

Nezha in Four Chinese Animation: Representations of a Mythological Character in the Context of Popular Media Culture

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the changing representation of the Chinese mythological character "Nezha" in various animated works. The data come from surveys and interviews with animation viewers, creators, and researchers, as well as literature reviews. The findings show that Nezha is represented through the audiovisual language of animation. As social and cultural contexts evolve, both producers and audiences reshape this character, breaking away from its original portrayal and continuously gaining new meanings and connotations. Nezha reflects the power dynamics and public demands of different times, maintaining its cultural appeal. However, the evolution of popular media has made Nezha's character more diverse and ambiguous, challenging the formation of a cultural consensus. This paper discusses the representation issues of mythological characters, focusing on Nezha in four animated productions. This paper is part of the doctoral thesis.

Keywords: Nezha; Animation; Popular Media Culture; Representation;

Introduction

Mythology has played a pivotal role in civilizations throughout history, serving as a tool for carrying and transmitting culture, values, and beliefs (Berk, 2016). Nezha is a representative character in Chinese mythology. He was introduced to China as a Dharma-protecting warrior deity during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) through Esoteric Buddhism and was adapted into a Chinese general, Li Jing's son. In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), Daoist priests incorporated this Esoteric warrior into their pantheon, where Nezha was utilized to battle the enemies of Daoist beliefs (Shahar, 2015). With the maturation of printing and media during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), Daoist divine-demon novels, represented by "Journey to the West" and "Investiture of the Gods," began to gain popularity (Meulenbeld, 2017). Nezha's textual image and stories gradually took shape in these two works, becoming well-known to the public, and have been disseminated across various media forms such as animations and movies.

Due to the profound visual impact prevalent in media societies, individuals are constantly bombarded with information transmitted through imagery, accentuating the critical role of visual representation. In the portrayal of Nezha, animation transcends mere entertainment to become a primary and efficacious medium for constructing and conveying meanings. This mode of representation not only melds cultural symbolism with commercial objectives but also facilitates the establishment of a nexus between consumer identity and the embedded meanings within the product. Animation, in this context, functions as a cultural intermediary, integrating and manifesting various ideological dimensions. It is through this amalgamation and portrayal that differing ideologies coalesce around the figure of Nezha,

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contributing to a cohesive and shared understanding and identification with the character. This process exemplifies the dynamic interplay between cultural narrative construction and media representation in shaping public perception and cultural identity.

Nezha's animated image first appeared in Chinese art films, "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio, restored the tragic plot from the original work where Nezha kills the Dragon King's son, causing conflict, and selflessly returns his own flesh and bones to his father. The self-sacrificing Nezha became the initial animated image. "The Legend of Nezha," funded by the state and adopting American and Japanese animation models, tells the adventure story of Nezha's continuous growth and victory over arch-enemies, making the young hero Nezha a childhood memory for the Chinese millennial generation. The web animation "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes" portrays Nezha with a girl's face and a muscular body, subverting the serious narrative in the original work with light and humorous short animated sketches, making Nezha a popular symbol among young people (Tan, 2020). In 2019, the phenomenal animated film "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019)" was released, achieving an astonishing box office of 5.2 billion RMB. The film unfolds a narrative centered on Nezha's struggle against fate, and the crafted "Ugly Nezha" image sparked extensive discussions. Chinese mythological animations have regained the attention of creators and the public, giving rise to the "Mythological Counter-Charm" phenomenon (Sun, 2021).

Currently, there are over a dozen animated adaptations featuring Nezha as the protagonist, and it can be seen that different adaptation approaches reflect their respective era backgrounds, embodying various humanistic concepts (Jin & Wang, 2023). At present, research on Nezha animations is quite extensive, but there is less research on the representational changes of Nezha's animated image, especially on the formation of its cultural significance. Therefore, this study conducts investigations and interviews based on four animations as case studies: "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King", "The Legend of Nezha", "Nezha in One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes", and "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" to explore the following questions: Why has the animated image of Nezha undergone representational changes? This study hopes to contribute to the research and creation of mythological animations, represented by Nezha.

Research Objectives

1. To study the development history of four Nezha animations.
2. To explore the cultural representation of Nezha and study its complex relationship with Chinese society by analyzing its animated image.

Literature Review

In terms of communication studies on animation, the works of Susan J. Napier and Paul Wells elucidate the significant characteristics and roles of animation as a popular medium, discussing issues of gender and race representation in animation (Napier, 2001; Wells, 2013). MAM Omar points out that the culture conveyed by animation is manifested through the characters' clothing, dialogue, performance, and plot, and the ethnic cultural identity of the animation's place of origin can be observed through these aspects (Whyke, Mugica, & Brown, 2021).

Regarding research on Nezha, Meir Shahar uses psychoanalysis to study the development of Nezha's story and explores the Oedipal complex within the story (Shahar, 2015). TW Whyke believes that Nezha's displacement and return in Chinese animation express the specific era's demand and call for traditional heroic images (Whyke & Mugica, 2021) and analyzes the Chinese national style reflected in "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" (Whyke et al., 2021). Sean Macdonald conducts an intertextuality study on the animation "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King," asserting that this animation marks the return of mythological themes in Chinese animated films and reveals tendencies towards future social and cultural struggles (Macdonald, 2015). Jing Jin believes that Nezha's transformation showcases the continuously changing socio-political background in China's socialist and post-socialist eras (Jin & Wang, 2021). Chengcheng You proposes the conceptual framework of "animated mythology" to explain the profound interaction between literature and film, society, and mythology (You, 2022).

Research Concept

1. Representation

Representation is one of the core concepts in cultural theory research. Throughout its development, representation has primarily encompassed content from various fields such as politics, literature, and art (Zhou & FU, 2013). Stuart Hall, a representative figure of the Birmingham School in the UK, transformed the philosophical epistemological concept of "representation" into a "signification" concept that combines structuralist semiotics with "cultural studies," thereby achieving a "cultural turn" of the representation concept (Hao, 2008).

In cultural studies and sociology, culture is defined as "a process, a set of practices" involving the production and exchange of meaning among members of a society or group, i.e., "the giving and receiving of meaning." This is the concept of culture adopted by Hall, who emphasizes that culture is constructed through representation and signifying practices. Representation generates meaning through language; any word, image, or sound that can carry a symbol into a meaningful representation system is a form of language (Hall, 1997). In language, there is no fixed meaning. The relationship between signifier and signified (Culler, 1976) in representation is arbitrary. However, as a communication tool, language also has relatively conventional meanings. "Meaning is not inherent in things. It is constructed, produced. It is a signifying practice, a product of practices that produce meaning, make things meaningful... Meaning is established by relationships (Hall, 1997)." It is evident that consensus on meaning requires a specific relationship or cultural context. At the same time, both producers and consumers participate in the competition of meaning during the cultural representation process. Meaning is not individual; it is a dialogue, the result of negotiations among various parties. In fact, the understanding and interpretation of the audience largely constrain the realization of cultural meaning (Zou, 2009).

Culture is also a place where various power relations operate. "The main contributions of discourse theory to the political field are all related to the conceptualization of power (Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998)." Where there is power, there is resistance. The audience can exercise its power of resistance through its interpretation (Foucault, 1980). Hall, drawing on the research of Marx and Gramsci, believes that representation and ideology are key concepts in the method of analyzing society and culture. The theory of ideology more clearly and directly points out

that "representation" operates like language and is actually the process of ideological struggle in language. The production and reproduction of meaning must operate through ideology. At the same time, ideology spontaneously and consciously distorts meaning in this process, so it is necessary to "unmask" the ideological level in "representation" (Rojek, 2009).

2. Popular Media Culture

Media is the most important producer of meaning and its codes in contemporary society. Media and representation are closely related. Representation mediates the prototype of the mastered thing and plays it back (Grossberg, 2006). Most modern cultures are disseminated through the media, forming media culture (Stevenson, 2002). Media symbols and texts not only play a significant role in the production and decoding process but are also further constructed and understood in society and culture, also influenced by power and ideology (Scannell, Schlesinger, & Sparks, 1992). "By owning publishing houses, newspapers, and later electronic media, the dominant class naturalizes those dominated and oppressed social relations (Fuchs & Mosco, 2015)."

Pop culture is a new type of culture characterized by its popularity and commerciality. It is the product of merchants and mass media, which not only brands pop culture with commercialization but also gives pop culture a certain "manipulable" meaning (F. Yang, 2007), thus forming popular media culture. In popular media culture, the audience decodes media texts through "cultural codes" and brings discourse into their reading of media texts (Scott, 2003). The audience can find meaning from their favorite media texts, discuss through writing and creating new texts, interact with new technologies, and thus converge and form new cultures (Geraghty, 2015).

It can be seen that culture is not static but is constantly constructed and reshaped in continuous representation practices. The media plays a key bridging role in this process, and the interpretive practices of the audience also occupy an indispensable position. Power relations, ideology, and cultural codes are also constantly being challenged, negotiated, and reshaped.

Research Methodology

In the contemporary field of animation, the representation of the mythical character "Nezha" has undergone various transformations. To delve into this phenomenon, researchers adopted qualitative research methods, focusing on analyzing the evolution of Nezha's image and cultural significance in animated works across different periods.

Firstly, through a literature review, researchers sorted out the image of "Nezha" in ancient literature, drama, and modern popular culture, aiming to provide historical and cultural background for subsequent analyses of animated works. Based on this, researchers selected four representative animated works for in-depth study, namely: "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King", "The Legend of Nezha", "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes: Nezha Episode", and "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child". These four works cover a timespan of nearly forty years, are familiar to audiences of different eras, involve three different popular media types - internet, television, and film, and have achieved commendable commercial box office and artistic awards, holding high recognition and influence in both real and online society.

To more comprehensively understand the creative background and audience acceptance of Nezha's image in these animated works, researchers purposefully selected animation creators (directors, screenwriters, producers, artists, etc.), researchers (scholars, historians, educators), and audiences for in-depth interviews, and conducted surveys on audiences of different age levels in the form of questionnaires. These interviews aimed to explore their cognition, interpretation, and evaluation of the image of "Nezha", as well as their evaluation and expectations of these animated works. During the interview process, researchers fully explained the purpose and nature of the research, and with the consent of the interviewees, recordings were made for subsequent detailed content analysis.

In the data analysis phase, researchers employed qualitative data analysis methods, systematically coding, categorizing, and thematically analyzing the collected text data and interview records. This process aimed to reveal the multiple representations of the image of "Nezha" in different animated works, as well as the cultural, social, and historical factors behind these representations. To ensure the reliability and validity of the research, researchers used triangulation of methods and sources, comparing results obtained from different data sources and research methods to test the robustness and consistency of research findings. Throughout this process, researchers paid special attention to the objectivity and accuracy of the data, maintaining a cautious and objective attitude while fully considering the limitations of the research. Researchers placed high importance on the privacy and information security of the interviewees. During the interviews and data collection, researchers obtained clear consent from the interviewees and appropriately anonymized them when reporting research results to ensure the identities of the interviewees were not disclosed.

Overall, this investigation provides an in-depth, comprehensive, and objective perspective to understand and analyze the multiple representations and cultural significance of the mythical character "Nezha" in modern Chinese animation. The results of the descriptive analysis follow.

Research Findings

1. The Development History of Nezha Animation

During China's planned economic period, animation production was determined by the state through production quotas, and purchases and sales were unified. "At that time, the state gave us (animation creators) a not low treatment" (Anonymous Interviewee 1, personal communication, 2023), allowing creators to devote themselves to creation without revenue pressure, exploring directions in folk art and folk stories, and forming a unique Chinese characteristic art film (T. Li, 2017). During this period, the animated image of Nezha first appeared in the animation "Uproar in Heaven (1964)" as an antagonist, a member of the same faction as the heavenly court, opposing the protagonist Sun Wukong. Although Nezha was depicted as a child, the round head and triangular eyes were not particularly endearing.

With China's reform and opening-up in 1979, the atmosphere for artistic creation became more relaxed. "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King (1979)", directed by Yan Dingxian, Xu Jingda, and Wang Shuchen, was released. The animation selects a famous plot from "The Investiture of the Gods," telling the story of a young hero with supernatural powers who challenges the Dragon King, sacrifices himself, and is ultimately reborn. Character designer Zhang Ding referred to traditional arts such as Chinese murals and folk paintings, adopted a decorative style, and used concise lines to draw the characters in the film. Nezha, wearing a red bellyband, with two shiny, bright, and spirited big eyes, exudes childishness.

Holding the Universe Ring and Red Armillary Sash, and stepping on the Wind Fire Wheels, he is transformed from an ancient New Year painting doll, closely aligning with the audience's imagination of Nezha (Academy of Arts & Design, 2023), creating a classic character image in the history of Chinese animation.

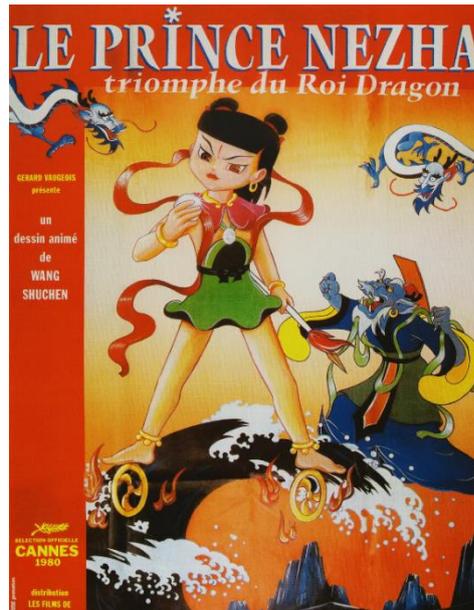


Figure1:"Nezha Conquers the Dragon King 1979" Animated Film Poster (French Version)

Source:<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2407029224/> (2023-6)

Since the 20th century, with the acceleration of the marketization process in China and the popularization of televisions, a large number of high-quality animations from Japan and the United States have entered China and been broadcast on TV. A survey shows that in 1991, 66.7% of the animated TV shows broadcast in Beijing were from foreign countries (S. Chen, 2003). The Chinese government has adopted a series of policies to promote the development of the domestic animation industry, while gradually restricting and even prohibiting the broadcasting of foreign animations during TV prime time, allowing only domestic animations to be broadcast (WU, 2006). Nezha, who briefly appeared in the TV animation "Journey to the West 1999," did not have much performance because the protagonists were the four-person team on the journey to the west, and Nezha was depicted with dark skin and a stylized face. The TV animation "The Legend of Gods and Spirits 1999," which draws from the mythological theme of the conquest of King Zhou in "The Investiture of the Gods," portrays Nezha as a handsome young man with big eyes, long hair, and dazzling armor, "This doesn't look like Nezha; it looks like a Japanese Saint Seiya" (Anonymous Interviewee 2, personal communication, 2023).

In 2003, the TV animation "Nezha Legend," produced by China Central Television, was released. The creators expanded the simple story of "Nezha Conquers the Sea" into a long epic, and the 52-episode plot allowed Nezha's adventures and growth to be fully interpreted. The animation chose the turbulent historical period of "the fall of the Shang Dynasty and the

rise of the Zhou Dynasty" as the background, telling the adventure story of the young hero Nezha defeating the big demon Shi Ji and overthrowing King Zhou's conspiracy with the help of partners like Little Pig Bear and Little Dragon Girl. Nezha in the film wears a red bellyband, has a bun hairstyle, and rides on the Wind Fire Wheels, embodying a typical "Chinese Doll" image (Chu, 2003). The theme song lyrics "Sometimes he is cute, sometimes he is silly" fully summarize Nezha's unique advantages and disadvantages as a child. Chinese audiences born around the 1990s say, "This is the Nezha in our memory, which we watched on TV after school" (Anonymous Interviewees 2 & 3, personal communication, 2023).

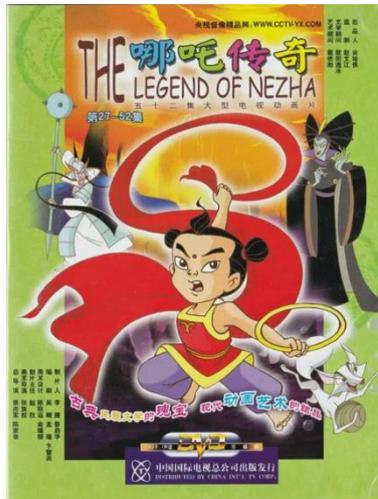


Figure2:"The Legend of Nezha" Animated Film Poster

Source:<https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2355107194/> (2023-6)

With the rise of the internet, the dominant position of traditional mass media has been shaken. The internet, with its technological advantage of providing ordinary audiences with a voice, has rapidly seized the "absolute" position of traditional media in terms of influence. David Herold likens Chinese internet society to the carnival described by Bakhtin, emphasizing the shaping of a new order to challenge the existing serious order (Herold & Marolt, 2010). During this period, a diversified image of Nezha was presented on the Chinese internet.

The web animation "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes," adapted from a comic work, is known for its humorous and absurd storylines and unique art style. It incorporates many bizarre jokes and fantastical elements. Nezha retains the iconic bun hairstyle and blood relationship with father Li Jing but is sculpted into an exaggerated image with a girl's face and muscular body, intertextually referencing the original description of Nezha being intersex in the original work. "King Kong Barbie" Nezha, spread in the form of expression packs and GIFs, has become a popular cultural symbol on the internet. Nezha achieves the greatest estrangement in fragmented collages, using light and humorous ridicule to vent the mental pressure of adults, thereby obtaining entertainment pleasure (Y. li & Ran, 2021).



Figure3: "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes" Animated Movie Stills

Source:<https://movie.douban.com/subject/11503638/photos?type=S> (2023-10)

Subsequently, animations featuring Nezha as the protagonist gradually increased. The animated film "I am Nezha (2016)" is China's first 3D animated film featuring Nezha, narrating the growth process of Nezha from a mischievous boy to a small hero with a sense of justice and willingness to sacrifice. In "Fog Hill of Five Elements (2016)," Nezha is pampered by his father, Li Jing, displaying a temperamental, arrogant, and indulgent side. In the web animation "Fog Hill of the Five Elements (2018)," Nezha is set as an emotionless and indifferent elementary school student. Under the impact of the internet, the animated image of Nezha has become blurred. Chinese audiences born around the year 2000 stated, "It seems like I have seen these Nezha characters, but I can't remember which animation they come from" (Anonymous Interviewee 4, personal communication, 2023).

In 2019, the phenomenal animated work "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" was released, directed by Jiaozi and produced by Coloroom Pictures. It achieved an astonishing box office of 5.2 billion and was shortlisted for the preliminary list of the 2020 Oscars for "Best Animated Feature." In the animation, Nezha is portrayed as a naughty and ugly child, born from a bead nurtured by the world's evil, and destined to face a catastrophe from the heavens. The film unfolds its narrative centered on Nezha's resistance against fate. This animation presents a national image interwoven with tradition and modernity through digital technology (Whyke et al., 2021). Although he retains the signature topknot, he has dark circles under his eyes, a row of broken teeth, hands shoved into his pants, and looks like a little ruffian. Some people's impression of him is "too ugly, Nezha should not look like this, he doesn't look like a good person" (Anonymous Interviewee 5, personal communication, 2023). However, among the younger demographic, the "ugly" image of Nezha has sparked a "ugliness critique" trend, causing widespread discussion and dissemination on the internet. The line "My fate is mine to control, not heaven's" became their slogan for self-proclamation. "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" became a popular topic on the internet, and mainstream media also reported extensively on it.



Picture 4: "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" Animated Film Poster
Source: <https://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/2546196389/> (2023-9)

After the success of "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child," animations with themes of mythology and legends have been sought after by creators and audiences alike. Similarly, drawing from mythological tales, "White Snake: The Origin," "Jiang Ziya (2020)," and "White Snake 2: The Tribulation of the Green Snake (2021)" all achieved commendable box office results and discussion heat. "New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021)" is another animated film with a realistic style, set in a modern city. In the film, the protagonist Li Yunxiang (the reincarnation of Nezha) encounters Ao Bing (the reincarnation of the Dragon King's son), triggering millennia-old grievances between the dragon clan and Nezha. Nezha is portrayed as an ordinary, passionate young man who loves motorcycles, while the Dragon King's son becomes the descendant of a capitalist. Nezha's signature Wind Fire Wheels are evolved into burning motorcycle tires, and the entire film is filled with an urban punk trend style. In contrast, the animated film "I am Nezha 2: Hero Returns (2023)" has been criticized for its chaotic plot, rough production, and mimicking the promotion of "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child."

2. Representation and Transformation of Nezha's Animated Image

Although Nezha has been the protagonist in numerous animations, the representation and significance of the character have evolved with shifts in historical, social, and cultural contexts. Different depictions of Nezha carry varied meanings, reflecting the zeitgeist of their respective eras. Through analyzing four animations featuring Nezha and their corresponding socio-cultural environments, this research explores the representational meanings and reasons for the transformations of Nezha's image. Furthermore, it investigates how Nezha acquires specific meanings in particular periods, becoming a symbol in popular culture.

2.1 Art Film "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King"

China's reform and opening up in 1979 reinvigorated artistic creation that had been stagnant for a decade, allowing animation creators to fully unleash their passion that had been suppressed for many years. Jiang Youyi, the cinematographer of "Nezha Conquers the Dragon King," said in an interview: "This film is actually related to the situation at the time and the

emotions of our creators. After being suppressed for so many years, many people wanted to create." (Zeng, 2008)

In the animation, Nezha defeats the four Dragon Kings, symbolizing the downfall of the "Gang of Four." To avoid implicating his father and villagers, Nezha commits suicide with a treasure sword, saying, "Daddy, I return your flesh and bones to you, so I won't implicate you." It is widely believed that this is Nezha's challenge to feudal patriarchy (Jin & Wang, 2023). When Nezha is reborn from the lotus, it also gives the audience the courage to face life anew (Ke, 2020). From this animation onwards, the image of Nezha has become a symbol bearing special meanings. People communicate emotionally and reach a consensus by transmitting the symbol of Nezha. The early promotional posters and album covers of the Chinese rock band "Miserable Faith" mostly feature Nezha, representing a longing for freedom, and a spirit of rebellion and pride, reflecting the voice of a generation of youth who are tormented, questioned by powerful social consciousness and social issues, yet always unwilling to remain silent.



Figure5:Miserable Faith Band Album Cover
Source:<https://www.weibo.com/tongyang> (2023-10)

In the early period of the Reform and Opening Up, the heroes shaped by the nation were often "noble, great, comprehensive" perfect images. Nezha's image also had to conform to the power expectations of the time. Therefore, creators combined Nezha with idols worshipped in Chinese folk culture and revolutionary heroes commended by the mainstream ideology. As a result, Nezha shed its divinity and became a justice fighter against feudal society and imperialism in a special period, embodying morality and chivalry. The Nezha influenced by politics was accepted by the public. On one hand, this reflected the expected return of heroes who eliminate harm for the people after the end of the "Cultural Revolution", and on the other hand, it satisfied the cultural needs of the public to liberate thoughts and call for humanity. Nezha demonstrated the value orientation and spiritual temperament of Chinese society at that time in its spiritual core.

2.2 TV Animation "Nezha's Legend"

After marketization, China's mass media culture began to face the challenge of globalization, with a large influx of foreign animations into China. Foreign culture eroded Chinese traditional culture through the medium of animation. In response to this crisis, the state invested in the production of "Nezha's Legend" and broadcast it on the central television station. After the prohibition of foreign animations, the public could only passively accept the cultural and entertainment products chosen by the authorities. "Back then, Japanese animations were broadcasted on TV, and they were very good, but later they were not allowed to be broadcasted," (Anonymous Interviewee 5, personal communication, 2023). Younger children, attracted by the animation story, saw Nezha as a playmate and grew up together, as sung in the animation theme song: "It's him, it's him, our friend little Nezha." Young viewers subtly learned the culture and values conveyed by Nezha, and the authorities achieved the purpose of educating young people through Nezha. From this perspective, the film essentially outputs ideology in the form of animation. After the animation was broadcast, it was affirmed by many parents, but this does not mean that Nezha truly reflected the cultural demands of the public, nor did it fully possess the technical strength to compete with foreign animations of the same period.

In terms of the animated representation of the character Nezha, creators have injected certain personality traits of modern characters and humanized the mythical characters. For example, Nezha's adventurous spirit, innovative spirit, questioning of authority, and refusal to blindly follow, etc. (Zhu, 2003). To cater to the market and audience, the film obviously imitates the plot and aesthetics of American and Japanese animations, wrapping the connotation of Chinese mythological stories in the shell of Western animation technology. Director Chen Jiaqi stated: "Find a new perspective that conforms to modern aesthetic habits and inject traditional cultural elements into new creations" (J. Chen, 2004).

Even so, Nezha has become a cultural weapon that China uses to counteract globalization. On the one hand, the specific social and cultural-political situation urgently requires domestic animations to compete with foreign animations in the domestic consumer market; on the other hand, animation is also endowed with the duty of "carrying the mission of inheriting Chinese culture" and using Chinese traditional culture and spirit to educate young people to resist the influence of foreign animations. At this time, animation not only plays an enlightening role for young people but is also an important window for external propaganda (L. Yang, 2009). This makes the rebellious spirit possessed by Nezha not only reflected in the animation plot but even becomes a hero to fight against foreign culture.

2.3 Web Animation "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes"

In the context of the internet, the charm of animated characters is not about the reproduction of reality or classic cognition. Instead, it starts from the perspective of the general audience's desire for change, reshaping or recreating it, thereby surpassing fixed cognition and procedural thinking to have new semantic pointers (Tan, 2020). Before 2000, when audiences heard or read about Nezha, they would associate it with the specific meaning expressed by Nezha. The code tells us the close relationship between the concept of "Nezha" and resistance, courage, and growth. The meaning represented by Nezha in early mainstream culture is relatively fixed. However, when mentioning Nezha in internet culture, the image that comes to mind for the internet generation is not a young hero, but a "King Kong Barbie" with a little girl's face and a fit body.

In "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes", represented by Nezha, it presents the internet generation's challenge to tradition and authority. The formed "bad joke" and "meme" culture create a self-deprecating humorous atmosphere. Young people who understand the "King Kong Barbie" Nezha form online communities, interact on the internet in the form of ridicule and bullet screens, and exclude the Nezha in mainstream culture and the authority it represents. It can be seen that the audience in the internet carnival era demonstrates subjectivity and uniqueness through diversified behaviors. They are no longer satisfied with passively receiving information content, executing orders, or responding to calls in a straightforward manner. They refuse to adhere to traditional rules, desire to show previously ignored unique subjectivity, and artistic creators also show resistance and deconstruction consciousness. They resist the influence of grand narratives by creating differentiated content to meet the needs of the audience in the new era and guide deep thinking (Mi & Zhang, 2015).

"One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes" breaks the relatively stable meaning conveyed by the traditional image of Nezha. People from different cultural backgrounds can no longer have the same understanding of "Nezha" and generate cultural consensus. The meaning of Nezha is constantly constructed and produced. This situation is becoming more and more intense in the internet environment. A large number of web animations imitating the style of "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes" have appeared, giving Nezha different meanings in different story backgrounds.

2.4 Animated Movie "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"

Since 2016, the "demotivational culture" has permeated among young people in China, mainly manifesting as negativity, decadence, indifference, and lack of ambition. Innate differences and unequal postnatal distribution have led young people to feel helpless and self-mocking about their predetermined fate (Dong, 2017). Social values are also constantly evolving, with individualism and self-awareness becoming focal points.

"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" tells the growth story of Nezha, who was "born a demon" but "defied the heavens and fought to the end." Facing Nezha's experiences, the audience can easily relate to similar individual circumstances and resonate. The line in the drama, "The prejudice in people's hearts is a mountain that you can't move no matter how hard you try," becomes even more powerful and deafening. "It reminds me of my own experiences at work" (Anonymous Interviewee 6, personal communication, 2023), precisely verifies the current individual circumstances, genuinely entering the audience's inner world.

At the same time, the movie emphasizes the damage caused by the injustice of fate to individuals. Nezha, in the film, was born with a "fatalistic" curse - the reincarnated demon pill must face heavenly punishment three years later. However, Nezha, upon learning the truth, did not give up but fought back vigorously, shouting the slogan "My fate is mine, not heaven's." Nezha's struggle against fate reflects the contemporary individual's struggle and resonance with marginalized and vulnerable groups. Nezha's image in the film serves as a complex symbolic representation, symbolizing individual resistance and courage in the face of unjust fate. The conveyed individual struggle and autonomous choice become the focus of the audience (Pan, 2019). Nezha gradually integrates into the discourse system and creative style of popular media culture, prompting more people to interpret and understand the new Nezha, forming a cultural and emotional consensus. Nezha has been re-created by the audience, becoming a popular cultural symbol representing individual resistance to fate and the pursuit of the spirit of freedom.

"Nezha Conquers the Dragon King" is a rebellion against feudal patriarchy, while "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child" is a rebellion against personal fate. This change in representation liberates Nezha from the traditional cultural framework, making it resonate with the emotions and values of the audience under popular media culture. The original "representation system" of anti-feudal Nezha, little hero Nezha, and Transformer Barbie Nezha is somewhat impacted and weakened, yet coexists. Director Jiaozi said in an interview with Entertainment Theory Studio, "Every era's story has its own spiritual core and era imprint. Just like when 'The Investiture of the Gods' was written, many things had already been turned upside down. ... When I adapt, it is also to serve the audience of our era, hoping to conform to the spirit of our times(He, 2019). "

Conclusion

Through a detailed analysis of the changes in the image of Nezha in cultural representations of different eras, it was found that Nezha has transformed from a classical mythological figure into a modern symbol that can reflect and respond to social changes, cultural dilemmas and diverse aesthetics. From the "anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolutionary hero" in the planned economy period to the "young hero who resisted cultural invasion" in the era of globalization, to the post-modern background of "King Kong Barbie" that pokes fun at the traditional "King Kong Barbie" and "Ugly Nezha" that reflects subculture, "Motorcycle Nezha" embodies punk culture. Different policy backgrounds and cultural environments have shaped different images of Nezha. The cultural characteristics of different Nezha can in turn reflect the changes in Chinese society. It can be seen that cultural changes are related to Reflection of reality has become the fundamental reason for the changes in Nezha's representation. The cultural representation of Nezha's animated image not only reflects the richness and depth of Chinese traditional culture, but also shows the adaptability and innovation of cultural symbols in different cultural backgrounds. The story and image of Nezha prove that cultural inheritance and innovation can coexist, and that tradition and modernity, local and global can achieve dialogue and integration through the process of cultural representation.

Nezha, as a cultural phenomenon within the sphere of popular media culture, transcends simple artistic or commercial categorization, evolving into a widely recognized and accepted cultural icon through consumer interaction. This evolution is influenced by societal norms and regulations, indicating a reciprocal relationship between cultural figures and the social context in which they exist. Analyzing Nezha's role in the cultural cycle reveals its complexity as a cultural product. Its significance is not static; it's continuously shaped and redefined through cultural practices and interpretations. This dynamic process highlights how Nezha, far from being a standalone figure, is intimately connected to everyday life and broader cultural narratives. As such, its meaning varies across different cultural settings, influenced by its role and position within those contexts. The interpretation of Nezha reflects broader cultural dialogues, where its symbolism is subject to change and negotiation. This ongoing evolution in meaning not only speaks to the fluid nature of cultural symbols but also illustrates how they are embedded and reinterpreted within the shifting sands of cultural and social dynamics.

Discussion

In this study, the researcher started from the history of Nezha's animation, analyzed Nezha's images in different media, and used the concept of cultural representation to study the social significance of Nezha's animated images.

First of all, from the perspective of the development and history of animation, most researchers' research results focus on the artistic research of film and television works and the historical changes of animation. Currently, most of the research documents on Chinese animation in China are chronicles. "History of Chinese Animation" published by the Commercial Press is widely used as a textbook for animation majors in Chinese universities. The author uses Chinese history as a reference to divide the development of Chinese animation into several periods including before the founding of New China, after reform and opening up, and in the new century. Duan analyzed the artistic style and technical form of animation (Sun, 2018), which involves the description of the social environment. Based on its chronological division of animation history, this study extracted the important position of Nezha animation in it. , but the book only uses the social environment as the historical background of animation creation, and does not mention the cultural mapping of animation on society, and lacks research on the interaction and construction of audiences and animation, which to a certain extent ignores the cultural cycle and development of animation. social proof.

Secondly, in terms of research on the artistic image of Nezha, most studies focus on the performance of Nezha animation as an art form. For example, Xiaou analyzed the impact of "Legend of Nezha" on the development of Chinese animation art style. A valuable exploration (Xiao, 2007), Liu Jia mentioned the similarities and differences in the artistic image design of the two early Nezha animations, and discussed the design of Nezha from three aspects: following the script content requirements, absorbing the essence of national art, and integrating modern audio-visual art. Ideas and methods (Jia, 2019). Cui Yunlan talked about Chinese animation's reference to traditional art (Yunlan, 2001), which has certain reference value for this study, because the study of Nezha in this study is based on its external image and inner character, but these The research will only analyze its aesthetic performance from an artistic perspective, which is limited. At the same time, it also lacks a comparative analysis of Nezha's animated images in different media, and cannot see the past and present of its media images. Through the audience from traditional media to electronic media, this study points out that Nezha is not only a cartoon character, but also reflects the progress of mass media and is the epitome of social culture. We should pay attention to the relationship between Nezha, media and society. , rather than just conducting a single analysis through art style.

In addition, there is relatively little literature on the theory of "cultural representation" in animation research. Zhang Jin studied the landscape imagery and its cultural representation in Makoto Shinkai's animated film "Your Name" (Jin, 2017), which helps To deepen his understanding of the cultural connotation and practical significance of animated films, Peng Guichang discussed the representation of Internet youth subculture in the postmodern context of "One Hundred Thousand Bad Jokes 2" (Guichang, 2018). He is one of the very few to study Nezha from the perspective of representation. research, but a single animation case cannot reflect the changes in representation. TW Whyke's research mentioned Nezha's inheritance of traditional Chinese culture (Whyke, Mugica, & Brown, 2021). This research agrees with and follows the relevant views. In short, at present, In view of the fact that

cultural research on Nezha focuses on a single case or traditional cultural connotation, and lacks two-way research on the inherent national culture and cultural changes of the times, this study conducted an in-depth cultural representation analysis of multiple Nezha animations to reveal the cultural representation of Nezha. With the diversity and changes, Nezha animation does not exist in isolation, but carries the national cultural spirit and continues to change in different social periods, becoming a cultural symbol of each era.

Recommendations

1. General Recommendations

Nezha animation is a cultural and social phenomenon that is developed and influenced by Chinese culture and society, and is constructed through communication between creators and audiences. This provides a new direction for the study of Chinese mythological animation. The research on Chinese mythological animation is closely related to Creation should start from a sociological perspective and focus on the interaction between animation and society, thereby expanding the research perspective.

2. Further Research Recommendations

As a cultural resource, the image of Nezha can play a role in modern society, such as in national identity, social education or marketing. This study can explore the use of Nezha as a symbol by different social groups, and the reflection and impact of this use on the values and cultural dynamics of contemporary Chinese society.

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