

A Critical Analysis of the “Masculinity” in “Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms”

Zhewen Gu^{1,a,*}

¹University of Sheffield, Western Bank, Sheffield, United Kingdom

a. zgu13@sheffield.ac.uk

*corresponding author

Abstract: Researchers in the field of film studies have identified that masculinity plays a significant role in all aspects of film narratives, encompassing character development, plot. Within the realm of film studies, scholars have discerned the pervasive presence of masculinity as a pivotal element across various facets of cinematic narratives. This encompassing influence extends to character evolution, the trajectory of the plot, and the thematic exploration of films. The following discussion takes the film “*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*” as a focal point, a cinematic adaptation rooted in Chinese mythical fantasy. Employing a critical lens, this analysis delves into the film’s portrayal of “masculinity” and its profound impact on the overarching narrative and thematic underpinnings. In “*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*”, a compelling emphasis on potent male figures becomes readily apparent. The entire cinematic narrative revolves around a central theme of heroism and patricide, resulting in the conspicuous presence of masculinity throughout the film. This examination aims to elucidate how these masculine elements are intricately interwoven into the movie’s fabric, shedding light on the film’s broader implications in terms of gender representation and storytelling dynamics.

Keywords: *Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*, Masculinity, heroism, patricide

1. Introduction

The portrayal of masculinity in movies has long been a topic of academic interest and public discussion. The concept of ‘masculinity’ has been presented in different art forms from classical literature to modern cinema, and it continues to influence the modern storytelling [1].

The film “*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*” (hereinafter referred to as “*Creation of the Gods*”), released in 2023, adapted from Chinese myths, has witnessed a great success at the box office. Different from the original version which concentrated on the conflicts between lords of vassal states, the adaptation has restructured the story with a new thematic focus on the relationship between father and son in the royal family. This article aims to explore the portrayal of masculinity in this film and how it shapes the characters and stories within it. It will critically interpret ‘*Creation of the Gods*’ and analyze how traditional masculinity, encompassing power, conflict, heroism, and the role of the father, is depicted in the film. This research will further investigate the cultural implications of the male-dominated narrative of this film which centered on rebellion, revenge, power grabbing, and success among males characters

In previous research, there has been a discussion regarding the representation of gender in contemporary world cinema. *“Creation of the Gods”* serves as a valuable case study for exploring how masculinity is portrayed in Chinese cinema, particularly within the unique Chinese cultural context. At the same time, research on “masculinity” on movies not only contributes to a deeper understanding to the structure of storytelling, but also encourages reflection on gender representation and cultural dissemination from multiple perspectives. This type of research enriches both theory and practice in the fields of media culture studies and film research.

2. Literature Review

“Masculinity” refers to the specific personality, behavioral, and role characteristics socially and culturally ascribed to men. It also encompasses the collective expectations and stereotypes that these characteristics create [2]. This concept not only influences men’s self-identity and behavior at the individual level, but also shapes gender roles and gender relations throughout social structures. Theoretical studies of masculinity have explored its emergence, evolution, and impact in cultural, psychological, and social domains, but it has also permeated other fields such as education, history, philosophy, and communication.

From theoretical perspective, the construction of masculinity has been discussed in the following two important theories.

2.1. Sex Role Theory

The concept of “masculinity” can be traced back to the emergence of sex role theory at the beginning of the 20th century, which formed the concept of “male/feminism” under the impact of the second wave of feminism in the middle of the 20th century. This concept developed into a model of what makes men in the context of consumerism. Under the impact of the second wave of feminism in the middle of the 20th century, it formed a “male/feminist” way of thinking, and in the context of consumerism, it developed into a series of descriptions of what makes an ideal man in a society [3]. Sex role theory emphasizes societal expectations and norms regarding sex roles. Men are expected to exhibit a particular set of behaviors and character traits to fit the needs of society and social structural factors such as patriarchy and the division of labor can trigger these expectations.

2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes dominance and control over masculinity in society [4]. This dominance usually involves power, domination, and authority, creating a hegemonic model of masculinity. Similarly, Lawrence Stone’s Theory of Masculinity further elaborates on this theory. Lawrence states that masculinity is a reflection of privileged status and influence in society [5]. At the same time, he emphasizes that masculinity encompassed traits such as wildness and strength, and these male physical traits further help them to obtain dominant status and leadership in a patriarchal society [5].

In summary, “masculinity” is a culturally and socially constructed notion that involves interactions between individuals, societies, and cultures. In many societies, masculinity is commonly associated with qualities like strength, toughness, dominance, rationality, and courage. These traits align with patriarchal societies where male authority and leadership are emphasized. However, the specific attributes associated with masculinity can vary across cultures and historical periods, depending on the values and needs of the society. At the same time, this social construct will change as society changes and the concept of gender roles will be reevaluated. As a result, the academic research on masculinity continues to grow and develop into different branches.

3. Masculinity and Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms

Masculinity plays an important role in the cinematic storytelling [6]. This influence is reflected in the portrayal, characterization, and emotional expression of male characters in movies.

Taking “*Creation of the Gods I : Kingdom of Storms*”, a Chinese movie released in 2023, as an example, one can see that the traditional concept of “masculinity” sets the tone of the whole movie. It can be said that the entire film is centered around the narrative involved in the cinematic representation of men, fathers, and heroes.

3.1. Main Plot

“*Creation of The Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*” is a Chinese fantasy saga movie. It is also the first installment of the “Creation of The Gods” trilogy. The movie is based on the 16th-century classical Chinese mythological novel *Fengshen Yanyi* (The Enchantment of the Gods) and the playbook *Wuwang Fuzhou Pinghua* (The Story of King Wu’s Conquest of the Zhou Dynasty). The movie tells the story of King Yin Shou of the Shang Dynasty, who colludes with Daji, a fox demon, and commits tyrannical acts, triggering the wrath of the gods. Jiang Ziya, who is an immortal, comes down from the god’s mountain “Kunlun” with the “List of the Gods”. He is tasked to bring this magical scroll to the real lord so that he could save the world. Ji Fa, the son of Marquis Xibo, also King Yin Shou’s hostage son (The Marquis’s child was sent to King Yin Shou as a means of restraining the Marquis); and Yin Jiao, the son of King Yin Shou, discovers the cruel disposition of King Yin Shou, and decides to rebel against him. As a result, all the forces within the kingdom are in chaos, and long-lasting conflicts have arisen [7].

3.2. Characters under the Masculinity Theme

One can see that the portrayal of male characters in “*Creation of Gods*” is framed by traditional masculinity for its particular emphasis on male dominance of the rule of the country. The movie is highly male-centric and the main male characters are all depicted with the qualities such as “strong”, “warlike”, “ambitious”, and “handsome”, “leadership”, “rebellious”, “emotional” and so forth. In the movie, the appearance of a physically strong body has been highlighted, emphasizing a muscular ideal for the audience. What should be noted is that these traits are also used as a part of a film promotion campaign to attract the audience during the launching stage.

The “Masculine” theme is found in a wide range of films all around the world. Classic male characters are often portrayed as unemotional, violent, dominant, and aggressive compared with women [8]. From the action films of the previous century starring Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Bruce Willis, Jackie Chan, and numerous other action icons, to the contemporary superhero movies that have gained immense popularity, a predominant theme across these movies is the portrayal of male characters with a consistent emphasis on traditional masculinity [9]. In other words, explicit masculinity has been widely applied in world cinema, constructing a male cosmo and a gendered fandom.

3.2.1. Villain with Masculinity: Dominance and Control

Carl Jung proposed the concept of “Animus”, which is one of the archetypal theories to explain the ideal male imagery in the female mind [10]. Jung categorized the Animus into four types to illustrate the psychological development of females from naivety to maturity. He identified this growth as progressing through four phases: the strength phase, behavioral phase, linguistic phase, and meaning phase, which also correspond to their attitudes towards and positions in relation to males. In the strength phase, women tend to be attracted to muscular men, then shift their attraction towards male

power in the second phase. In the third phase, they become drawn to male language, and in the final stage, they begin to seek a spiritual leader.

Whereas this theory primarily applies to female psychology, it still reveals an ideal male archetype through the description: a dominant individual who excels in physical appearance, social status, intelligence, and leadership. Indeed such masculinity male figures could be found in *“Creation of Gods”* and one example among them is King Yin Shou, the male protagonist.

King Yin Shou is a highly iconic character in *“Creation of Gods”*. He was the king of the Shang dynasty, known for his brutal, extravagant and despicable rule, and the villain of the time. The movie has portrayed King Yin Shou as an overlord who is in a position of absolute dominance. This can be indicated in terms of the character’s appearance and action design. The beard, the muscles, the warlike, the belligerence, all of which are used to emphasize the image of a powerful male. These traits present male’s salient features explicitly. Indeed King Yin Shou’s image is quite similar to the personality of Rambo in *“First Blood”* [11].

King Yin Shou’s masculinity could also be seen in his action. He is confident in his rule and proud of his power and position. He is ready to act in defense of his dignity (forcing a hostage son to commit suicide to intimidate his enemies). The ambition becomes arrogance later on. He disdards for life killing his servants in the palace for his own purpose and shows his indifference to the unexpected death of his wife.

In addition, King Yin Shou demonstrates masculinity concerning dominance and control over the country. He maintains his rule through violence and threats, and intimidates opponents through cruel punishments. It shows his strong desire to control everything and suppress dissent, reflecting the traditional male desire for power and domination.

However, behind the hegemonic image of King Yin Shou also hints at the toxic side of masculinity. His arrogance and brutality ultimately lead to the collapse of his regime, and his blind confidence has brought a disastrous consequences.

3.2.2. Father with Masculinity: Patriarchy and Suppression

Moreover, the role of King Yin Shou represents the social position occupied by the male role of “father” in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy is a social system in which the dominant position and privileges are held primarily by men. It refers to a family or clan controlled by the father or the oldest male or group of males [12]. In these social systems, it is often extended to various manifestations in which males have social privileges that result in exploitation or oppression upon others, through male dominance in moral authority and property control.

A patriarchy society empowers men in every aspects, such as power, responsibility and authority and such advantages will be reproduced by the mechanism of patriarchal society. Men are expected to exhibit these qualities in order to fulfill the expectations placed on them by their families and society.

The role of the “father” typically holds significant social importance in this context due to the blood bond between the father and his male offspring. A patrilineal society refers to a family and social organization in which family transmission, inheritance and power are passed on through patrilineal blood relations. This social structure has important implications for the status and authority of the paternal role.

The famous psychologist Sigmund Freud proposed the theory of “Oedipus complex”, which suggests that fathers represent authority and rules in the psychological development of individuals [13]. This theory states that fathers, as authority figures in the family and society, have a profound influence on the formation of an individual’s personality and behavior.

The central narrative of the movie explores the relationship between King Yin Shou and his sons. King Yin Shou is in the position of ‘father’ and holding a dominance, while the prince occupies

subordinate roles. Such a superior-subordinate dynamic also extends to King Yin Shou's status as the "king", where, as the "father of the nation", he achieves various goals by various means through his absolute authority and never allows his authority to be challenged or questioning of his power.

3.3. Story Structure under the Masculinity Theme

In addition to characterization, the entire storytelling has been framed by masculinity narrative. Masculinity is often associated with social expectations. Connell's theory of "multiple male genders" states that masculinity is a product of historical, cultural, and social contexts, and that it can change according to different situations and cultures [14]. This theory states that the representation of film masculinity can be varied across time periods and social context.

Scholars found that action movies are the quintessential genre for displaying masculinity. For example, Bruce Willis in *Die Hard* plays a police detective who demonstrates strong, heroic and fearless masculinity. His character plays the role of a "male" in the movie who takes on the role of protection and rescue by showing strength and intelligence to fight against the terrorists. This masculinity not only shapes the character's behavior, but also influences the plot of the movie, driving the action scenes and conflicts [11].

Similarly, stories corresponding to masculinity are heavily displayed in the movie "*Creation of Gods*." Departure from the original version- the classical myth fantasy in the early 17th century- this movie adapted the story by adding new storylines, such as: hero journey and patricide.

3.3.1. Heroism

Heroism is central to the conception of masculinity. The courage, strength, and determination in heroism correspond to the traits and symbols related to men. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, in patriarchal societies, men often become synonymous with the role of heroes who bring salvation and protection through power.

Joseph Campbell emphasizes the importance of heroism in classical mythology and literature in his "Hero's Journey" theory [15]. This theory focuses on the theoretical framework of heroism and narrative patterns, emphasizing the importance of heroism in classical mythology, literature, and human culture. The theory sheds light on the growth, adventures, and accomplishments of heroes and how these elements coexist across cultures and stories. Campbell divides the process of heroic growth into three stages: 1) The Departure: the hero begins in the real world but feels dissatisfied or called. They accept the mission of adventure and leave their familiar surroundings. 2) The Initiation: The hero encounters various challenges and trials during the adventure. They undergo growth, change, and self-discovery in preparation for the ultimate test. 3) The Return: The hero overcomes the final test and gains knowledge, strength, or revelation. Victory and success are achieved in the end.

This pattern of heroism appears frequently in classical mythology and literature of all ages, and similar elements can be found in different cultures and stories. Through the experiences of the heroes, these works explore profound issues such as human nature, faith, and morality.

The "Departure" and "The Initiation", are the key storylines that make up the *Creation of Gods* movie. For instance two princes, Ji Fa and Yin Jiao, who are dissatisfied, confused and fearful of King Yin Shou's position as a king and a father, and search for a way to break the fox demon's seduction of King Yin Shou and restore peace to the world. However, they eventually realize that King Yin Shou's tyranny is entirely due to his nature and not all because of female seduction. They start a revolt, but in the end it is not completely successful. The prince Jifa is unwilling to help King Yin Shou to complete his tyranny. Breaking free from the ideological control of King Yin Shou, he decides to insist on justice and rightness. He later repaired the relationship with his biological father and finally became the leader of the anti-tyranny movement. Similarly, King Yin Shou's biological

son, prince Yin Jiao joins forces with the others, eventually end his father's tyranny, and becomes an important figure in rescuing the world.

After experiencing "The Initiation", they gained an understanding of their previous lives and embarked on a completely different path from before, ultimately becoming "men" and "heroes".

3.3.2. Patricide

At the same time, in the "Return" stage of the heroism narrative, heroism narrative and patricide narrative could be widely found in numerous works.

Patricide is an ancient and pervasive narrative pattern in myth, literature and drama that emphasizes the importance of masculinity in society and culture. The pattern usually involves younger male characters killing or overcoming their fathers or authoritative figures representing paternal authority. The patricide narrative is often seen as a symbolic element in mythology and literature, symbolizing a new generation of men's quest for growth and independence. This quest requires transcending the authority of the previous generation and embodies the independence, courage, and self-confidence of masculinity.

Likewise, numerous works across various eras and genres incorporate the theme of patricide : Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, Manga *Baki*, modern movies *Star Wars*, and so on.... The patricide plot is closely tied to the psychological concept of paternal authority. Furthermore, according to Freud's "Oedipus complex", "patricide" reflects the individual's struggle with the father's authority. This struggle is important in masculinity and affects the individual's growth and self-perception [16].

The theme of patricide is reflected in the character arcs of multiple characters in this movie. After accidentally breaking the seal of the demon fox Daji, King Yin Shou's inner desire for power was exploited by Daji. Subsequently, with the help of Daji's witchcraft, he killed his father and brother, ascending from his position as a prince to becoming the new emperor. Through the act of 'patricide,' he dismantled the authority established and represented by the previous generation, establishing his own authority.

Furthermore, after witnessing their father's cruelty and obsession with power, the two princes chose to rebel and save the world by killing their father King Yin Shou. These two young princes challenged their father's authority and ideas through the act of "patricide", embarking on a completely different path from before. They finally developed their own independent thoughts, and established their own authority, marking their journey toward becoming 'men' and 'heroes'.

4. Conclusions

This study examines that various ways in which masculinity is portrayed in the movie "*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*", particularly through its characters and narrative. It figured out how this adaptation work reinforce the excessive masculinity through the male characters' muscular appearance, heroic narrative and patricide behaviour. The masculinity of the main characters shapes their adventurous, challenging, and growth-oriented journey.

Regarding to the future study, "*Creation of the Gods I: Kingdom of Storms*" offers a representation of masculinity that contributes to the formation of an exclusive male fandom. It can serve as a valuable subject for future sociological and film studies to delve deeper into how Chinese cinema explores Chinese masculinity, reaffirming it as extreme toughness, invulnerability, and domination. This exploration will further responds to the growth of Chinese soft power and commercialization in cultural production.

References

- [1] Dyer, Richard. (2002). *The matter of images: Essays on representations*. Routledge.

- [2] Van Den, W. (1997). *Reinventing the Sexes: The Biomedical Construction of Femininity and Masculinity*. Indiana University Press.
- [3] Liu, Y. (2014). Masculinity. *Foreign literature*, 4, 106-115.
- [4] Connell, R., Messerschmidt, J. (2005). Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & society*, 19(6), 829-859.
- [5] Stone, L. (1965). *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*. Oxford University Press.
- [6] Zong, Y. (2017). Analysis of Masculinity in Oscar Best Pictures. *Film Literature*, 23, 69-71.
- [7] Maoyan Film. (2023). Fengshen1: zhaogefengyun. www.maoyan.com/films/346288.
- [8] Collins, R. (2011). Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Media: Where are We Now and Where Should We Go? *Sex roles*, 64, 290-298.
- [9] Harriger, J. (2022). With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: A Content Analysis of Masculinity Themes in Superhero Movies. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*, 23(4), 353-361.
- [10] Jung, C. (2014). *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*. Routledge.
- [11] Tasker, Y. (2012). *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. Routledge.
- [12] Walby, S. (1989). Theorising Patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23(2), 213-234.
- [13] Brill, A., Freud, S. (1934). The Interpretation of Dreams. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 79(2), 223.
- [14] Connell, R. (2009) *Gender in World Perspective*. Polity Press.
- [15] Campbell, J. (2003). *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work*. New World Library.
- [16] Freud, S. (2012). *Totem and Taboo*. Routledge.