plot and emotional closure while retaining an entrance to the larger world. Extendability corresponds to "audience groups" and "universal values," determining whether a storyworld can persist through audiences' circulation, discussion, and imagination.

4. The Potential for Theatrical Realization of Core Elements

The original storyworld's timeline, anchor characters, logical rules, typical scenes, core images, and key props form the basis on which texts in different media establish connections. A children's-theatre adaptation should not merely select the best-known characters or the liveliest plot episodes. It must assess whether these core elements are both attractive and capable of effective theatrical realization.

A timeline is the main skeleton of a storyworld. Because children's theatre is constrained by performance duration, it cannot fully contain the many characters, subplots, and recurring events of mythological classics. It is therefore necessary to determine whether the source timeline can be distilled into a task structure that children can follow. Journeys, searches, guardianship, quests, and growth can link different spaces and events, enabling children to understand a character's goals, the source of a crisis, and the result of action within a limited time. If the timeline is too loose or events lack clear causality, the children's play easily becomes a collage of scenes and spectacles; if a core task can establish a clear path of action, changes of time and space become a process through which children explore the storyworld.

Anchor characters are characters that stabilize the child's perspective, connect different character relations, and guide plot development. Mythological worlds often have large ensembles, but a children's play cannot make every character carry an equal narrative function. Adapters need to determine whether the source contains a character with a vivid personality, clear action goals, and the capacity to form an emotional connection with children, or whether an appropriate child-entry perspective can be selected without violating the source logic. Anchor characters help children understand complex rules while providing a stable centre of attention for multiple stage spaces and character relations.

Logical rules determine whether children can genuinely believe in and enter a mythological world. Where does a character's power come from? How are magical objects used? How do characters move between different spaces? What actions violate order, and how will a crisis be resolved? Together, these questions form the internal logic of a storyworld. Children can accept fantasy and the surreal, but that does not mean they do not need rules. The clearer the rules, the more children can predict, judge, and participate in character action while watching. If an adaptation arbitrarily changes sources of power, character relations, or world order, children will find it difficult to form a stable immersive experience.

It is also necessary to examine whether core elements can be realized through theatrical language. Literature can explain a world through narration, while animation and film can rely on camera work and special effects for transformations. Theatre, however, must create a live presentation through actors' bodies, stage movement, changes of light and shadow, musical rhythm, prop mechanisms, and spatial design. Flying, transformation, magical combat, crossings between realms, strange beasts, and fantastic landscapes should not be merely showy visual spectacles; they should be connected to dramatic action and the world's rules. Effective interaction should likewise not consist of mechanical questions or programmed games that break away from the storyworld. It should serve character tasks, situational choices, and the understanding of rules. When children help a character identify a path, respond to a crisis, or complete a task, their voices and actions acquire a genuine place within the story. The theatrical potential of core elements corresponds to "media conversion" and takes theatre-specific affordances as its principal strategy.

5. Cultural Grounding: Cultural Identity and Contemporary Translation

Whether an original storyworld possesses sufficient cultural grounding is the fourth criterion for judging its adaptation potential. A storyworld grounded in a deep cultural context usually has a stable symbolic system, a broader basis for audience participation, and a stronger sense of cultural identity. Through centuries of transmission, Chinese traditional mythology has preserved abundant ideas about the origin of heaven and earth, natural order, human ethics, and collective imagination. It does not merely supply children's theatre with fantastic figures and adventures; it also provides the cultural foundation for the continuing growth of a storyworld.

It is necessary to examine whether the source world's cultural symbols are stable and recognizable. Images of deities, mythical beasts, cosmological structures, mountains and regions, ritual concepts, and ethical relations together form the cultural grammar of a mythological world. A children's play should not use them merely as a collage of names or visual elements; it should understand their relations of meaning in the source world. For example, a magical object is not only a prop that advances the plot; it may also be tied to a character's identity, source of power, and value choices. Likewise, a mythological space is not merely a background; it may embody relations between heaven and humanity, concepts of order, or the conditions of a character's growth. The more accurately such cultural grammar is grasped, the more effectively an adaptation can remain intertextually connected to the meta-storyworld.

Cultural grounding can also strengthen the common basis of reception for parent-child audiences. A child may encounter a mythological figure on stage for the first time, whereas a parent may already possess relevant experience from literary reading, film and television memories, or folk narration. These two kinds of experience meet in the theatre, enabling parent-child discussion and shared understanding.

Yet cultural grounding does not mean reproducing a traditional text unchanged. Mythological children's theatre needs an effective contemporary translation of values if it is to preserve the vitality of the storyworld. Traditional myths should neither be displayed on stage intact nor be arbitrarily rewritten by contemporary consumer logic. On the premise of following the child's perspective and adapting to children's psychology and cognitive habits, theatre should connect cultural elements with contemporary relevance. Characters' predicaments, growth, responsibility, guardianship, and relationships can communicate with children's present emotional experience. Such communication, however, must be based on respect for the source spirit and cultural logic, avoiding the distortion of mythological values or the erasure of their distinctive qualities in pursuit of a supposed "modernity."

6. Conclusion

From a transmedia perspective, mythological children's-theatre adaptation should serve a vital and promising storyworld rather than the short-term replication of an existing IP. Drillability ensures that a world contains layered structures, dramatic conflicts, and spaces for participation that can be explored in depth. Extendability ensures that a worldview has inclusiveness, shareability, and conditions for low-threshold participation. The theatrical realization potential of core elements ensures that timelines, anchor characters, and logical rules can be reorganized through theatrical language. Cultural grounding ensures that an adaptation can draw upon cultural identity and continue the spirit of mythology through contemporary translation. Together, these four criteria point to the possibility that children's theatre can become an effective piece of the original storyworld.

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