

THE STUDY OF NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FILM LANGUAGE IN TSUI HARK'S FILMS*

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Abstract

This study investigates the narrative structure and film language in the fantasy works of Tsui Hark, focusing specifically on three representative films released between 2013 and 2018. As a director known for blending traditional Chinese aesthetics with modern cinematic techniques, Tsui constructs intricate narratives that challenge linear storytelling and genre conventions. Using qualitative methods of textual and visual analysis, the research explores how Tsui's films utilize episodic structures, symbolic imagery, dynamic cinematography, and layered sound design to communicate deeper philosophical and cultural themes. The findings reveal that Tsui Hark's cinematic style transcends entertainment, positioning his works as culturally reflective texts that engage with identity, power, and illusion in contemporary Chinese society. His hybrid narrative and visual strategies contribute significantly to the evolution of genre cinema in a transnational context.

Keywords: Tsui Hark, Chinese cinema, narrative structure, film aesthetics, fantasy genre; visual language, cultural identity

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Introduction

In the realm of East Asian cinema, Tsui Hark occupies a singular position as a visionary director who reshaped Hong Kong action film aesthetics and narrative conventions. His unique ability to integrate traditional Chinese cultural elements with postmodern cinematic techniques has left a profound impact on both domestic and international film discourse. Since the 1980s, Tsui has been at the forefront of a cinematic transformation - blending genres such as martial arts, fantasy, horror, and romance - to construct complex narratives that both entertain and provoke reflection. Works like *Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain* and *Once Upon a Time in China* not only brought new energy to martial arts cinema but also introduced philosophical depth and cultural introspection into action storytelling. Scholars have noted how directors like Tsui operate within a “transnational imagination,” negotiating between local traditions and globalized film languages (Dai, 2005). His films are not mere cultural artifacts but active agents in shaping identity and political consciousness in postcolonial Hong Kong (Abbas, 1997).

The significance of Tsui Hark’s filmmaking lies not only in his stylistic innovation but also in his sustained exploration of human complexity, moral ambiguity, and cultural transformation. His directorial approach is grounded in a deep understanding of cinematic language - employing stylized visual effects, rapid montage, and layered *mise-en-scène* to expand the expressive capacity of genre cinema. Rather than relying on formulaic conventions, Tsui disrupts traditional narrative logic, creating hybrid storytelling forms that reflect the uncertainties and contradictions of contemporary life. This paper argues that Tsui Hark’s work exemplifies how genre cinema can transcend its entertainment function to engage with philosophical and ethical dilemmas. Through a close examination of selected films, this study investigates how Tsui’s narrative structures and visual syntax function not only as artistic strategies but also as

tools for cultural commentary. By situating Tsui's oeuvre within the broader frameworks of postmodern genre theory, visual semiotics, and global film aesthetics, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving role of the auteur in global Chinese cinema.

Objectives

1. To analyze the narrative structure in Tsui Hark's films.
2. To examine the film language of Tsui Hark's films.

Literature Review

In her essay *Rethinking Genre*, Christine Gledhill (2000) challenges traditional understandings of genre as a fixed category and instead emphasizes its dynamic nature as a discursive and institutional practice. She argues that genre should be viewed as a cultural process, constantly reshaped by audiences, industries, and historical contexts. This perspective offers a valuable framework for analyzing Tsui Hark's cinematic language, which frequently blurs genre boundaries-combining action, fantasy, and historical drama in a single narrative. Gledhill's emphasis on the role of genre in mediating ideological and cultural tensions aligns with Tsui's use of martial arts cinema to negotiate questions of nationalism, identity, and historical memory.

In *Chinese National Cinema*, Zhang Yingjin (2004) presents a comprehensive overview of narrative strategies in Chinese cinema, tracing their evolution alongside socio-political transformations. Zhang suggests that narrative form in Chinese films often resists linearity and closure, favoring episodic, circular, or multi-perspective storytelling modes. This insight is especially pertinent to Tsui Hark's films, which often exhibit fragmented and hybridized narrative structures, reflecting the instability and pluralism of Hong Kong identity. Tsui's engagement

with historical revisionism and metafictional storytelling directly resonates with Zhang's theoretical model of cinema as a site of cultural negotiation.

Brian Attebery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) explores how fantasy operates not only through supernatural elements but also through the logic of subversion and estrangement. He contends that fantasy texts question dominant ideological frameworks by creating alternative worlds that reflect, distort, or challenge reality. Tsui Hark's fantasy films such as *Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain* exemplify this mechanism by blending mythological tropes with modern anxieties, generating narratives that oscillate between escapism and allegory. Attebery's framework enables a deeper understanding of how Tsui uses fantastical visuals and non-linear logic to critique contemporary political and spiritual crises.

In the article "Tsui Hark: National Style and Polemic," Stephen Teo (2001) examines Tsui's auteur status within the context of Hong Kong's transition from colony to Special Administrative Region. Teo highlights how Tsui's films are characterized by a polemical approach to history and identity, often using cinematic spectacle to reflect on the anxieties of postcolonial existence. He argues that Tsui's distinctive style lies in his combination of commercial appeal with intellectual provocation, a duality that positions him as both a mainstream director and a cultural critic. Teo's analysis is crucial for understanding Tsui's political consciousness and artistic innovation.

Methodology

To explore how Tsui Hark integrates storytelling techniques and visual styles in his fantasy films, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. This method is suitable for capturing the complex, symbolic, and stylistic aspects of his films through textual and visual analysis. By focusing on detailed observations and interpretive insights, the qualitative method enables the researcher to



explore how Tsui Hark constructs narrative meanings and visual impact through genre blending, intertextual references, and cinematic innovation.

1. Population and Samples

Tsui Hark's prolific career spans several decades, with films that reflect his evolving artistic vision. This research narrows the focus to three representative fantasy films produced between 2013 and 2018, a period when Tsui demonstrated a mature cinematic style and bold experimentation in both narrative structure and visual spectacle. These films were selected based on their influence on genre filmmaking, innovative storytelling, strong visual identity, and industry recognition (awards and box office impact). Each film represents a different facet of Tsui's late-career directorial expression and collectively offers a comprehensive lens for analyzing his approach to fantasy cinema (Table 1).

Table 1 Selected Films of Tsui Hark for Analysis

Release Year	Film Name	Film Poster	Awards & Box Office
2013	Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nominated at Asian Film Awards (2014): Best Production Design, Costume Design, Visual Effects - Nominated for nine categories at Hong Kong Film Awards (2014), including Best Supporting Actress and Best Art Direction - Box Office: 94 million RMB

2017	Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Box Office: 248 million RMB (highest grossing among the three films, co-directed with Stephen Chow)
2018	Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nominated at Golden Horse Awards (2018): Best Visual Effects, Best Action Choreography - Asian Film Awards (2019): Best Visual Effects, Best Costume Design - Box Office: 96 million RMB

These films are chosen for their relevance to the fantasy genre, cultural symbolism, and Tsui Hark's signature aesthetic. The focus is on the director's narrative strategies, mise-en-scène, and visual design in relation to genre conventions and audience reception.

2. Research Instruments

The research divides into 2 parts of analysis. That will be:

Part 1: The storytelling technique of Tsui Hark's films. This research uses the concept of storytelling technique of film to study and determine Tsui Hark's films. This part of the research focuses on examining the storytelling techniques used in Tsui Hark's films. It utilizes concepts from film storytelling techniques to study and analyze the narrative structures, character development, plot progression, and other elements that contribute to storytelling in Tsui Hark's films.

Part2: The visual styles of Tsui Hark's movie. This research uses the concept of visual styles to explain Tsui Hark's films. This section of the research

focuses on exploring the visual styles in Tsui Hark's films. It uses concepts related to visual aesthetics, including cinematography, color schemes, special effects, and overall visual presentation, to explain and analyze how these elements are used in Tsui Hark's films to create a distinctive visual impact.

3. Data Collection

The primary data comprises the three selected films, obtained through reputable digital platforms, including:

Tencent Video (<https://v.qq.com/>)

iQIYI (<http://www.iqiyi.com/>)

Bilibili (<https://www.bilibili.com/>)

Migu Video (<https://www.miguvideo.com/>)

Each film was watched multiple times in high-definition format, with scenes manually timestamped and annotated for key narrative and visual markers. Supplementary data include interviews, director commentary, behind-the-scenes footage, and archival reviews, helping to contextualize creative decisions and production background.

4. Data Analysis

The data analysis for this research will encompass a comprehensive examination of three key films from Tsui Hark's later career, to discuss objectives of this research. This analysis will be conducted in two distinct parts:

- (1) The analysis of the storytelling techniques in Tsui Hark's films.
- (2) The analysis of visual style of Tsui Hark's films.

5. Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a dual-lens framework focusing on narrative structure and film language to explore the artistic and cultural dimensions of Tsui Hark's fantasy films. On the narrative level, the research examines how nonlinear storytelling, fragmented plots, and hybrid genre elements construct complex meanings and reflect deeper ideological tensions. Simultaneously, the study analyzes Tsui's visual style-including cinematography, color symbolism, sound

design, and editing- as a language system that supports, contrasts with, or enhances narrative intent. By integrating these two analytical dimensions, the framework allows for a holistic understanding of how Tsui's films transcend conventional genre boundaries and function as a medium for cultural introspection and philosophical engagement.

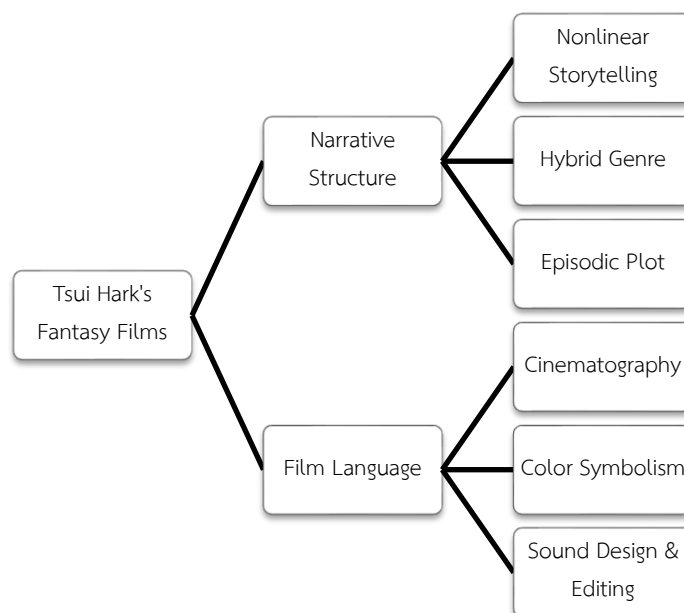


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework (Source: Constructed by the researcher)

Results

1. The Analysis of Narrative Structure in Tsui Hark's Films

1.1 Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon (2013)

In *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon*, Tsui Hark constructs a richly layered narrative through a sophisticated combination of political intrigue, mythical monsters, and identity revelation. The plot progresses through a series of investigative stages, typical of a detective story, but is interwoven with wuxia fantasy elements, allowing Tsui to experiment with nonlinear storytelling. The protagonist, Dee Renjie, gradually uncovers a deeper conspiracy involving court

politics, imperial authority, and monstrous transformations, reflecting a structure that both pays homage to and subverts traditional heroic narratives.

The film's storytelling relies heavily on thematic dualities, such as loyalty versus deception and science versus superstition. Tsui introduces the character of Yuchi Zhenjin as both a foil and a partner to Dee, using parallel character arcs to enrich the viewer's emotional engagement. Tsui also employs climactic revelations at key moments to recalibrate audience expectations, aligning with a cinematic rhetoric that emphasizes spectacle and emotional impact.

Notably, the structure follows a modular pattern: each set piece (e.g., sea monster attacks, medical investigations, imperial court scenes) operates as a narrative unit that advances the plot while simultaneously building character depth. This multi-threaded structure demonstrates Tsui's mastery of balancing complexity with clarity, crafting a narrative that is accessible yet intellectually engaging.

1.2 Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back (2017)

In *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back*, Tsui Hark reimagines the classic mythological journey through an ironic and episodic narrative structure. Unlike the linear progression seen in conventional adaptations, Tsui constructs a fragmented and circular storytelling style that mirrors the psychological tension between the master Xuanzang and his disciples. Each encounter with a demon is less a plot point than a moral trial, revealing the inner flaws and unresolved conflicts within the traveling group.

The film blends slapstick humor with philosophical undertones, using narrative ambiguity to challenge audience expectations. For example, the supposed virtuous monk is portrayed as temperamental and self-righteous, while the demons are often given complex motivations. This inversion complicates the traditional binary of good versus evil, a narrative device Tsui employs to reflect contemporary cultural anxieties about truth and authority.

Tsui also uses visual-narrative parallelism: sequences of grand spectacle (e.g., Pigsy's transformation or Spider Demon's trap) mirror the emotional states of the characters, particularly the growing distrust between the master and his disciples. The result is a layered narrative that operates simultaneously on mythic, psychological, and social levels, indicating a matured and postmodern storytelling strategy.

1.3 Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings (2018)

In Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings, Tsui Hark advances his narrative experimentation by blending detective genre conventions with political allegory and magical realism. The film's storytelling pivots around a web of illusions-literal and metaphorical-which disrupt the linearity of the detective genre and require viewers to question the reliability of both visual perception and narrative truth.

The structure is constructed around interlocking plotlines: the apparent conflict between Dee and the Empress Wu is only a surface narrative that conceals a deeper spiritual and ideological struggle involving illusionists and hidden conspiracies. Through these nested narratives, Tsui emphasizes themes of manipulation, fear, and loyalty. The use of unreliable narrators and shifting perspectives creates a fluid storytelling rhythm where characters are constantly redefined by new revelations.

Furthermore, Tsui integrates Buddhist philosophical motifs into the narrative arc. Characters face not only external threats but also internal delusions. This metaphysical layer intensifies the emotional stakes and elevates the detective narrative into a moral parable. In doing so, Tsui Hark reinforces his signature storytelling style-where logic, mythology, and introspection coexist in dynamic tension.

2. The analysis of film language in Tsui Hark's films

2.1 Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon (2013)

In *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon*, Tsui Hark skillfully blends classical Chinese aesthetics with modern cinematic techniques, crafting a visually dynamic experience. The cinematography employs a fluid camera style that mirrors the pacing of the investigative narrative. Sweeping wide-angle shots present the grandeur of the Tang dynasty, while intimate close-ups during moments of revelation draw viewers into the emotional and psychological tension of the detective process.

Color plays a crucial symbolic role in this film. Royal court scenes are infused with golden tones, conveying the majesty and formality of imperial power. In contrast, darker shades of blue and green dominate sequences involving the supernatural, evoking mystery and otherworldliness. This careful chromatic distinction visually delineates the rational from the mystical—a tension central to the film's plot.

The film's sound design further enhances this narrative duality. Traditional Chinese instruments, such as the guqin and flute, enrich the historical ambiance, while modern orchestral scoring drives emotional intensity during action and suspense. In particular, scenes involving hallucination or mythic beasts use layered, echoing sounds to create an immersive atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

Editing techniques are tightly choreographed, particularly in fight scenes and dreamlike sequences. Tsui blends rapid cross-cutting with slow motion to shift viewer focus and alter narrative tempo. For example, in the battle with the sea monster, editing remains coherent and rhythmically steady despite heavy CGI, allowing the spectacle to feel grounded within the story world.

Lighting also plays a storytelling role. Through chiaroscuro effects—especially in scenes of secret meetings or palace intrigue—Tsui visually reinforces the contrast between knowledge and deception. Lantern-lit chambers and shadowed corridors create a mood of uncertainty and tension, supporting the film's themes of hidden truths and moral complexity.

Ultimately, the visual language of Young Detective Dee is not merely ornamental but deeply functional. Each stylistic choice—from camera movement to color and sound—serves to articulate a narrative about reason, authority, and the unknown. This film stands as a key example of Tsui Hark's evolving visual style in his later works, combining traditional cultural motifs with contemporary cinematic grammar.

2.2 Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back (2017)

In *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back*, Tsui Hark transforms a classical narrative into a visually spectacular fantasy, employing a bold and exaggerated visual language to reflect the film's allegorical complexity. The cinematography is deliberately theatrical, featuring long tracking shots and dramatic camera angles that emphasize the surrealism of the pilgrimage. Characters are often framed in exaggerated perspectives to reflect their psychological states, such as fear, pride, or confusion, creating a sense of visual metaphor throughout the film.

The use of color is especially pronounced in this work. Each scene is saturated with vibrant hues—fiery reds for demon worlds, icy blues for divine realms, and golden light for sacred moments—creating a layered visual cosmology. These color schemes do more than please the eye; they communicate shifts in moral tone and narrative energy. This intense chromatic palette distinguishes the spiritual journey's emotional highs and lows and helps distinguish the realms of heaven, earth, and hell.

Sound design plays an essential role in reinforcing the film's hybrid tone of slapstick, myth, and psychological tension. Tsui blends exaggerated sound effects with musical motifs that reference traditional operatic structure. This approach both grounds the narrative in Chinese performance tradition and enhances its comedic and mystical elements. Sudden shifts from quiet ambience

to explosive effects are employed to reflect the unpredictable nature of the demons and the internal chaos of the monk's spiritual struggle.

Editing in this film favors rapid montage sequences that alternate between physical comedy, intense action, and introspective stillness. This contrast reflects the unstable moral world in which the characters operate. For example, during battle scenes, Tsui uses quick cuts and CGI transitions to portray transformation, illusion, and violence in one fluid motion. Meanwhile, slower editing tempo is used during moments of reflection, particularly those involving the monk Tang Sanzang, allowing space for philosophical contemplation amid chaos.

Tsui's approach to visual style in *The Demons Strike Back* reflects a maturing vision that seeks to fuse spectacle with introspection. The film becomes a mirror of internal transformation, using dynamic visual aesthetics to externalize abstract spiritual conflicts. It reveals Tsui's ongoing effort to modernize classical Chinese storytelling without losing its ethical and symbolic depth. Through vivid cinematic language, the film invites audiences to rethink the boundaries between sacred and profane, illusion and reality.

2.3 Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings (2018)

Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings represents a pinnacle in Tsui Hark's visual experimentation, seamlessly combining advanced CGI, traditional Chinese iconography, and symbolic composition. The film's cinematography embraces a heightened sense of spectacle, with sweeping crane shots and layered visual frames that immerse the viewer in an elaborate world of court politics, religious mysticism, and psychological manipulation.

One of the most striking features is the film's use of illusion and visual deception as both plot device and stylistic principle. Scenes involving magical hallucinations or manipulated reality employ a surreal aesthetic—floating Buddhas, morphing environments, and shifting architectural perspectives—to question the nature of truth and perception. These techniques echo the

philosophical undertones of the narrative, positioning illusion not only as a magical force but also as a metaphor for political deceit and personal identity.

The color palette in this installment is more controlled but strategically expressive. Dominant golds and reds in imperial settings reflect grandeur and power, while greenish hues appear in sequences involving hidden forces or mind control, signifying corruption and unnatural interference. Light is sculpted through symbolic means-such as divine rays penetrating the throne room or dark shadows cloaking conspirators-to support the moral allegory embedded in the narrative.

The film's sound design intensifies its psychological tension. Unlike earlier works that favored musical elaboration, this film often uses silence or low-frequency rumble to heighten suspense. In key scenes involving mental illusion, Tsui employs minimalist soundscapes to disorient the viewer, creating a sense of dread and ambiguity. Ritual drums, chanting, and distorted echoes contribute to the atmosphere of spiritual conflict and imperial manipulation.

Editing is used as a narrative disruptor. The rhythm of cutting often mimics the instability of the characters' mental states. Transitions between reality and illusion are intentionally ambiguous, forcing the audience to question what is real. Action scenes are not only fast-paced but also layered with symbolic motifs, such as the statue of the Four Heavenly Kings shattering during a moment of crisis-suggesting the collapse of order and balance.

This film showcases Tsui Hark's ability to elevate genre filmmaking into philosophical cinema. Through a highly controlled yet dynamic visual style, he explores themes of trust, delusion, and institutional power. By embedding visual metaphor in every technical aspect-from cinematography to sound to set design-Tsui constructs a layered experience that invites viewers to reflect on authority, belief, and the fragility of perception itself.

Discussion

This study explored the narrative structure and visual style of three of Tsui Hark's later fantasy films, demonstrating how his works function as more than genre entertainment. Rather, they serve as culturally embedded, philosophically charged texts that reflect on the nature of perception, power, and identity in contemporary Chinese cinema. In relation to the first research objective, the analysis of narrative structure shows that Tsui Hark does not simply conform to genre expectations but actively redefines them to serve broader ideological and artistic purposes. His use of episodic progression, nested plots, and allegorical devices resonates with traditional Chinese narrative modes while also diverging from them through postmodern irony and ambiguity.

As Chan (2009) suggests in his study of transnational Chinese cinema, filmmakers like Tsui Hark operate within a global cultural economy while retaining a distinctly local sensibility. This observation is directly reflected in the findings of the second research objective, which emphasized Tsui's innovative film language. In *Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back*, Tsui blends Buddhist allegory with blockbuster-scale visuals, producing a stylistic duality that juxtaposes spiritual inquiry with consumer spectacle. This outcome aligns with Chan's perspective on transnational cinema while highlighting a unique contextual dimension of Tsui's late works- namely, the negotiation between mythic tradition and the demands of globalized film markets.

Schroeder's (2010) examination of *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain* also provides insight into Tsui's sustained commitment to visual experimentation as a narrative device. The findings from *Detective Dee: The Four Heavenly Kings* demonstrate that the fantastical visual style-elaborate CGI creatures, symbolic lighting, and surreal mise-en-scène- does more than decorate the story; it becomes a means to explore psychological and ideological conflict. While this is consistent with Schroeder's identification of visual excess as central to Tsui's

aesthetic, the present study also reveals a divergence in emphasis, as Tsui's later films integrate illusion and deception more pervasively to address sociopolitical anxieties in the 2010s.

Furthermore, Bettinson (2016) identifies the persistence of traditional motifs in Hong Kong puzzle films, a category that includes many of Tsui's works. The analysis of *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* confirms this persistence: its multi-threaded narrative structure and temporal shifts mirror traditional Chinese episodic storytelling. However, the study also found that Tsui imbues these narrative devices with postmodern ambiguity, complicating the viewer's search for linear resolution. This reflects not only continuity with earlier traditions, as Bettinson argues, but also a critical divergence, as Tsui introduces skepticism toward historical certainty and institutional authority.

These findings confirm that Tsui Hark's cinematic approach is simultaneously rooted in traditional Chinese aesthetics and attuned to modern technological and thematic concerns. His films are not only artistic expressions but also interventions into contemporary discourse-offering commentary on morality, national identity, and the human psyche. In conclusion, this study reveals that Tsui Hark's narrative and visual strategies work in tandem to produce a dynamic, layered cinematic experience. By blending classical motifs with experimental techniques, he redefines the fantasy genre as a space for cultural reflection and innovation. His later works, in particular, offer valuable insights into how Chinese filmmakers are negotiating tradition and modernity in an increasingly globalized cinematic landscape.

Recommendations

1. General Recommendations

This study underscores the critical value of analyzing narrative and visual elements in Chinese fantasy cinema, particularly in the works of Tsui Hark. For

filmmakers and scholars, it is recommended to approach genre cinema not merely as entertainment but as a vehicle for cultural, philosophical, and social expression. As demonstrated in Tsui's films, visual effects and narrative complexity can be employed to explore deeper moral and psychological themes. Thus, practitioners in the film industry should consider adopting more integrated approaches to storytelling, where visual aesthetics serve not only a decorative function but also a narrative and thematic one. Educators in film studies programs are also encouraged to include Chinese fantasy cinema in their curricula to help students understand how non-Western auteurs like Tsui Hark challenge and enrich global cinematic language.

2. Future Research Recommendations

While this study focused on three of Tsui Hark's fantasy films from 2013 to 2018, future research could expand the scope chronologically and thematically. A comparative study of Tsui's earlier and later works could reveal how his aesthetic and narrative strategies have evolved in response to changing political and technological contexts. Moreover, cross-cultural analysis between Tsui's films and Western fantasy or science fiction films could provide insight into transnational influences and the localization of global genres. Future studies could also employ audience reception analysis to understand how viewers from different cultural backgrounds interpret the symbolic and visual complexities of Tsui Hark's cinema. In addition, interdisciplinary approaches- drawing from psychology, philosophy, or media studies- could deepen the understanding of how Tsui's films reflect and influence contemporary Chinese identity.

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