

# ***Research on National Cultural Consciousness Construction and Strategy of Chinese New Mythological Animated Films***

## ***--Taking Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child as an Example***

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**Abstract:** Chinese neo-mythological films are emerging as a new genre of cinema, attracting more and more creators and audiences. Taking *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, a representative of the new mythology animated films, as an example, this paper analyses the national cultural awareness embodied in the characterisation and social identity of Chinese new mythology animated films through a documentary research method, and points out that Chinese new mythology animated films can only be better developed if they take into account the national culture and the characteristics of the times. That is, on the basis of preserving the traditional group memory of the nation, creative adaptations are made using a modern vision to gain contemporary popular recognition. The author believes that valuing the uniqueness and value of China's new mythological films in the construction of national cultural awareness will lead to more masterpieces in the future, contributing to the development of the Chinese film industry and even the world's animated films.

**Keywords:** group memory, tradition ethnic culture, time characteristics

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Research Background**

With the changes in times and the development of society, the creation of Chinese mythological animated films is constantly evolving and developing. Since the release of the animated film "*Monkey King: Hero is Back*" in 2015, the animated film adapted from mythology has broken into the public's vision. The appearance of the 2019 film "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*" once again pushed the creative adaptation of mythological films to the climax of national discussion. According to the statistics of Chinese literature retrieved by CNKI Advanced Search with the theme of "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*", the number of relevant documents reached 138 in 2019. There is a big difference between high-tech mythological animated films and traditional mythological films. Zhao & Wang concluded that the myth narrative in the current domestic animation is not a simple retelling of classical myths but a new creation [1]. It is no longer simply

depicting mythological stories, but through mythological elements and exploration of current social issues, it provides readers with a new perspective for thinking and cultural experience.

According to Fang Shicheng's research, new mythological animation films are an innovative form of animation screen, which started in 2015 and are dominated by technocracy and have a certain commercial value [2]. These new mythology animation films feature cultural narratives such as returning to classic legends and reconstructing traditional themes, shaping the unique charm of national culture, completing the subversion of the mythological subject, and the construction of social consensus of values, thus profoundly influencing the cultural identity of the audience [3]. Whether it is a "contemporary rewriting" of a specific myth or a "new narrative" after mixing, collaging, grafting, and transforming various non-homologous myths, all of them inject contemporary concepts while retaining the typical visual The "new narrative" is a mixture of contemporary concepts, while retaining the typical visual symbols of mythological images and drawing heavily on traditional Chinese art styles, providing a new way of thinking for the development of Chinese animation [1].

With the continuous development of China's film industry, Chinese mythological-themed animated films have gradually received more attention. However, China's research has not yet formed a complete system in this field. Through CNKI's advanced search, 54 Chinese-related documents were retrieved with the theme of "Chinese New Myth Animation Film". Most scholars/articles mainly study Chinese New Mythology animated films' current situation and development direction. In contrast, few scholars/articles have studied the construction of national cultural memory in mythological animated films. Thus it can be seen that the creative adaptation of mythological animation is an important proposition in modern animation creation in recent years, the research on the construction of national culture in Chinese new mythological animated films is still superficial, Animation creators are faced with the plight of the lack of understanding of the construction of national culture in traditional mythology, and the exploration of mythological animation is still fragmented, lacking a more comprehensive and in-depth discussion.

## 1.2. Research Design

Therefore, this paper will provide a systematic analysis of the new Chinese mythological animation films through literature research methods as well as case study methods through journals, essays, industry reports, and websites. Myth is the story of aesthetic imagination and explanation of supernatural phenomena with common directivity produced unconsciously in a specific historical period. It is the metaphysical spiritual condensation in the collective consciousness and contains the common aspirations of people at that time [2]. So, after understanding the state of film development and the current state of research, a specific analysis is made in relation to the new mythological animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. Then, by analysing the characters portrayed in these mythological animation films, the social rules embedded behind the characters' relationships, and then seeking group memories based on individual differences and seeking the spiritual world whose depths can evoke national emotional empathy, we conduct a case study and strategic research on the construction of national cultural memory in China's new mythological animation. Animated films based on classic Chinese myths are based on folklore and mythology, encoded, transcoded, and decoded during the long transmission process, reconstructing a surreal time and space where heaven, earth, man, gods, and ghosts coexist. The narrative vehicle of the classic mythological themes is rooted in the original memory and symbolic accumulation of Chinese culture, preserving the nation's historical memory and emotional experience [4]. In the following development, "New Myth" animated films should be firmly based on traditional culture, follow the industrial creation process of modern films, dig out the resounding theme of the story, and bring forth new ideas in the local characteristics to stand firm and walk steadily [2].

## 2. Case Description

Scholars have pointed out that Chinese animated films center on the transformation of traditional mythology, relying on the storytelling properties and the efficacy of cultural memory storage that traditional mythology has, touching the spiritual world of human beings in the reproduction of mythological meaning on the one hand, and reshaping mythology in the structural simulation of the modern world on the other, generating the basic path of modern mythological narrative [4]. Since the release of "*Monkey King: Hero is Back*" in 2015, many films relying on traditional mythology's framework for creative adaptations have emerged. Although this will result in a pile-up of subjects and fierce competition in the short term, it also gradually expands the market and accumulates a certain number of fan viewing groups, building up momentum for the fire of "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*".

*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is a new mythological animation film directed by Yang Yu, adapted from the traditional Chinese mythology "*The Legend of the Gods*", to be released in the summer of 2019. The film tells the story of Nezha, who is born as a demon but "fights against the heavens to the end". The film was a huge success at the box office and in terms of word-of-mouth. The adaptation of "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*" is a subversion of the traditional image of the folk gods, but it is also a folklore animation narrative relevant to the current social and cultural context and reflects the aesthetic and ethical interests of the general public. The film builds a bridge between history and current reality from the perspective of the folk public [5]. Although the release of the movie "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*" has set off a wave of new mythological animated film adaptations, no mythological film of the same level has been produced yet.

## 3. Analysis of Problem

### 3.1. Characterisation

Some scholars point out characterization is the film's soul [6]. A brilliant animated film cannot be made without good characterisation. In the creation of new Chinese mythological animation films, character reimagining is a crucial part of the process, with different characterisations giving plausible motivations and explanations for different characters' actions.

First, new mythological animated films often incorporate period features while retaining the attributes of the original characters in order to appeal to audiences.

Traditional mythological animated characters have evolved over a long period of history to become a distinctive national cultural group memory. So, the creators can draw on the mythological system unique to the nation in the group's cultural memory to reduce the audience's unfamiliarity with the new story. When these traditionally animated characters appear in the story, the creators do not need to spend too much time introducing their original identities, personalities, and chains of relationships, as these elements are already imprinted in the audience's mind, and even though they are different from the classic images, this inherent familiarity helps the audience to integrate more quickly into the plot[1]. For example, in the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the previous image of Nezha as a fat doll who could not tell if he was a man or a woman was reversed. Nezha wears smoky make-up, has a big belly, and holds a dog-tailed straw in his mouth. This image of a mischievous teenager breaks away from the conventional image. Even though Nezha's image has been subverted, the audience can still remember to match it with its classic symbolic features, and other characters distinguish themselves.

Therefore, preserving the traditional character traits and drawing on the memory of the national cultural community is undoubtedly a wise way to adapt today's new mythological animation films.

Second, the subversive transformation and creative reinvention of traditional mythological animation characters is an important way of creatively adapting new mythological animation films and modernising and interpreting the cultural memory of traditional ethnic groups.

In the process of creation, the creator usually places the traditional mythological character in a modern context, reshaping the character and personality, breaking the traditional character stereotypes, and implanting new memory points so that the character does not become completely assimilated by the frozen memory while following the tradition, maintaining the continuity and subversive relationship with the traditional mythological archetype [4]. As a cultural symbol, like Nezha and Sun Wukong, has become synonymous with "brave rebellion" and is deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people, and the image of Nezha has been constantly updated, enriched, and developed to meet the increasing demands of contemporary audiences for the identity of the role [7]. For example, in the animated film *"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"*, Nezha is transformed from a perfect god into a human being with the breath of life. He is hot-tempered and irritable. When he encounters disappointment, he will have emotions and problems. The distance between Nezha and the audience has been shortened from a single flat image of hatred of evil to a complex and diverse characterization, from a grand educational implication to the personality growth of small people, paving the way for the subsequent development of the story and the growth and transformation of the characters. Compared to the early film images, Nezha incorporates many modern expressions, no longer a simple binary opposition between good and evil, but a representative of rebellion against destiny, in line with the emotional tendency of contemporary people to freely control their destiny and realise their self-worth. The familiar mythological figures are defamiliarised so that the characters can find themselves from different backgrounds, complete the remodeling of self-worth, break away from the old-fashioned plot, and give the characters and stories a new soul [4].

Third, Myth, as a form of cultural heritage, carries people's recognition and expression of their own national culture. The revival of myth can not only carry on the cultural tradition of myth but also meet the various needs of modern society for cultural inheritance.

Whether it is to excavate the origin of mythology or to strengthen the reproduction of mythology, it embodies the combination of historical and cultural thinking. On the one hand, adhering to the core spirit of the origin of myth is the respect for history and culture, the reverence and spiritual foothold of a nation for its own origin, and the historical memory and sentiment of the national spirit and imagination for its own traditional culture; on the other hand, the reinterpretation of myth is the expression of the mainstream consciousness in the context of time and space that meets the needs of the people, and then calls for the spiritual return of the whole nation, activates the origin of cultural memory in the hearts of the audience, and gets close to the foundation of traditional culture, whether it is to excavate the origin of the myth or to strengthen the reproduction of the myth, it reflects the combination of historical and cultural thinking; on the one hand, adhering to the core spirit of the origin of myth is the respect for history and culture, the reverence and spiritual foothold of a nation for its own origin, and the historical memory and feeling of the national spirit and imagination for its own traditional culture; on the other hand, reinterpreting the myth is the expression of the mainstream consciousness in the context of time and space that meets the needs of the people, and then calls for the spiritual return of the whole nation, activates the origin of cultural memory in the hearts of the audience, and gets close to the foundation of traditional culture [5]. As a well-known representative of mythological figures, Nezha has evolved in the long historical process, always adhering to the spiritual core of mythological origin, absorbing the nourishment of realistic culture in different space-time contexts and cultural backgrounds, explaining and narrating the self-needs and self-representations of different people under the social coordinates of the time,

which is also the core of Nezha, and has become the output form of self-expression and self-identity of folk culture bearers within the group.

As one scholar said, the image of a film character should not be confined to the traditional form; while highlighting the balance of personality and emotion in the image of the character, it is also necessary to achieve the complementarity between the external shape and the internal character of the character, and to effectively integrate traditional culture and the spirit of the times, so as to create a film character image that meets the aesthetics of the new era audience [6].

### 3.2. Social Rules

The transformation of myth is a dynamic process of symbolization, and each evolution of symbolic connotation is not an unconscious accidental change but is influenced by the characteristics of a particular era, social atmosphere, and other factors [8]. On this basis, Chinese animated films reconstruct the new form of modern mythology by resetting and reconstructing the characters and their relationship with the world, thus completing the re-coding of traditional mythology [4].

First, modern mythology is not merely a mapping of the real world; it also often provides a reflection and critique of reality.

Through the actions and choices of mythological characters, modern mythology attempts to explore how humans should deal with the problems and challenges of reality. Some authors have split the adaptation of Nezha's image into three, from resistance to traditional feudal patriarchy and social order to the dichotomy between good and evil and the realisation of educational purposes for younger viewing subjects, to the rewriting of his origins against the odds, focusing on human nature and the fact that the relationship between gods and demons is no longer tit-for-tat [5]. Nezha's image changes from rebellion against the social order to one of self-worth and development, beginning to explore his path to self-redemption. Modern mythology draws on the essence of traditional mythology while simultaneously incorporating the realities of modern society and reflecting the common rules of human society. Viewers can gain insight into the problems and challenges people face in reality through the portrayal of mythological characters and storylines. In addition, modern mythology can help people to establish the right values and realise the true meaning of freedom and responsibility.

Second, the transformation of the thematic proposition embodies a contemporary emotional quest.

For example, the transformation of Nezha's mother, Lady Yin, from the image of a woman who is subservient to her husband's orders to that of a career woman reflects the changes in family structure and identity roles brought about by the rise of female power in modern society: the mother's role is not only to take care of her husband and son but also to have a say in external social and educational matters for her children. The fact that Nezha's mother, Lady Yin, has to be absent from her son's upbringing because she is so busy subduing demons every day in order to protect the local people leads to Nezha's emotional absence and inexpressive character flaws, which is a troubling issue for working women today regarding how to balance work and family [7]. The virtual world presented by Chinese new mythological animated films is often a microcosm of the current real society, which has certain social practical significance and entertainment and educational significance. How the characters are narrated in different historical stages, to some extent, also constitutes an observation perspective of the social and cultural reality at that time [1].

Third, in the cinematic space, viewing is both a process of witnessing personal growth and a search for fragments of memory. At the same time, several elements of the mythological matrix are reorganised and modernised according to actual needs [2].

Mythological stories need to be constantly interpreted with new themes because of their different social rules and characteristics of the times. On the premise that the original spiritual core remains

unchanged, we should eliminate the outdated emotional needs and integrate them into the characteristics of the new era. The attitude of combining "breaking" and "establishing" is not only the modern transformation of mythological resources but also the mythological expression of modern people's spiritual world [4].

#### 4. Suggestions

When making creative changes in Chinese new mythological animation films, it is necessary to consider the national culture and the characteristics of the times.

##### 4.1. Need to Be Rooted in National Culture

The film respects Nezha's original rebellious attributes and continues the traditional Chinese educational philosophy of pursuing a happy ending.

First, respect for the character's own resistance properties:

In adaptations of new mythological animated films, some original portrayals of the characters or stories are often borrowed to reduce the unfamiliarity of the characters.

In the movie *"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"*, despite the numerous creative adaptations of Nezha, some of the character's own personality attributes, such as the setting of defiance, are retained. In the film, Nezha constantly rebels against the Mandate of Heaven and redeems himself. In the face of the people, he is unyielding and strives to eliminate prejudice; in the face of his parents, he refuses to be misunderstood while daring to act; in the face of the irreversible Mandate of Heaven, he resists tenaciously, not bound by prophecy, and strives to redeem himself through his own cultivation.

In protecting his will, Nezha encourages resistance to old ideas and regulations, a characterization that also offers a glimpse of resistance, growth, and redemption in traditional Chinese culture.

Second, continuing the educational philosophy of teaching by example.

Teaching by example is a very important way of education, which enables the educated to learn the correct way of behavior and doing things through behavioral demonstration and verbal guidance.

In the movie *"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"*, Li Jing is a typical representative of "teaching by example". In the film, Li Jing is still a strict father with a more humanistic approach than in previous literary works. Although Li Jing is not a man of many words, he loves his child deeply and attempts a miracle, knowing that Nezha will be destroyed as a demon child. Because of this love in his heart, Li Jing is willing to give his life in exchange for guarding Nezha. This act of his father's profoundly affected Nezha, as he did not accept his fate and shouted that his life was up to him, but he also found his value.

Thanks to Li Jing's teachings, Nezha was transformed from a "devil child" scourge to a young hero who saved the world.

Third, the pursuit of a happy ending:

In Chinese culture, family is an important concept, and many people believe family harmony and harmony are the foundation of happiness. In the movie *"Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child"*, Nezha and Ao Bing are dead, but their souls are still alive, leaving room for future story development. The happy ending satisfies the audience's emotional needs and conveys positive values, making it more acceptable to more people.

The creation of new Chinese mythological animation films must be based on traditional national culture in order to be recognized by the public.



## 4.2. Need to Incorporate the Zeitgeist

The film and television creators of China's new mythological animated films integrate the characteristics of the times, values, aesthetic orientation, and spiritual connotations on the basis of exploring China's high-quality traditional cultural resources in order to make the traditional mythological stories told in a new way [9].

The creator's modern vision and the inclusion of period elements are key reasons for the success of the film "Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child". The struggle against the powerful is replaced by the themes of resistance to fate, self-growth, and redemption, which people recognize today [10].

First, audience identification.

Today's film creators try to gain recognition by evoking a sense of recognition from the audience. The uncertainty of life often leads people to identity anxiety. Some scholars have pointed out that Chinese films in recent years have reflected people's need for identity from different perspectives: one type of film is youthful nostalgia films, which define their own identity by evoking memories; another type of film is animated films such as *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, which emphasise individual responsibility and commitment in shaping self-identity in practice; another type of film is melodramatic films, which Another category is the melodramatic films, which emphasise national identity inspired by national rescue; and the films represented by the science fiction disaster film *Wandering Earth*, which express the quest for identity of human beings as a community[ 11].

The film also reflects the demand for identity, taking the misplaced identities of Nezha and Ao Bing as a starting point, overlapping the mis-education of parents and teachers with the coloured vision of the other, to speak of the difficulties and embarrassment of establishing self-identity in the process of growing up, insinuating the identity dilemma of contemporary people, while attempting to resolve the reality of identity dilemma by reducing identity to the soul [11].

Therefore, by alluding to the issues of the time and incorporating the characteristics of the times, the film is more likely to evoke a sense of identification with the audience.

Second, the integration of modern values.

The incorporation of modern contemporary values has made the film more accessible to the general public.

With the development of the times, people's values are also changing and evolving, with more emphasis on values such as equality, respect, pluralism, and diversity. In current animated films, more and more works also begin to highlight humanistic concerns. For example, the theme of rebellion against fate was usually opposed to the oppression of feudal kingship or religious theocracy in previous literary productions, yet in today's society, the kernel of the story of fate by God becomes fate by oneself [12]. The theme of the film is no longer one of obedience and revenge, no longer one of rebellion and struggle, no longer one of pure individual heroism and absolute opposition between good and evil, but rather one of "my fate is mine", in response to the changes of modern society [13]. The change in the theme of the film "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*" is one of the reasons why the film is such a success.

Therefore, the adaptation of the new Chinese mythological animation film needs to incorporate modern values.

Only by taking into account the national culture and the characteristics of the times can China's new mythological animation films be better developed. This is the inheritance and development of traditional national culture and reflects and expresses modern society.

## 5. Conclusion

Suppose Chinese new mythological animation films want to achieve better development in the future. In that case, they have to rely on traditional national culture and bring together collective

memory while incorporating a modern vision and popular recognition of the times. Such creative adaptations include but are not limited to, characterisation, social rules, and the spirit of the times.

As the Chinese film market continues to expand and grow in influence, Chinese mythological animated films are gradually gaining attention as an important category. Using the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* as an example, this paper examines the new Chinese mythological animated film, which positively contributes to the construction of a national cultural consciousness in Chinese mythological animated films and the future development of mythological cinema.

This paper examines the construction of national cultural consciousness and the future direction of China's new mythological animation film through the study of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. Through the analysis of characterisation and cultural connotations, it reveals the close connection between traditional mythological culture and modern life highlighted by the film, and reflects the profound influence of the group memory of national mythology on modern life, contributing to a deeper sense of cultural identity and the realization of cultural confidence.

However, there are some shortcomings in this paper. Firstly, this paper mainly adopts a documentary research method to analyse and study the construction of national cultural awareness in Chinese new mythological animation films. This leads to a heavy reliance on secondary data and a lack of use of primary data, which may lead to inaccurate or missing information. Secondly, as the scope of research on the national consciousness of Chinese new mythological animation films is too large, this paper only selects a few aspects of Chinese new mythological animation films, such as the paving of traditional national memories and the integration of contemporary features. This makes the study somewhat one-sided and requires further refinement. The above issues can be studied in greater depth and more extensively in the future through case study analysis and data collation and analysis.

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