

The Youthful Transformation of the Brand Image for "Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy's Sea Adventure": Reimagining a Cultural IP for the Z Generation

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Abstract. Ne Zha 2, another major Chinese traditional culture animated film, premiered during the 2025 Spring Festival season. Building upon the success of its predecessor Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Boy, it further integrates traditional Chinese cultural elements while implementing innovative approaches to rejuvenate its brand image. This strategy has resulted in a more widely appealing and profound cinematic work. This paper examines how Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy Rages at Sea transformed its brand IP image to appeal to younger audiences. Using case study methodology and analyzing data from social media platforms alongside audience feedback, it explores how traditional Chinese cultural animation films attract Gen Z viewers through brand image innovation. Following the case analysis, the study reveals that Ne Zha 2 implemented numerous innovative adjustments in character development, narrative techniques, and visual style. This leads to the conclusion that modernizing cultural IPs through innovation and diversifying promotional strategies are key to attracting Gen Z audiences. Simultaneously, this research provides theoretical foundations for the innovative development of the cultural and creative industries and offers directional guidance for the youth-oriented transformation of traditional Chinese cultural IPs.

Keywords: Nezha 2, Brand Image, Generation Z, Cultural IP, Film Marketing

1. Introduction

With the rapid rise of the audiovisual industry worldwide, animated films have emerged as an important medium for cultural transmission and communication due to their visual appeal, narrative structure, creativity, and minimal cultural barriers [1]. However, the path to ensuring the sustainable development of animated films, facilitating the transformation of Chinese animated films, and effectively telling Chinese stories while expanding their global reach remains an area requiring further exploration. The 2025 Spring Festival blockbuster " : The Demon Boy's Rebellion" , a sequel to "Ne Zha: The Demon Boy's Descent," has grossed 12 billion yuan domestically and surpassed 1.152 billion USD globally, entering the top 10 all-time global box office rankings (global box office history chart), with box office figures continuing to rise.

Year	Movie	Director	Box Office (10,000 CNY)
2025	Ne Zha: Chaos in the Sea (8.5) 🎬★	Jiaozi	1467026 ↑
2021	The Battle at Lake Changjin (7.6) 🎬★	Chen Kaige*	577524 &
2017	Wolf Warrior 2 (7.1) 🎬★	Wu Jing	569456 &
2021	Hi, Mom (8.1) 🎬★	Jia Ling	541372
2019	Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (8.5) 🎬★	Jiaozi	503557 &
2019	The Wandering Earth (7.9) 🎬★	Guo Fan	468814 &
2023	Full River Red (7.8) 🎬★	Zhang Yimou	454437

Figure 1. China's all-time box office chart

As Generation Z increasingly becomes the main force in cultural consumption, how traditional cultural IPs can attract this demographic through youth-oriented transformations has become a critical issue. This study takes "Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy's Sea Adventure" as a case study, exploring the strategies for its brand image rejuvenation and the impact on Generation Z from the perspectives of Generation Z's cultural characteristics and consumption trends, brand image rejuvenation, cultural IP reinterpretation, and cross-cultural communication strategies. The aim is to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the innovative development of the cultural and creative industry.

2. Brand image youthful transformation

Chinese brand strategy expert Li Guangdou believes that brands should keep pace with the times and adapt to market demands. Brands need to continuously update and develop, employing the strategy of "making my brand look younger" to grasp the essence of brand youthfulness. We should have confidence that the next century will be the century of Chinese brands. Brand youthfulness is not merely a constructive behavior: it involves presenting consumers with better core values and concepts, finding one's value in a complex market, and conveying the brand's value philosophy and cultural connotations with a positive attitude. It also involves focusing on consumers and continuously innovating product types, updating product packaging, and other measures to position the brand's products as youthful [2].

The dumpling team has modernized the traditional Nezha brand image with innovative ideas, making it more youthful and forming a new Nezha brand image. "Nezha 2" continues the creation of the traditional cultural IP "Nezha" while placing greater emphasis on the youthfulness of the brand image to cater to the needs of the "Z generation" audience:

2.1. In terms of character development

Generation Z is more attracted to the authenticity of historical and political figures ; they believe that a rich and profound plot that resonates with them is key; they reject and have a stronger desire for self-expression. In "Ne Zha 2," the film focuses on the character development of Ne Zha and other characters, using the plot and character portrayal to metaphorically critique modern young people's strong questioning of social rules and hypocritical systems, while also reflecting their pursuit of self-worth. Through Ne Zha's growth story, themes such as self-identity, family relationships, and social

prejudice prompt audiences to reflect on various topics including family bonds, friendship, and personal growth.

2.2. In terms of narrative style

Ne Zha 2 adopts an "anti-hero" narrative strategy, portraying Ne Zha as an "other" trapped by prejudice and discrimination. In the process of constructing his identity, he faces violent discipline from the social structure and the difficult choice of self-awakening. In the stalemate between extreme adversity and relentless struggle, Nezha unleashes a heroic spirit and human brilliance that resonates deeply, achieving a profound reconstruction and bold of traditional heroic narratives. By deconstructing and reconstructing the identity of the "magic pill," the narrative focus shifts from the explicit oppression of power to the implicit revolution of subjectivity. Through the deconstruction of established identity codes, the film achieves a paradigm shift from a disciplined object to a rebellious subject.

2.3. In terms of visual style

Of the more than 2,400 shots in the entire film, 80% are special effects, with 200 million characters appearing in a single scene. The combination of art design and animation technology is breathtaking. Through the clever use of fluid dynamics and physics engines, traditional Chinese aesthetics and modern aesthetics collide to create a fantastical world that is both classical and modern. Through the independently developed "Dynamic Ink Wash Rendering Engine," the film integrates traditional Chinese ink wash painting into its scenes, digitizing traditional ink wash art to establish a visual system rooted in Eastern aesthetics. Every frame of the film is meticulously crafted, showcasing the production team's exceptional technical prowess. Particularly in the scenes of the "Tianyuan Ding" and the Dragon Palace, the fusion of classical beauty and modern sensibilities is breathtaking, delivering a visually stunning experience. The action sequences abandon the overly reliant use of light-based battles common in traditional fantasy and wuxia films, opting instead for a more physically grounded "punch-to-the-bone" combat design. In the special effects department, the film employs the "Qiankun" rendering system, which combines particle effects with biomechanics. Take Ao Bing's scales as an example: each scale functions as an independent light-reflecting surface, with particle algorithms simulating the elastic deformation of real biological tissue. Meanwhile, the depiction of Nezha's "three heads and six arms" abandons Western mecha-style design, instead drawing inspiration from Dunhuang flying apsara murals to use gradient particle streams to create an ethereal, Eastern fantasy ambiance [3].

3. Cultural characteristics and consumption trends of generation Z

Generation Z typically refers to young people born between 1995 and 2010, who are digital natives. They have grown up during the rapid development of the internet, characterized by unique cultural consumption patterns and brand recognition methods.

The creation and market demand for cultural products are increasingly influenced by the viewing habits and consumption characteristics of today's Generation Z. As digital natives, Generation Z exhibits the following cultural characteristics:

3.1. Aesthetic independence and preference for innovation

Their aesthetic tastes are more diverse and personalized, favoring works that are creative and break with tradition, as well as brands that reflect their personal values and lifestyles. Born into the emerging generation, the growth of the Z generation in China has been accompanied by the rapid development of the country. This has endowed them with a stronger sense of national responsibility and cultural pride, making them passionate about traditional culture and viewing cultural revival as their mission. At the same time, the nine-year compulsory education and the popularization of university education have made the Z generation's growth more predictable and their aesthetic level higher [4]. Most of the traditional Chinese myths are about the "Taoist divine authority" creating a strict hierarchical order through its inviolable sanctity, thereby creating an absolute control of individual lives by the theocratic system for people. However, "Ne Zha 2" boldly subverts the theocratic system, redefining people's stereotypical perceptions of mythology. By delving into the internal conflicts within the dragon clan, the survival struggles of the demon clan, and the political intrigues of the celestial realm, the film further deconstructs the power structure of mythology, elevating prejudice to the level of collective power conspiracies. The heavenly calamity curse is redefined as a conspiracy narrative of the power elite, and the immortal realm at the top of the power hierarchy is no longer the embodiment of supreme justice. Wuliang Tianweng, as a highly revered representative of the immortal realm, appears kind and benevolent on the surface, but behind the scenes, he does things that harm the innocent and destroy lives. The crane and deer attendants by his side, who appear ethereal and otherworldly, are actually corrupted demons who have been bought and evolved. Together, they form a power structure that appears just but is fundamentally hypocritical, using their authority to perpetuate prejudice, define the demonic race as the embodiment of evil, and strip them of their rights to equality and freedom. Under the guise of "teaching the righteous way," they slaughtered other races to consolidate their own power. Through a highly ingenious narrative technique, the character of the unscrupulous immortal, representing individual moral decay, subtly implies that beneath the façade of divine authority, power-driven schemes may lurk in the shadows.

The film not only reshapes the public's perception of ancient myths but also injects fresh vitality into traditional culture by infusing comedic elements to break the solemnity of Chinese mythology. The diverse characters and their dialogues are rich with postmodern collage elements—for instance, the design of the barrier beasts draws inspiration from the bronze masks and golden-masked bronze heads unearthed at Sanxingdui in Sichuan. The animated characters blend ancient, mystical cultural elements with modern animation techniques, forging a new aesthetic and cultural symbolism for the contemporary era. The film's characters and narrative unfold within scenes deeply connected to our daily lives. Whether evoking laughter or critique, they swiftly resonate with audiences while vividly portraying human interactions. This approach imbues the film with the same warmth and texture as real life.

3.2. Pursuing emotional resonance and socialized consumption

Generation Z places great importance on emotional resonance, favoring high-quality content that evokes personal feelings and fosters social belonging. Their consumption habits also lean toward social and interactive experiences. Nezha's portrayal in the film is far from flawless. His struggles and setbacks resonate deeply with audiences, allowing viewers to see their own reflections in the character. He stands not only as a hero of traditional Chinese culture but also as a projection of

contemporary youth. His rebellious spirit strikes a chord with the aspirations of the younger generation [5].

3.3. Digital and globalized cultural consumption

Generation Z is profoundly influenced by digital technology, accustomed to sharing and discussing their perspectives on cultural content across social media platforms—a phenomenon crucial for film dissemination and marketing. On one hand, by integrating traditional culture with tourism, the “Nezha IP+” industrial system is being developed. This involves embedding the traditional cultural IP of Nezha into real-world cultural tourism, commercial development, and IP design. The ultimate goal is to create a new type of urban cultural space that offers traditional cultural experiences, features creative content design, and provides leisure and entertainment for audiences. Cultural tourism cities can design Nezha-themed itineraries, enhanced with modern art installations and technological innovations, to boost visitor engagement through interactive experiences. Leveraging the creativity of young people to reimagine the Nezha IP, cities can collaborate with universities to host Nezha IP creative design competitions, encouraging student participation in the innovative dissemination of Nezha culture. For instance, Tianjin encourages college students to infuse new elements into the Nezha IP, advocating for the application of this traditional cultural IP into youth culture like streetwear and animation. This fosters the creation of diverse street-themed apparel collectibles, animated works, and games, attracting a broad consumer base including Gen Z. On another front, virtual worlds centered on Nezha are being built using VR, AR, and metaverse technologies, allowing visitors to digitally experience Nezha's stories and related traditional Chinese culture. By developing the “Nezha's Sea Journey” metaverse scene, users can immerse themselves in the mythological narrative. Furthermore, big data and AI are employed to analyze visitor preferences, offering personalized Nezha cultural experiences and unique itineraries tailored to different audiences [6].

Regarding the consumption concepts of Generation Z: In terms of research on the consumption needs of Generation Z in China, Ao Chengbing believes that the consumption philosophy of Generation Z is more rational and diversified, making them a relatively rational and clear-headed generation. The consumption philosophy of Generation Z does not pursue luxury or vanity; they place greater emphasis on consumption experiences, reject extravagant consumption, and value consumption taste while embracing consumption symbols, thereby forming a unique and diversified consumption philosophy distinct from their predecessors [7]. Regarding the potential causes of these consumption differences, Guo Chaoyang suggests that different generations have distinct consumption values and socialization processes, with family, peers, and media being the three primary factors contributing to these differences. Additionally, the consumption capacity of Generation Z is continuously improving, making them the backbone of consumption [8]. Chen Jie argues that China's consumption has gradually entered an era dominated by Generation Z, who prioritize experience and data, prefer interest-based communities, and seek product aesthetics in their consumption. Therefore, brands and product companies need to focus on system-level iterations tailored to the new generation of users rather than simple fixes, and redefine their marketing and brand strategies [9].

4. Youthful transformation strategy for the brand image of "Ne Zha 2: Ne Zha the Demon Boy's Sea Adventure"

In the market competition targeting Generation Z, renowned scholar Li Guangdou was one of the first to propose the concept of brand youthification. In his article "Crafting Brand Youthification," he stated that China has entered an era of brand youthification, identified the two core elements and two trends of youthification, and outlined four principles for brand youthification: first, youthify brand ambassadors; second, use youth-oriented language for communication and packaging; third, prioritize targeting young demographics; and fourth, align innovative strategies with youthification [10]. "Ne Zha 2" also adopted various strategies to achieve brand image rejuvenation and cultural rejuvenation:

4.1. Youthful brand ambassadors: modernization and multidimensionality in character development

In "Ne Zha 2," Ne Zha's image has been deeply reimagined, no longer merely a traditional mythological hero. Through depictions of his personality and inner world, he has become a modern hero with self-struggle and growth, resonating with Gen Z's focus on individuality, complexity, and self-identity. Compared to "Ne Zha 1: The Demon Boy," Ne Zha is no longer a rebellious child driven by passion. He grows into a responsible and duty-bound individual facing the greater good of his family and nation, yet he retains his rebellious spirit. At the end of the film, when the Dragon King Ao Guang asks, "Do you still want to change the world?" Ne Zha's response remains, "I want to try." This characterization resonates deeply with the "Z Generation"; Ao Bing's difficult choice between personal emotions and family interests reflects the complex emotions of the "Z Generation," and at the film's conclusion, his father Ao Guang begins to understand his son, letting go of his expectations and listening to his true feelings; The addition of Shen Gongbao and his family not only enriches the film's ensemble cast but also subverts the traditional perception of Shen Gongbao as a villain during the climactic battle at Chen Tang Pass, where he fights alone against thousands with no regrets; Yin Lady's line, "You look down on me, but I am also a noble warrior," breaks through traditional notions of female strength. She is not merely a mother but a warrior defending the homes of Chen Tang Guan. The characters in the film are imbued with richer personalities and modern traits, making the entire story more vivid and captivating.

4.2. Youthful language packaging: visual style and narrative techniques blending modern and traditional cultural elements

The film retains mythical elements from traditional Chinese culture while boldly integrating modern science and technology with visual effects language, lending the plot and imagery greater tension and appeal. Its action sequences extensively employ special effects, transforming solemn and rigid traditional narratives into a wholly new visual experience. This cultural innovation not only perfectly aligns with the aesthetic preferences of contemporary young audiences but also endows traditional culture with fresh imagery and content. Simultaneously, the film incorporates modern elements and humorous scenes, making the story more relatable to Gen Z's real lives and personal emotions.

The continuous advancement of digital technology has gradually positioned such innovative films as a medium for conveying Chinese culture and aesthetic concepts to global audiences. Kunlun Mountain's "Celestial Palace" draws inspiration from Han Dynasty architectural concepts combined

with jade-adorned bronze birds; each character's design features signature moves aligned with their elemental attributes: fire-element Nezha unleashes the “Ghost Foot Seven,” while ice-element Ao Bing wields Tai Chi and Wing Chun. From the Trump-like accent of Taiyi Zhenren to the Tianjin-speaking Octopus General and Hong Kong-accented Shark General, alongside the northwestern dialect-speaking groundhog character “Squirrel Two,” each animated character radiates rich traditional cultural characteristics. Through modern narrative styles and visual aesthetics, *Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy Rages at the Sea* both inherits the essence of traditional Chinese culture and resonates with Gen Z's aesthetic standards.

4.3. Emphasizing targeting the young audience: emotional storytelling and value transmission

Mark Gaboré presents a compelling concept in his book **Brand Design: The New Art of Creating Emotional Connections with Consumers**. When addressing consumers' emotional needs, brands should not focus solely on the functional aspects of their products but should instead emphasize showcasing individuality and addressing the issues that matter most to consumers [11]. *Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy Rages at the Sea* places greater emphasis on the emotional development between characters, particularly delving deeply into themes of family, friendship, and responsibility. The emotional conflicts between Ne Zha and his parents and companions profoundly resonate with the emotional needs of Gen Z audiences. The film's portrayal of “growth” and “self-identity” conveys positive life values, aligning closely with Gen Z's pursuit of self-actualization and social responsibility.

The subversion of details in the film carries profound meaning. “Black is no longer black, white is no longer white.” In the battle between gods and demons, the demon-slaying squad clad in golden armor no longer represents justice—true righteousness belongs to the black. Nezha's growth is not achieved overnight; it stems not only from his unyielding perseverance but also from the strength bestowed upon him by his parents, mentors, and friends. This embodies a true breakthrough in traditional values—transforming from “If heaven and earth cannot tolerate me, I shall overturn the heavens and earth” to “If heaven and earth cannot tolerate me, I shall overturn the heavens and earth.” Nezha's character serves as both a youthful symbol of defying fate and resisting injustice, and a representation of our journey to rediscover ourselves after drifting with the current.

Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy Rages at the Sea successfully blends traditional culture with contemporary concepts. While preserving elements of courage, justice, and resistance against oppression from the classic tale, it incorporates modern values such as the pursuit of personal liberation, self-identity, and social responsibility. This fusion endows the film with deeper cultural resonance, making its narrative and characters more aligned with the aesthetic preferences and emotional connections of Gen Z audiences.

4.4. Innovation strategies aligning with youth: social media and cross-platform marketing

The success of *Nezha 2* also hinged on its highly effective marketing strategy, particularly in terms of engagement and dissemination across social media platforms. The film launched its pre-release promotion across multiple platforms including Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu. It also leveraged influencers, KOLs, and user-generated content (UGC) to establish emotional resonance with Generation Z. The release of derivative merchandise, character-themed products, emojis, and related short videos further amplified the film's exposure and audience engagement, making it widely known on social media even before its theatrical release.

5. The impact of cultural IP reinvention on generation Z

The success of *Nezha 2* hinges significantly on its innovative reimagining of traditional cultural IP. This innovation extends beyond modernizing cultural heritage; more crucially, it resonates with contemporary society's aesthetic standards and emotional needs, particularly among younger audiences.

By reimagining traditional IPs with fresh character designs and retelling familiar narratives through novel storytelling techniques, *Nezha 2* successfully shattered young audiences' preconceptions about traditional cultural IPs. It forged a more fashionable and vibrant cultural IP identity through innovative approaches. This transformation not only deepens Gen Z's understanding and recognition of the *Nezha* IP but also enhances their affection for traditional Chinese cultural IPs and their sense of belonging to Chinese heritage.

In terms of cultural identity and emotional connection, *Nezha 2* blends traditional culture with modern concepts, creating a stronger emotional resonance with Gen Z. The film's themes of self-discovery and embracing one's identity resonate deeply with Gen Z values, allowing audiences to see reflections of themselves in its diverse characters and narratives. This profound emotional connection strengthens Gen Z's cultural belonging to the *Nezha* IP while offering them a fresh perspective on traditional culture.

Regarding consumer behavior and brand loyalty, the innovative branding of *Ne Zha 2* significantly influenced Gen Z's purchasing decisions. They not only demonstrated high enthusiasm for watching the film but also actively sought out *Ne Zha* IP merchandise and participated in related brand activities. This shift in consumption patterns fully reflects Gen Z's high recognition and loyalty toward the *Ne Zha* IP. Furthermore, *Nezha 2*'s continuous engagement with fans through social media platforms keeps the *Nezha* IP image consistently active in the minds of Gen Z and audiences, further solidifying their positive feelings toward this IP. This successful transformation of a traditional cultural IP brand image provides a highly valuable reference case for the modernization of other traditional cultural IPs.

6. Cross-cultural communication and a global perspective

In terms of cross-cultural communication and a global perspective, as mentioned in Professor Sun Lijun's book "Research on the Current Status and Communication Methods of Chinese Animation Film Creation," we should deeply explore the advanced experiences of Chinese animation film development, build an interactive animation film ecosystem integrating cultural heritage, technological empowerment, and media exploration, and fully unleash the vitality of Chinese animation film as a "mobile medium," providing references for Chinese animation film to better "go global." [1] Hou Songzhongxia, in "On the Value of Myths and Legends in Chinese Animation," mentions that we should make good use of rich historical and cultural resources, allowing China to draw on the classic traditions of animation while incorporating international commonalities, which can further promote the development of China's animation industry and add a significant contribution to China's efforts to rank among the world's leading animation industries [12].

Ne Zha 2 has not only achieved tremendous success in the Chinese market but has also begun expanding into overseas markets. Through cross-cultural communication within the film, it showcases the unique charm of traditional Chinese culture while making international adaptations in narrative style and visual effects to appeal to global audiences. This cross-cultural communication provides valuable experience for Chinese cinema's global expansion. Professor Chen Xiangnong of the Beijing Film Academy remarked, "This film's success proves that Chinese animation has the

power to resonate globally through local stories.” Judges at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival praised it as “redefining animation's visual boundaries with Eastern aesthetics.” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiajun noted that such works have become a new bridge for cultural exchange between China and the world [13].

7. Conclusion

This study analyzes the brand image innovation methods employed in *Ne Zha 2: The Demon Boy's Descent into the World*, revealing the importance of modernizing cultural IP imagery and diversifying communication strategies to engage Generation Z. It deepens our understanding of cultural IP image innovation and offers new insights for the innovative development of traditional cultural IPs. Future research could expand the sample scope, utilize more data, and incorporate qualitative research methods to further validate the effectiveness of brand image innovation transformation.

However, this study still has the following limitations: it only analyzed the case of *Nezha 2*. Future research could expand the scope of case studies (different cultural IPs) to analyze through comparison how various cultural IPs innovate and transform to appeal to youth audiences. Additionally, this study employed only case analysis and qualitative research methods. Future work could incorporate quantitative research to more comprehensively analyze the effectiveness of brand IP image transformation through data. Furthermore, this study primarily focused on Gen Z audiences. Future research could include other age groups to analyze how audiences of different ages respond to the youth-oriented transformation of cultural IPs.

Overall, *Nezha 2* successfully rejuvenates traditional cultural IPs through character innovation and modern narrative techniques, while seamlessly blending traditional culture with contemporary values. This approach not only resonates with Gen Z audiences' emotional needs and aesthetic standards but also enhances their recognition and understanding of traditional cultural brands. Consequently, it stimulates their desire to consume these transformed IP products. Moving forward, this approach of reimagining traditional cultural IPs for younger audiences will become a prevailing trend in the film and television industry, offering valuable case studies for innovation and brand development across other cultural products.

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