

Reconstructing Myth and Identity: A Study of Ne Zha: The Demonic Children Roar

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Abstract. The animated feature Ne Zha achieved record-breaking commercial success in China and initiated dialogues about its cultural determinants. This paper investigates the film's success based on three dimensions of its content. First, the film reimagines Ne Zha from a character with a tragic past into a hero of individual rebellion, making his self-determined character relatable to contemporary youth. Second, the paper deconstructs the family narrative. It challenges patriarchal paradigms and emphasizes emotional dialogue, reflecting the evolution of Chinese family ethics. Finally, the film uses a unique cultural aesthetic that synthesizes the classical East with contemporary digital technology to demonstrate cultural confidence. The paper concludes that the film's success was a merger of cultural innovation, industrial capacity, and compelling emotional content. The film serves as a powerful model for creatively transforming traditional IP and marks a direction for developing Chinese narratives beyond China.

Keywords: Ne Zha, Chinese Animation, Cultural Innovation, Character Reconstruction, Eastern Aesthetics

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese animation film industry has shown a vigorous development trend, and achieving box office success has gradually become an important force driving the growth of the Chinese film market. Among them, the 2019 release of Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child (hereinafter referred to as Ne Zha 1) ignited the market with a box office revenue of over 5 billion yuan, becoming a milestone work in the history of Chinese animated films. Its sequel, Ne Zha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea (hereinafter referred to as Ne Zha 2), achieved an astonishing total of 15.9 billion yuan during the 2025 Spring Festival period. It not only topped the box office in Chinese film history, but also surpassed many Hollywood blockbusters to become the world's top grossing animated film, becoming the world's single market box office champion and the highest peak for non English language films. From a box office perspective, Ne Zha 2 undoubtedly achieved great success, but box office figures alone cannot fully explain its widespread social influence.

Based on the data generated from the survey of Chinese Film Audience Satisfaction, the film earns far better scores in the two attributes of "content innovation" and "cultural identity" than any other film released around the same time [1]. The research report from the third issue of Contemporary Film in 2025 stated that the film received high praise among both young audiences

and middle-aged audiences with an 87% recognition rate of its source material, an especially large proportion among the 25-40 year-old audiences [2]. The scholar Wang Xiaoming points out that *Ne Zha 2* finalizes the modern success of converting traditional cultural components [3]. It revitalizes classical mythological narratives through character re-shaping, narrative creativity, and technological innovations, is an indispensable reason for its success with audiences of all ages. This article explores *Ne Zha 2* as the object of study through the content presentation lens, including aspects of character shaping, theme projection, cultural innovation and so forth, to look deeply at the underlying reasons contributing to its record breaking box office. The study addresses how the film manages to maintain multiple relationships, or balances tradition and modernity, art and commerce, and local and global. The study also purposefully investigates the internal mechanism of dual success in the market and in reputation. In so doing this study hopes to add valuable implications to the creation and industry development of Chinese contemporary animated film.

2. Evolving myth and identity

2.1. Identity transformation of *Ne Zha*

On the basis of continuing the worldview of the previous work, *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea* further deepens the growth arc and spiritual connotation of the core character *Ne Zha*. The film follows the ending of *Ne Zha 1*, where *Nezha* successfully resisted the heavenly tribulation to preserve his soul, but his physical body was destroyed. *Taiyi Zhenren* reshapes the world behind him with lotus roots. In the wake of the first film's events, *Nezha's* battlefield shifts from the outside world to within himself. The primary conflict is no longer about public prejudice but a deep, personal crisis of identity. He is effectively rendered an “alienated body,” caught between the rejected label of “demon child” and the unearned title of “spirit bead hero.” By refusing to place him in a simple category, the film breaks from mythological binaries and carves out a far more complex psychological landscape for its hero.

Where the first film's *Nezha* met his fate with an outward roar, the sequel's hero must learn to face his own internal fears. The threat of the *Donghai Dragon Clan* is ever-present, but it pales in comparison to his turmoil over his identity and longing for connection. We witness this vulnerability in his pained reactions to the townspeople's fear and, most pointedly, in his complicated emotional reliance on his frenemy, *Ao Bing*. This evolution—from a symbol of rebellion to a portrait of adolescent self-doubt—vividly reflects a broader trend towards more humanized and modern character arcs in Chinese animation.

In *Nezha 1* characterization began from the idea of “revolt,” and through the developmental aspects of identity, it was more externally characterized as a “demon child”, moving with a strong external confrontational color; Whereas in *Nezha 2* it supports more an internal identity anxiety and reconstruction process. During this process, *Nezha* gradually realized that true strength does not come from magic or hatred, but from accepting oneself, taking responsibility, and guarding the ones he loves. For example, at the climax of the film, *Nezha* no longer fights against the tribulation alone like in the previous installment, but chooses to face the crisis together with *Ao Bing*, his parents, and the people of *Chentangguan*, marking his transformation from a “lone rebel” to a “guardian of the community”. *Nezha's* innovative image did not depart from traditional imagery, but instead resonated with it.

The traditional Chinese story of *Nezha* emphasizes the determination to “returning the bones to the father and giving the flesh back to the mother” and the resistance to patriarchy, while “*Nezha 2*” injects more modern humanistic care and emotional expression while retaining its rebellious spirit.

The film does not simply repeat the narrative of "patricide", but reconstructs the responsibility and emotional bond between generations through the sacrifice of Li Jing and his wife in exchange for life, and Nezha's emotional transformation from resistance to understanding. This approach not only echoes the intense conflict between Nezha and his family in traditional stories, but also endows them with a more modern dimension of reconciliation and growth, reflecting the efforts of Chinese animation to creatively transform traditional stories.

2.2. Cultural context of Ne Zha

The phenomenal success of *Ne Zha: The Demon Boy Churns the Sea* (hereinafter referred to as *Ne Zha 2*) has sparked multidimensional interpretations in the academic community. Scholars have attempted to dissect the underlying reasons for its conquest of global audiences from multiple perspectives such as cultural translation, technological aesthetics, and social psychology.

A report from Peking University's Cultural Industry Research Institute points out that the youthful expression of traditional IPs has become the "core competitiveness of Chinese comics breaking through the circle" [4]. Through deconstructing and recreating classic myths, *Nezha 2* abandons the binary narrative of black and white, and portrays Nezha as a character with both rebellious spirit and human warmth. The film places the character of the Dragon King into a kind of workplace isolation, depicted as he is being "trapped in the deep sea." Similarly, the character of Shen Gongbao has his divinity removed by being given a stutter. In this way, the characters bear greater resemblance to the contemporary audience's own experience of survival. The film thus achieves an organic relationship between traditional culture and contemporary values. On a technical level, the film stands as a landmark for Chinese animation, primarily for the way it breathes digital life into classical Chinese art forms. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the "Ao Bing Hua Long" sequence. Here, flexible ink-rendering technology allows digital ink to flow and bleed across the screen with the organic freedom of a traditional brush, creating a stunning marriage of ancient aesthetics and modern computing. The film's creative ambition doesn't stop there; its action scenes borrow their very DNA from video games. The fight choreography directly mirrors the fast-paced combo systems of games like "Devil May Cry," plunging younger audiences into what feels like an immersive gaming session. Experts in the China Film Association are optimistic about this as being a stage leap for Chinese animation; moving from "technological catch-up" to "aesthetic leadership" [5]. As for sociopsychological resonance, it is the foci of interest for many scholars. The origin of Nezha's "Magic Pill" has been interpreted as metaphor for a society's labeling and structure oppression upon individuals; while Nezha's infamous declaration of "I am the master of my fate, not heaven.", reflects an existentialist idea of "awakening of self definition", accurately hitting contemporary youth's struggles in class solidification and pursuit of individual value.

In addition, the film provides a modern interpretation of family ethics, and the image of Li Jing and his wife is seen as a microcosm of "Chinese-style parents", sparking widespread discussions on intergenerational conflict and reconciliation. In terms of dissemination and reception, some studies have approached from the perspective of "coarse information transmission", believing that the success of *Ne Zha 2* is due to the reverse utilization of "cultural discounts". By accurately grasping the pricing logic of cultural products in the global market, it has lowered the acceptance threshold for international audiences. Professor Zheng Tuyou from Fudan University emphasized that the key to the success of the film lies in the refinement and sublimation of the core theme of folk stories [6]. The philosophical proposition of "I am the master of my fate, not heaven.", which is rooted in Taoist thought and highly modern, has deeply resonated with audiences of all ages.

However, there are also studies that remind us to be wary of the narrative traps behind business success. Scholars have pointed out that in the attempt to upgrade the grand narrative of *Nezha 2*, some of the characters' motivations were simplified, and they fell into the dilemma of "special effects and wonders squeezing the narrative space". *Nezha's* resistance degenerated from the "philosophical awakening" in the first part to a stress response of "opposing others", resulting in the collapse of the characters' spiritual core.

In summary, the academic community generally believes that the success of *Nezha 2* is the result of the systematic synergy of cultural innovation, industrial hard power, and communication soft power. It signifies an effective creative path: by modernizing and globalizing traditional culture, supplemented by top-notch audio-visual technology, in order to adhere to the cultural core while achieving emotional resonance with the widest possible audience.

2.3. Character reconstruction

2.3.1. Role reconstruction: from a tragic sacrifice figure to a rebel leader

Compared with the tragic image of the *Nezha* character in the 1979 version produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, the smoky-eyed makeup and the rebellious style of dress of the new version's *Nezha* already indicate a significant change in its spiritual core.

In the 1979 production of "*Nezha Rides the Sea*" by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, *Nezha* presented a tragic hero image with a white robe and bare feet, sacrificing himself to repent. That scene of returning the bones to the father and giving the flesh back to the mother was one of the most shocking tragic scenes in the history of Chinese animation. The old version of *Nezha* completed his rebellion against the patriarchal system through self-sacrifice, and its aesthetic expression was filled with the grandeur and beauty of classical tragedy. While the new version of *Nezha*, with its smoky-eyed makeup and walking with a pocket in hand, makes its appearance. Its appearance design itself conveys a strong signal of breaking away from tradition. The aforementioned visual disruption merely serves as an introduction; the core of the character has been fundamentally transformed. Rather than a tragic hero who passively accepts fate, *Nezha* evolves into a manifestation of a "rebellious top-trending icon" that actively contests the external order. The film has upgraded the phrase, for which the previous version of the film was generally praised, "I am the master of my fate, not heaven" into a more weighty "If there is no way ahead, I will carve out a path; if the natural order is unjust, I will overturn this universe." *Nezha's* new mantra captures the very spirit of a modern rebellion, one determined to master its own fate. This spirit ignites the film's final battle, where *Nezha* no longer stands alone but leads the demon clans against the heavens' unjust decree. His heroic transformation is sealed in the unforgettable image of him ripping through the golden celestial curtain, a scene drenched in defiant red. In that moment, the lone wolf who suffered under the system is reborn as the leader of a revolution against it.

This is far more than a simple retelling; it's a radical reinvention of the myth itself. *Nezha* is no longer just a hero fighting for his own destiny; he becomes an avatar for anyone who has ever faced an oppressive system. It is this reinvention that resonates so deeply with the aspirations of today's youth. The film sharpens its social commentary with piercing character details. We see it in the tragedy of *Ao Bing*, whose robotic bowing paints a chilling picture of a soul crushed by a rigid, elite upbringing. We feel it in the sting of *Shen Gongbao's* words, as he points to his scar and laments that centuries of hard work cannot compete with the privilege of birth, a gut-punch critique of a world that too often values pedigree over perseverance.

It's in these character dilemmas that the film finds its powerful echo in the real world, resonating with a generation of young people who feel constrained by rigid class structures and unequal opportunities. The new Nezha becomes a mirror for profound shifts in Chinese social values: the pivot from collectivism to individualism, the turn from quiet acceptance to loud defiance. His journey captures the blossoming desire for equality and justice stirring in the hearts of China's youth. The film's true genius lies in this reformulation, breathing new life into old lore by creating a hero young people desperately needed. He is not a distant, perfect god, but a gloriously imperfect and defiant human being who discovers that the fight for justice is more important than the comfort of acceptance. Nezha's arc from victim to icon becomes a testament to animation's power to not just entertain, but to capture the pulse of a changing society.

This masterful reinvention provides a powerful blueprint for how China can creatively modernize its vast library of cultural stories. The raw emotional impact is undeniable, as seen in the explosion of over 120,000 scrolling comments on Bilibili when Nezha finally shatters the celestial vessel—his "career ceiling." In that single, cathartic moment, the audience was not just watching a hero; they were feeling their own chains break. Nezha is thus elevated beyond the screen, becoming a potent emblem for any young person who dares to dream of breaking free and demanding a more just world.

2.3.2. Family narrative: breaking the emotional ice with clumsy love

The film dismantles the archetype of the powerful, authoritarian parent not through grand declarations, but through small, startlingly human details. Take Lady Yin: her maternal love is not gentle but fierce, a fact revealed in the wonderfully absurd moment she smashes through a door just to deliver buns. The splintered wood and comedic timing give way to the image of a warrior mother, protective to a fault. Li Jing's silent love is given a similarly powerful cinematic voice. As he prepares for the ultimate sacrifice, the camera doesn't show us a stoic patriarch; it pushes in on his trembling hand, betraying the fear beneath his resolve. The subsequent shot of the burning talisman is a blurry, frantic image, plunging the viewer directly into his moment of agonizing choice. It is a stunning visual metaphor for the unspoken turmoil of a Chinese father, whose love is often expressed only in moments of extreme sacrifice.

But the film's true heart lies in its delicate portrayal of a new kind of family communication. It perfectly captures the familiar friction of adolescence in Nezha's eye-rolling dismissal of his parents. Yet, this everyday frost between them is instantly melted in the heat of a crisis. His primal scream—"Who dares hurt my parents!"—is a raw, emotional declaration that obliterates any hint of youthful detachment. The film visualizes this reunion with a painterly touch: the family, huddled together, is bathed in a soft red glow, a warm island of love against a vast, cold blue sky.

Here, the family ceases to be a rigid hierarchy and becomes a fluid space of shared emotion. This journey of Nezha and his parents mirrors a quiet revolution happening in homes across China. The film gives us not a memory of the Chinese family, but a snapshot of its evolution in real-time: the slow, hopeful sprouting of a new kind of love that values open expression and individual respect.

The very foundation of the family relationship shifts in the film, moving from the cold calculus of authority and obedience to the warm light of mutual respect. The silence that once enforced emotional distance now gives way to moments of raw, honest connection. This stands in stark contrast to the old Li Jing, a patriarch defined by commands like "You are not my son anymore." The new Li Jing is drawn with breathtaking vulnerability. We see his composure crumble into tears as he vows to save his son, and we witness the revolutionary moment he stands before Nezha and

utters a simple, powerful admission: "Father was wrong." With these words, the stone statue of the traditional father cracks, revealing a man capable of being an emotional equal.

Nezha's journey beautifully complements his father's. The boy who once scoffed at his family's "false kindness" is reborn as their fiercest protector. This emotional convergence from estrangement to reconciliation feels deeply authentic, reflecting a larger search for more open forms of connection in the real world. The film doesn't just show us a family; it shows us the anatomy of their love—Li Jing's silent sacrifice, Lady Yin's clumsy ferocity. It provides not a nostalgic portrait of a family that was, but a hopeful snapshot of a family that is becoming: one where love is learning to be more inclusive, more individual, and finally, more vocal.

2.4. Cultural confidence: empowering the soul with eastern aesthetics

The film's cultural innovation is painted in color, but powered by a formidable technological engine. The stunning visuals are not an overnight miracle but the culmination of years of progress in China's animation industry, which has mastered 4K rendering and dramatically boosted its effects-processing power [7]. This technical maturity allows the filmmakers to construct breathtaking scenes charged with meaning. In the Jade Void Palace, for example, the screen is flooded with an imposing, cool blue, making the viewer feel the crushing weight of celestial authority.

But the film's true genius lies in how it transforms this color palette into a visual war of ideas, one drawn from the wellspring of Eastern tradition. The central conflict is a battle fought on the canvas itself: the cold, orderly blue of heaven and law against the vibrant, defiant red of blood and life. This red finds its ultimate expression in Nezha's sash, a streak of crimson that cuts through the frame like a "bloodied blade." This clash of color is a deliberate choice, designed to stir a subconscious desire for rebellion in the audience, turning the entire film into a breathtaking showdown between conformity and the untamable spirit of life [8].

The collision of the two is not only a visual interpretation of the plot, but also a modern inheritance of the concept of "freehand brushwork with color" in traditional Chinese art. Li Jie, director of the Animation Research Institute of the China Academy of Art, specifically pointed out in his article "The Aesthetic System Construction of Eastern Animation" that "Nezha 2" successfully integrates traditional mural color design concepts and digital imaging technology in color application, creating a visual language that is both national and contemporary [9].

The important reason for this film's box office miracle is that it successfully combines mythological genes with contemporary spirit. When Nezha changed from fighting against himself to fighting for the common people, when his parents' love broke away from the shackles of etiquette and became a cry for life, and when Chinese animation created a Xintiandi of oriental aesthetics beyond Hollywood standards, this traditional intellectual property gained eternal vitality through creative transformation. Nezha 2 proves that true cultural output begins with a deep exploration and confidence in the local spirit. The cumulative box office figure of 15.9 billion is activated by the conscious response of millions of viewers who "let the world see the story of China," and the mythical renaissance that emerged directly from the screen and has now become a cultural declaration of a new era.

3. Conclusion

The triumph of this cinematic work demonstrates that the authentic vivacity of a culture's heritage does not arise from successful reparation of tradition, but rather from a purposeful reinvention of that tradition through forward-looking perspectives and values. The film provides significant

inspiration for Chinese animation and its creative and cultural industries. A powerful Chinese narrative can only take shape in a global perspective by following a specific formula. It requires being rooted in a cultural foundation, embracing technical innovation, and attending to the emotional and spiritual needs of modern humanity. "Nezha: The Demonic Children Roar in the Sea" is not simply a film, but also a flag that signifies the confidence of Chinese animation matured to a point where it can enter into the global dialogue using its specific representation of aesthetics and visual language.

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