

From “Prince Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” to “Nezha 2”: deconstructionism by new-generation director

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Abstract. In 2025, “Nezha 2” swept across various film charts and became a dark horse in the Spring Festival film season. As of now, it has topped the Chinese box office chart with 15.414 billion yuan and ranked fifth in global box office history with 15.867 billion yuan. The success of this phenomenon-level film is inseparable from the profound cultural heritage of China. The character of Nezha originated from religious folk tales. From literary classic mythological novels to “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio in 1979 and then to “Nezha 2” in 2025, the forms of works are rich and diverse. Based on different artistic expression forms, Not only has the classic character of Nezha undergone earth-shaking changes, but the narrative of Nezha’s series of works has also undergone tremendous transformation over time. From the binary opposition structuralism to the current diversified deconstructionism, the new generation of directors have gradually emerged in the history of cinema with their unique directorial styles, continuing to write a new chapter in the new era of film history that belongs to them. Jiaozi, the director of the film “Nezha 2”, is one of the representatives of the new generation of directors. As of now, Jiaozi has topped the box office chart of Chinese directors with a cumulative box office of 20.449 billion yuan for the two series of films starring Nezha. The success of the film “Nezha 2” is closely related to the director. Therefore, the significance of interpreting this epoch-making film cannot be separated from the analysis of the director’s creative style. This article will start by comparing the differences between the 1979 film “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” and the 2025 film “Nezha 2”, and explore how the new generation of directors, through deconstructing traditional narratives, reshaping character images, and integrating contemporary values, adapt traditional classic myths and legends with new era meanings. Thus, it reveals the significance of modernity brought by this phenomenon-level Chinese animated film.

Keywords: Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King, Nezha 2, deconstructionism, new-generation director

1. Introduction

Nezha, this character image originated from the mythological figure in the folk tale “The Investiture of the Gods”, is a highly representative young hero in traditional Chinese culture. His image of challenging authority and resisting fate is deeply rooted in people’s hearts. The 1979 film “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” produced by Shanghai Animation Film Studio is a classic of Chinese animation. The 2025 film “Nezha 2” directed by Jiaozi is a milestone work in Chinese animated films. This is not only reflected in box office sales but also in the core of film creation, that is, the bold adaptation of traditional stories. It deconstructs the traditional narrative and the traditional image of heroic figures. This article aims to compare the differences between these two films, analyze how new-generation directors innovate in traditional narratives, re-create Nezha’s story, and achieve the innovation of traditional stories in the context of the new era.

Starting from the fifth generation of directors, the characteristics of the sixth and seventh generations of directors have become less and less obvious, and it has become increasingly meaningless to distinguish which generation of directors by generation [1]. In the new era, directors not only come from the traditional academic circle, but also have transitioned from star actors to behind-the-scenes directors, and there are also many who have crossed industries to become directors. These directors from different industries have added new strength to the film industry. Therefore, in the new era, not only are the types of directors diversified, but the films they create also present diverse colors, which has changed the original traditional and inherent binary opposition structural system. The director of Jiaozi, born in 1980, did not follow the path his parents had planned for him. Instead, he gave up medicine for film. His cross-industry experience has given him a diverse character. His film works, whether it is the first one “Nezha” or the second one “Nezha 2”, both reflect the theme of Nezha’s refusal to accept his fate and his struggle against it. This is inseparable from the director’s experiences and personal feelings. That is to say, Director Jiaozi

integrated his personal experiences and ideology into the “Nezha” series of films. Therefore, the film “Nezha 2” not only reflects the director’s unique creative style but also reproduces the director’s creative objectives.

2. The deconstructionism of “Nezha 2”

2.1. The deconstructionism of traditional story themes in “Nezha 2”

There is only a three-wors difference between “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” and “Nezha 2”, but the story themes they express are vastly different. Director Jiaozi has thoroughly deconstructed the narrative of the classic film “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King”. It was created in 1979. At that time, China was in the first year of its reform and opening up, and the diversified development of culture was on the rise. Therefore, during this period, “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” was still in the stage of adapting and recreating the legendary mythological story “The Investiture of the Gods”. The film still depicted structuralism, with a binary opposition between the good and the bad characters as the story theme.

“Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” describes the complete growth story of the young hero Nezha from his birth, his rebellion in the sea, his suicide, to his resurrection and his campaign against the Dragon King. In the narrative of the film, Nezha was destined to be extraordinary from the moment he was born. The film begins by depicting the long wait of Li Jing and his wife for a child. With the help of Taiyi Zhenren, Nezha was born. He was born with extraordinary powers and learned magic from Taiyi Zhenren. Taiyi Zhenren presented him with the Hun Tian Ling and the Qian Kun Ring as gifts, and he gradually demonstrated extraordinary heroic spirit.

Nezha presents a positive spirit of heroism. When the Dragon King was about to eat the young boys and girls, Nezha upheld justice, killed the third prince of the Dragon King, Ao Bing, and peeled off his skin to cramp up, which enraged the Dragon King, Ao Guang. He took the opportunity to raise an army and hold the people accountable, intending to use Nezha’s problem to oppress Li Jing and further intimidate and threaten the common people. Li Jing, as a father, did not understand what Nezha had done and asked Nezha to repay Ao Bing’s life. Li Jing’s cowardice and the sufferings of the common people led Nezha to choose to die to repay his parents’ kindness and safeguard the peace of the people with his life. However, his sacrifice did not bring peace to Qiantang Guan. On the contrary, the Dragon King became even more ruthless, still eating the young boys and girls every year.

After Nezha’s death, Taiyi Zhenren used lotus flowers and lotus leaves to recreate his physical body, enabling him to be reborn. After being resurrected, Nezha bravely fought against the dragon Kings of the four seas and eventually defeated the evil Ao Guang, eliminating harm for the people, pacifying the sea, and restoring peace to the common folk. The entire film presents the image of a young hero who is both loyal and filial, brave and fearless, through a concise and linear narrative, highlighting the spirit of sacrifice in traditional Chinese culture of the spirit of sacrifice.

The linear narrative approach is highly characterized by structuralism. The narrative of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” mainly tells the traditional heroic story of justice defeating evil. This narrative describes around the main character Nezha, which conforms to the narrative feature of the binary opposition between justice and evil in structuralism [2]. Nezha plays a typical hero role in the story. His movement trajectory, from being the creator of innate abilities, to killing the dragon’s son and causing conflicts, then to self-sacrifice, rebirth, and ultimately defeating evil, constitutes a classic hero’s story model. This heroic narrative approach is the traditional structuralist narrative mode. The unilinear narrative of the film reinforces the irreversibility of mythological narration, that is, events cannot be traced back, which makes Nezha’s sacrifice more ritualistic and inevitable. In the context of structuralism, this unilinearity is not a limitation of narrative means, but a manifestation of the deep structure, which deepens the traditional and classic narrative structure of heroes [3].

“Nezha 2” deconstructs and reconstructs the classic story of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” with a theme that conforms to modern society. “Nezha 2” was created by director Jiaozi. Jiaozi’s original name is Yang Yu. He was born in 1980. He grew up along with the reform and opening up and was in a period of comprehensive cultural prosperity and development. As a contemporary director, Jiaozi has been influenced by diverse cultures. Therefore, his works are highly modern and reflect the avant-garde ideas of contemporary young directors. This can be seen in the first “Nezha” film, which deconstructs the story of Nezha, breaks the stereotype, and creates an image of Nezha who refuses to accept his fate. In the “Nezha 2”, a bolder deconstruction was carried out, reconstructing the entire story framework. Not only did it continue to run through Nezha’s indomitable personality characteristic, but it also reconstructed justice and evil, immortals and demons, breaking the audience’s stereotypical impression of positive and negative characters.

“Nezha 2” reinterprets the classic narrative [4]. Director Jiaozi, while continuing the core theme of Nezha’s rebellion against fate, introduced the contemporary expression of fate is not determined by heaven, endowing this ancient mythological figure with a new identity structure and new narrative. After the celestial tribulation, although the souls of the two were preserved, it was urgent to restore their bodies. However, the process of reshaping was full of uncertainties. The Dragon King of the East Sea, Ao Guang, and Shen Gongbao, joined forces with the underwater demons to attack Chentang Guan. In order to avoid making the same mistake again and again, Ao Bing saved Nezha, but his own physical body was destroyed. To help Ao Bing restore his physical body, he needs to go to the Yuxu Palace where the Chan Jiao is located to obtain the Yuyie Qiongyang needed to restore

the magic power of Bao Lian. Nezha and Ao Bing had no choice but to share the same body to participate in the immortality test organized by the Yuxu Palace. The test for becoming an immortal was to have them subdue the monsters. However, during the test, they discovered that the Wuliang Xianweng had ulterior motives and was using the monsters to refine elixirs to enhance the power of the Chan Jiao. The Wuliang Xianweng killed the people of Chentang Guan and even delved into the idea of eliminating the demon race, Nezha and the Dragon clan. In the final showdown with the Wuliang Xianweng and the Dragon King of the Three Seas, Nezha and Ao Bing joined forces to break the Heart-Piercing conjuring, ultimately defeating the Wuliang Xianweng and rescuing some of the demon races. At the end of the film, Nezha and Ao Bing decide to carve out their own path and lay the groundwork for the sequel.

In the film of Jiaozi, the single-line narrative was reconstructed and a multi-line narrative approach was adopted. This adaptation of the modern narrative method is a deconstruction of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King”. The multi-line narrative approach deconstructs the heroic narrative of traditional films. “Nezha 2” disposes of a single protagonist’s growth thread and adopts multiple parallel and interwoven storylines. It simultaneously narrates multiple time storylines, thereby breaking the duality of good and evil and decentralizing the protagonist’s perspective, creating a more complex mythological world for the film. Unlike “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King”, which mainly revolves around Nezha in chronological order, “Nezha 2” not only tells the story of the main protagonist, but also presents a multi-threaded narrative approach to present the stories of supporting characters through flashbacks and interludes. When explaining the reason why Shen Gongbao went to attack Chentang Guan, the film adopted a flashback approach, introducing the stories of the supporting characters, the Dragon Clan, and Shen Gongbao, apart from the protagonist Nezha. This narrative technique allows each thread to alternate at different time points, and the fates of the characters are interrelated yet misaligned with each other, enabling the audience to form an understanding of the overall story while constantly piecing together fragmented information. This multi-pronged approach not only enhances the dramatic tension of the story but also meets the contemporary audience’s demands for ups and downs in the plot and diverse perspectives, deconstructing the traditional narrative methods. The film deconstructs the narrative logic of traditional films, which is characterized by the dominance of heroes and a clear distinction between good and evil, through multiple narrative lines. First of all, Nezha is no longer the sole focus. Characters like Ao Bing, Shen Gongbao, and Wuliang Xianweng each have their own independent storylines and motives for action.

“Nezha 2” reconstructs the structure of the narrative language. In the film, Li Jing did not agree with the proposal of Taiyi Zhenren and Shen Gongbao that Ao Bing’s spiritual energy should be used to mask Nezha’s demonic energy in order to obtain nectar. He said, “This is definitely not the right way.” In Li Jing’s narrative language, what Li Jing considers “the right way” is clearly defined. However, as the main protagonist, Nezha saves Ao Bing in an unconventional way, which breaks the traditional structure. The protagonist is the representative of completely just heroism. This narrative language is also reflected in the language of the Hai Ye Cha. He told Shen Gongbao that he was a demon and a villain. Shen Gongbao, however, asked it in return who the villain was. This dialogue reflects the deconstruction of the antagonist. The Hai Ye Cha believed that the fairy was a villain, but as the antagonist, but Shen Gongbao and the Sea Night Demon, who seemed to be villains, eventually saved Nezha’s parents. In this film, Jiaozi does not structurally set up the opposition between the good and evil characters. On the contrary, Shen Gongbao and the Dragon King Ao Guang are characters who are both good and evil. Each of them has their own story. Through the shaping of the supporting characters, the audience can understand the personality traits and experiences of these characters, making the supporting characters’ images more three-dimensional. Therefore, the narrative language in films, on the one hand, can promote the development of narrative stories; on the other hand, through the deconstruction of narrative language, the deconstructionism characteristics of films become more prominent.

2.2. The deconstructionism of character settings in “Nezha 2”

Structuralism is reflected in the setting of character roles. The film “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” adopts a typical binary opposition character setting approach. The binary opposition of the character traits of the positive character Nezha and the negative character Ao Guang in film design is also one of the manifestations of structuralism. Nezha represents justice, resistance, sacrifice and light, while the Dragon King symbolizes evil, oppression, violence and darkness, thus establishing a clear good and evil confrontation field. This opposing relationship is not an accidental arrangement but a manifestation of the deep structure of the narrative of mythological heroism.

Apart from the binary opposition between justice and evil, and between Nezha and Ao Guang, there also exists a structured binary opposition in the father-son relationship between Li Jing and Nezha. Traditional patriarchy is reflected in the fact that fathers have absolute discourse power. They consider children to be their own property, and traditional family relationships are based on the absolute suppression of children by fathers. The portrayal of the father-son relationship between Nezha and Li Jing in “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” is based on the binary opposition between father and son in such a traditional family. In the film, Li Jing’s father is depicted as a weak-willed, strict and oppressive personality. When the Ao Guang attacked Chentang Guan, Li Jing not only bound Nezha but also intended to kill him. Such a traditional image of a father not only presents the restraint of family ethics on Nezha’s behavior, representing the authoritative characteristics of the father as a traditional patriarchy, but also shows the binary opposition between the father’s positive position and the child’s passive position

in the traditional father-son relationship. Therefore, “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” reflects the binary opposition structure system of the father-son relationship.

In “Nezha 2”, Jiaozi deliberately dissected the dual character structure of good and evil, reconstructing the originally clearly demarcated opposition between good and evil into a multi-polar interwoven value network [5]. Nezha is no longer merely the embodiment of justice. Since his birth, he has been criticized as a demon. The stereotype of the demon symbol has led the common people to believe that Nezha is a demon who will harm the world. The common people are all wary of his identity as the reincarnation of a demon. Nezha longed to be accepted, to prove that he was not a demon, to take control of his own destiny, and to achieve self-redemption. He had both a heroic awareness of resisting fate and a profound anxiety about his own identity. Ao Bing is no longer the villain who was in opposition to Nezha in film. He not only shoulders the mission of his family but also constantly struggles between friendship and responsibility, presenting complex emotions of loyalty, filial piety and righteousness. The parallel setting of the two main characters breaks the single structure, making Nezha both a hero and a demon, and Ao Bing both a spirit pearl and capable of doing bad things that harm the people of Chentang Guan. This dual identity is a mirror image of each other, breaking the single setting of the positive or negative character of the one character, and completing the complementarity and reflection of each other’s significance on their respective narrative lines. In terms of character design, Jiaozi makes the characters’ personalities more three-dimensional and complex, and endows them with multi-faceted features, which is also more in line with contemporary values.

“Nezha 2” has even reconstructed the antagonists. Supporting characters such as Shen Gongbao and Wuliang Xianweng have also been endowed with complex motives and positions. In this film, the motive behind Shen Gongbao’s theft of the spirit Pearl is explained, allowing the audience to have a better understanding of the character settings of the supporting roles and the complex background of Shen Gongbao. Although Shen Gongbao led Nezha to become a demon child and was the villain in the first film, in the second film, Jiaozi redirected the villain - the Wuliang Xianweng, and Shen Gongbao was no longer the villain character. He is both the avenger and the forgotten victim of destiny, and his anger stems from the pain of being abandoned by the Yuxu Palace. He tried hard to change the fate of the demon race, but still couldn’t be promoted to the Twelve Golden Immortals due to the prejudice in people’s hearts. Although the Wuliang Xianweng is called immortal and wears the immortal robe, in fact, he is extremely ambitious. He disregards the lives of the demon race only for his own benefit. Despite having the status of righteous path, he does all kinds of evil deeds. These complex characters clearly break the inherent perception of structuralism that immortals are positive characters and demons are villains. The setting of these character roles is a complex system interwoven with multiple behavioral motives and interest networks, revealing the contemporary interpretation of characters.

“Nezha 2” reconstructs the traditional father-son relationship. In the setting of Jiaozi, the father-son relationship is no longer like the traditional family relationship, presenting a state of opposition and incompatibility. Instead, it is a harmonious father-son relationship. Li Jing can understand Nezha and respect him. Unlike “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King”, this time Li Jing is no longer the embodiment of paternity who forced Nezha to commit suicide in the name of family reputation and the order of fate. Instead, he has become ally who understands and accompanies his children, standing on the same side as Nezha and helping him fight the enemy together. Through multiple scenes of father and son fighting side by side, the film dissects the binary opposition structure of fatherly love - absolute dominance and child - unconditional obedience. Instead, it presents a parent-child relationship characterized by equal consultation and mutual support. This setting where father and son converge on a common mission dissolves the suppression of individual subjectivity by patriarchy in traditional myths. The setting of Jiaozi where the father and son cooperate to defeat the Wuliang Xianweng makes the character relationship itself a dynamic community. Just as deconstructionism emphasizes that meaning emerges from differences and variations [6]. The relationship between Li Jing and Nezha also reconstructs meaning through continuous dialogue and practice. Nezha’s rebellion is regarded as a positive expression of self-assertion. Through this, the film not only reconstructed the cultural meaning of the father-son relationship, but also prompted the audience to rethink the binary opposition of authority and autonomy, enabling traditional myths to regain new vitality in the context of modern families and society.

Through multi-level and multi-perspective character Settings, “Nezha 2” not only deconstructs the transcendental stance of who is just and who is evil in traditional mythological animations, but also achieves a deconstruction from binary opposition to multiple expressions in a structuralist sense. This rearrangement on the deep semiotic system not only makes the characters more realistic, but also endows the cultural significance of the film in the contemporary context with greater tension and inclusiveness.

2.3. The deconstructionism of visual languages in “Nezha 2”

The visual language of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” conforms to the dual characteristics of structuralism. From the perspective of structuralism, the visual language intensifies the symbolic tension between the hero and the villain through the distinct binary opposition of colors. The character design of Nezha is mainly in a passionate verdant color. Red not only symbolizes vitality and passion but also implies his innate divinity and rebellious spirit. His Hun Tian Ling is always colored red, allowing the audience to immediately perceive his energy and just power as a positive subject, embodying the vigorous vitality of Nezha as a heroic figure. In contrast, the Dragon King Ao Guang, as the villain, is in a dark color, using bluish-gray. This not only forms a sharp visual contrast with Nezha’s red but also symbolizes oppression and tyranny, highlighting his threat as a

villain. Such color opposition is not accidental, but a binary structure embedded in the deep symbolic system of the film. Through the contrast between vermilion and bluish-gray, justice and darkness, and by using the visual language of color, the theme of good and evil is presented directly. And in every confrontation between Nezha and the Dragon King, the intense collision of colors echoes the core conflict of the struggle between good and evil in the narrative.

In “Nezha 2”, director Jiaozi also uses colors to depict characters and themes, but he no longer remains in the traditional binary structure. Instead, he deconstructs and reconstructs classic symbols within a richer palette of colors. The seven-colored lotus in the film is a riot of white, with multiple colors gradually changing and superimposing. Modern 3D animation technology is used to present the diversity of colors, allowing different colors to be displayed on the same object. This breaks the stereotype of the lotus’s monotonous colors and endows this traditional symbol with new contemporary significance.

The color treatment of Ao Bing and Ao Guang as non-villain characters is no longer a single bluish-gray. The dragon scales on Ao Bing’s body glinted a transparent blue luster under the light and shadow, complemented by a metallic highlight, highlighting the tug-of-war between his Spirit Pearl radiance and his bloodline destiny. Ao Guang did not continue to use the bluish-gray color of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” as the main tone of the character, but instead adopted silver-gray, making the complex character of Ao Guang more three-dimensional in this film. He is more like a brave warrior rather than a villain. This rich variety of colors is presented through modern techniques making the Dragon clan no longer merely an embodiment of evil, but an image with its own cultural texture and emotional contradictions. The film weakens the absolute opposition between immortals and demons in the past, and instead presents the complexity of the characters’ inner worlds and the multiple tensions in their relationship networks.

“Nezha 2” further deconstructs the single concept of good and evil through the use of secondary characters and scene colors. The real villain in the film - the Wuliang Xianweng, is mostly presented in white in the early stage. White gives the audience a sense of cleanliness, simplicity and innocence, which also conforms to the inherent impression of the Wuliang Xianweng as a pair of immortals. The Yuxu Palace where he was located mostly used cold gold and ivory white, but he was the villain. The demons are mostly presented in dark colors, but they are positive images of those who have done nothing bad. This also adds dramatic tension in the later plot twists of the film. Especially during the great battle between the Demon clan and the Chan Jiao, the deconstruction of the good and evil by colors was even more thorough. The Lu Tong and the Wuliang Xianweng are both white. When the Chan Jiao fought against the Demon clan, the Jiaozi used modern particle techniques and also presented a white particle effect. The Demon clan, on the other hand, presented a grayish-black particle effect. This contrast of black and white deconstructs the traditional application of colors. In the film, the righteous side represented by Nezha and Ao Bing is expressed in dark tones, while the evil side represented by the Wuliang Xianweng is expressed in white. This design deconstructs the binary opposition of colors, holding the stereotype that black represents evil and white represents justice. The positive characters can be displayed through dark tones, while the negative characters can also be shown through white. Therefore, “Nezha 2” not only breaks the traditional binary opposition structure of black and white in terms of color, but also makes the character design more complex through color design and adds a reversal effect to the narrative of the film to increase the dramatic tension.

Through the interweaving of multiple colors and the use of secret language, “Nezha 2” completely breaks the absolute binary opposition between immortals and demons visually, and instead captures the multi-faceted nature of characters and the complexity of the story in visual language. Every time a character makes an appearance or a scene switches, the audience can instantly perceive their identity, emotional entanglements and fate choices through colors, thus constructing a diverse mythological world that respects traditional imagery while also daring to express itself in a contemporary way.

3. Conclusion

From “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King” in 1979 to “Nezha 2” directed by Jiaozi, the Chinese mythological figure of Nezha has undergone a comprehensive deconstruction and recreation from a linear hero’s narrative to a multi-dimensional narrative space, from the establishment of a binary opposition character to a multi-polar complex character system, and from traditional ink-wash aesthetics to a rich color space. At the narrative level of the theme, “Nezha 2” breaks the established structure such as the boundaries between good and evil through parallel and fragmented narratives, presenting a diverse identity reconstruction. In terms of character construction, “Nezha 2” presents rich character motivations, forms complex character emotions, and breaks the prior judgment of good and evil. In terms of visual language, dumplings use modern animation technology to make the colors rich, allowing the sign of traditional myths to be interpreted in multiple ways within a broader visual language. Through the comprehensive deconstruction and reconstruction of “Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King”, Director Jiaozi not only offers a modern interpretation of the classic text but also opens up a post-structuralism discourse path for domestic animation, allowing this cross-era cultural sign, Nezha, to radiate richer tension and vitality in the contemporary context.

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