

Modernizing Myth : A Comparative Analysis of Traditional Legends in the *Ne Zha* Animated Film Series

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Received: February 17th, 2025; **Revised:** April 6th, 2025; **Accepted:** April 13th, 2025

Abstract

In recent years, the adaptation of mythological themes in audiovisual media has expanded significantly. However, existing research often focuses on case studies or broad paradigms, lacking a systematic exploration of the interactions between technological aesthetics, ideology, and mythic narratives. This article examines the animated films “Ne Zha” and “Ne Zha 2,” using a three-dimensional analytical framework of “cultural deconstruction—technological empowerment—value reconstruction” to explore the modern translation strategies of the Ne Zha character and its socio-cultural implications. Through text comparison and key scene interpretation, the study compares the films' narrative themes, character identities, visual symbols, and ideological expressions. It reveals that Ne Zha's image has shifted from “individual resistance” to “collective action,” with the narrative focus expanding from individual struggles against social prejudice to collective resistance against systemic oppression. This evolution is achieved through cyberpunk aesthetics and fluid simulation technologies, reshaping traditional mythological symbols and positioning animated films as a medium for critical cultural reproduction. The paper also discusses the balancing strategies used by Chinese animated films between traditional symbols and contemporary expression, offering a new theoretical framework for modernizing mythological intellectual properties (IPs).

Keywords: Ne Zha Series, Modern Mythological Translation, Identity Reconstruction, Power Narratives, Technological Empowerment

Introduction

In recent years, the modern adaptation of mythological themes has expanded significantly in both domestic and international academic research. Internationally, theories like Henry Jenkins' “transmedia storytelling” and Marie-Laure Ryan's “story worlds” provide foundational support for studying myth adaptations. However, there is a lack of depth in interpreting the reconstruction of cultural memory. Domestic research focuses on the evolution of adaptation paradigms, with models like Liang & Xu (2024) “Folk Film—Heritage Film—Prototype Film” revealing the integration of traditional myths into audiovisual media. Films like “Demon Forces Demon” showcase new possibilities for mythological adaptations through visually spectacular techniques and narrative reconstruction.

Existing research often focuses on case studies or broad paradigms, neglecting the interaction between technological aesthetics and ideology, particularly in animated films. For

instance, Zhang & Wang (2021) analyzed mythological imagery in “Ne Zha” (2019 film) but did not explore how technological aesthetics influence mythological narratives. Yang (2020) traced the evolution of mythological characters in Chinese animated films but did not systematically compare different adaptations or explore the symbolic translation of Ne Zha's image. Ding (2020) examined hero figures in “Ne Zha” (2019 film) and “Monkey King : Hero is Back” (2015 film) but did not address the evolution of Ne Zha's character or the global context of mythological reconstruction.

Recent studies highlight the role of technology in reinterpreting mythology. Guo & Sun (2024) explored digital media's role in visualizing Chinese mythological IP, while Zhang (2023) examined technical aesthetic expressions in Chinese mythological films. Bing (2023) investigated the influence of technology on myth narratives and subjectivity construction. However, these studies lack a comprehensive framework to explore the interconnected mechanisms of myth deconstruction, technological empowerment, and value reconstruction.

Research Objective

1. To analysis of “Ne Zha” and “Ne Zha 2” focuses on the evolution of narrative techniques, exploring how these films reconstruct symbols, embed values, and transform modes of individual and collective resistance. Moreover, to achieve a modern reinterpretation of traditional mythology while addressing contemporary social issues.

2. To analysis framework of “Cultural Deconstruction - Technological Empowerment - Value Reconstruction” is constructed by integrating mythic archetype criticism, ideological criticism, and technological aesthetics.

Literature Review

1. Mythic Archetype Criticism : Reconstruction of the “Rebel” Archetype in Ne Zha

The evolution of Ne Zha's archetype as a “rebel” reflects the adaptability of mythological symbols within cultural integration and shifts in social values. This process can be analyzed in four stages as follows.

Phase One : Protective Deities and Early Resistance. Ne Zha originates from the Buddhist figure “Nalakuvara,” depicted as a multi-armed giant tasked with subduing demons (Ye et al., 2022). Early representations, like the Liao Dynasty stone box, show resistance against malevolent forces without ethical conflicts. Song Dynasty texts introduce philosophical dichotomies, symbolizing self-dissection for enlightenment (Ning & Yang, 2024).

Phase Two : Secular Transformation. From the Song to Ming and Qing Dynasties, Ne Zha evolved from a Buddhist protector to a mischievous child. Ming Dynasty's “Investiture of the Gods” secularized his rebellious nature, challenging Confucian filial piety and patriarchy (Bi, 2020). This phase highlights the conflict between individual freedom and traditional ethics, aligning with Northrop Frye's theory named “Tragic Mode” (Frye, 1957).

Phase Three : Modern Animation Deconstruction. The film “Ne Zha” (2019 film) reconfigures the “spiritual orb/demonic pill” dichotomy to symbolize social prejudice. Ne Zha's struggle against marginalization resonates with Jung's “shadow archetype,” but the film remains within the limits of individual heroism (Li, 2025).

Phase Four : Contemporary Sequels and Collective Resistance. “Ne Zha : The Devil’s Child” (2024 film) shifts focus to systemic oppression and collective resistance. The alliance between Ne Zha and Ao Bing critiques institutional violence, aligning with Frye’s “communal rebirth” (Frye, 1957). Technical aesthetics, like fluid dynamics rendering, enhance the film’s political significance and critical depth (Ye, 2013).

These phases illustrate Ne Zha’s evolution from a religious symbol to a figure of ethical rebellion and social critique, reflecting the dynamic adaptability of mythological symbols in different historical contexts.

2. Ideological Critique : The Projection of Societal Values Behind Adaptations

The film theory of “ideological criticism” integrates Marxist social critique, post-structuralism, and close textual analysis of films, engaging with changes in social reality and struggles (Shen, 2016). Animated films embody the socio-ideological consciousness of historical periods, reproducing mainstream values through narrative structure, character development, and visual language. The modern adaptation of the Ne Zha animated series reflects a dynamic reconstruction of social ideology in three core themes as follows.

2.1 Anti-Fatalism : Challenges traditional fatalistic views by emphasizing individual will and action. The film reinterprets Ne Zha’s character (released in 2019) with the narrative “My fate is not determined by me, but only by heaven.” “哪吒的人生信条是我命由我不由天”, “申公豹的豹生缩影则是我命不由我只能由天” highlighting individual subjectivity and self-identity (Methven, 2025).

2.2 Anti-Elitism : Shifts focus from individual heroism to collective action. The sequel “Ne Zha : 2” portrays group resistance, addressing contemporary youth concerns about social stratification and structural injustice.

2.3 Techno-Mythology : Integrates technology and mythology through cyberpunk visuals and fluid simulation technology. This fusion reconstructs the discourse of power within mythology, rendering abstract social oppression into tangible forms and aligning with contemporary audience perceptions.

These aspects illustrate how the Ne Zha series engages with modern societal values and technological innovations.

Analytical Framework

This study has an analytical framework that uses 3 analytical techniques (cultural deconstruction, technological empowerment, and value reconstruction) to synthesize the hero character design in the films *Ne Zha* and *Ne Zha 2*. The results will be the hero character design strategies that can be applied for further design.

Research Methodology

This study was qualitative research by content analysis of the 2 films. Dimensions for study employed a combination of textual comparative analysis and critical scene interpretation to systematically explore the adaptation strategies employed in the Ne Zha animated series.

1. Textual Comparative Analysis

The core of the textual analysis is a comparative study of the traditional myth “Investiture of the Gods” (Ming Dynasty, Wanli edition), “Ne Zha” (2019 film), and “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film) in terms of narrative evolution. The selection of text samples is based on three considerations as follows.

1) Representativeness of Versions : “Investiture of the Gods” (Ming Dynasty, Wanli Edition) is chosen as the traditional text, presenting the ethical conflict surrounding Ne Zha’s act of “bone removal to return to his father,” establishing his archetype as a “rebel.” “Ne Zha” (2019 film) and “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film) form a complete modern adaptation series. The former reshapes Ne Zha’s image through individual struggle and opens market opportunities, while the latter deepens this image with collective action and technological innovation, balancing commercial viability with critical engagement.

2) Temporal Span and Cultural Context : The study spans nearly 500 years (from the 16th to the 21st century), covering agricultural civilization, industrialization, and the digital technology era. It analyzes how mythological archetypes are reconstructed in response to changes in production modes, ideologies, and societal needs.

3) Continuity of Adaptation Strategies : The analysis focuses on Ne Zha’s evolution from an individual hero to a collective resistance subject, exploring how this transformation adapts to shifting social discourse systems across different eras and resonates with contemporary audiences’ cultural psychology.

These criteria ensure systematic textual analysis and historical depth, revealing the dynamic process of myth adaptation within changing social ideologies.

Based on this, the specific comparisons of the text analysis are as follows.

Table 1 Comparative Textual Analysis of Traditional Myths and *Ne Zha* and *Ne Zha 2*

Version	Narrative Theme	Character Identity	Focus of Resistance	Projection of Values
Traditional Mythology (Investiture of the Gods)	Patriarchal Rebellion	Patricide	Patriarchal System	Fate Theory
<i>Ne Zha</i> (2019 film)	Anti-Stigmatization	Devilish Child	Social Prejudice	Individualism and Anti-Fatalism
<i>Ne Zha 2</i> (2025 film)	Critique of the System	Rebel	Systemic Oppression	Anti-Elitism and Collective Action

Through this longitudinal comparison, we can reveal how the image of Ne Zha has been imbued with new social meanings at different historical stages, and how it aligns with the psychological needs of young audiences in the narrative evolution from individual resistance to collective struggle.

2. Key Scene Analysis

In the analysis of key scenes, to ensure the systematic and objective nature of the research, the following criteria are employed for selecting pivotal moments as follows.

- 1) **Narrative Turning Points** : These are core events that drive the plot forward, such as character awakenings or escalations in conflict;
- 2) **Character Development** : Significant moments that prominently reflect a character's growth or transformation in identity;
- 3) **Thematic Presentation** : Scenes that profoundly convey the film's central themes;
- 4) **Technical Innovation** : Instances showcasing important advancements in areas such as CGI effects, fluid simulation, or visual metaphors.

Based on this standard, three iconic scenes from “Ne Zha” (2019 film) and “Ne Zha : The Devil's Birth” (2025 film) were selected. Through semiotic and visual narrative analysis, this study explores how the films reconstruct Ne Zha's mythological imagery through cinematic language, thereby imbuing traditional myths with new social significance in a modern context. The specific scene analyses are as follows.

Table 2 Comparative Analysis of Key Scenes in 'Ne Zha' and 'Ne Zha 2'

Films	Key Scenes	Visual Elements	Narrative Function	Symbolic Significance
Ne Zha (2019 film)	1. The Arrival of Catastrophe	Dynamic Particle Effects	Individual Awakening	Rebellion against Fate
	2. Self-Reflection in the Ruined Temple	Contrast in Light and Shadow	Identity Crisis	Countering Stigmatization
	3. Release of the Cosmic Circle	Energy Light Effects	Free Will	Personal Liberation
Ne Zha 2 (2025 film)	1. Confrontation at the Ocean Floor	Fluid Dynamics	Class Struggle	Critique of the System
	2. Collapse of the Celestial Realm	Cyberpunk Architecture	Deconstruction of Power	Anti-Elitism
	3. Divine Conflict Among the Deities	Large-Scale Cluster Animation	Collective Resistance	Collective Awakening

The aforementioned key scenes not only enhance narrative tension through visual expression by leveraging technological aesthetics (such as CG effects and fluid rendering), but also deepen thematic significance at the level of visual metaphor (for instance, the cyberpunk celestial realm). This approach allows traditional mythology to be re-encoded and socially reconstructed within modern audiovisual media.

Results

The comparative analysis results show the following results.

1. Reconstructing Identity : From “Ethical Rebels” to “Structural Resisters”

The traditional identity of Ne Zha is that of a disruptor of ethical order. In “Investiture of the Gods,” Ne Zha accidentally kills Ao Bing, the son of the Dragon King of the East, which leads to the Dragon King's threat to flood Chentang Pass. To save his parents and the people, Ne Zha expresses deep remorse : “One must bear responsibility for one’s own actions; I killed Ao Bing and Li Gen, so I should pay with my life. How can a child implicate their parents? Today, I will cut open my belly, remove my intestines, and extract my bones to return them to my parents; I shall not burden them any further.” Subsequently, he “raises his sword in his right hand and first cuts off an arm; then he opens his abdomen, removes his intestines and bones, scattering his three souls and seven spirits before returning to the underworld” (Xu, 2016). This extreme act reflects Ne Zha's rebellion against patriarchal authority. However, contemporary animations have redefined Ne Zha's character. In “Ne Zha” (2019 film), the narrative primarily focuses on Ne Zha's struggle against personal fate and societal prejudice. In its sequel “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film), both Ne Zha and the dragon clan emerge as victims and resisters against structural oppression.

1.1 Ne Zha : From “Patricide” to “Symbol of Anti-Prejudice”

In “Investiture of the Gods,” Ne Zha accidentally kills Ao Bing, leading to retaliation from the Dragon King. Under patriarchal pressure, Ne Zha takes extreme measures like self-disembowelment but eventually returns to traditional ethics by transforming into a lotus flower, showing the limits of being an “ethical rebel.” In modern adaptations, Ne Zha's character evolves. In “Ne Zha” (2019 film), his conflict shifts from feudal systems to societal prejudice, symbolizing the “symbolic violence” faced by marginalized groups. His resistance focuses on self-affirmation but fails to challenge the roots of prejudice. In “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film), Ne Zha's resistance becomes collective, allying with Ao Bing and the demon clan to challenge the Heavenly order. He proclaims, “If fate demands my kin to fight each other, I shall overturn this Heavenly Court,” marking his transformation into a “structural resister.” This evolution aligns with Giddens' theory of structuration and Žižek's theory of systemic violence, highlighting the need for collective action and institutional restructuring. This reflects modern society's demands for fairness and justice, showcasing animation's potential for political allegory. (Žižek, 2012)

1.2 Dragons : From “Instrument of Domination” to “Oppressed Community”

In “Investiture of the Gods,” the dragon clan is portrayed as part of the celestial bureaucratic system, representing the orthodox order's suppression of rebels. The punishment inflicted on Ao Bing by Ne Zha, who flays him alive, symbolizes divine authority's retribution against dissenters. Conversely, in “Ne Zha” the identity of the dragon clan is redefined as that of a “suppressed demon race.” Their dwelling, Dragon Palace, is depicted not as a sanctuary but rather as an underwater purgatory where they are imprisoned. The film “Ne Zha 2” further deepens this metaphor by depicting the Dragon Clan being compelled to suppress magma with their flesh and blood, only to receive systematic erasure of their historical contributions from the Heavenly Court. Through technical aesthetics, the film enhances the sense of oppression experienced by the Dragon Clan. For instance, when Ao Bing awakens his memories, dragon bones form giant chains in dark

currents that entwine around an underwater volcano. The skeletal textures are represented through algorithmically generated irregular cracks, symbolizing both the long-term and invisible nature of oppression. This visual coding not only makes the identity of the “oppressed” more tangible but also endows the suffering of the Dragon Clan with a perceptible collective trauma imagery. Consequently, it deepens Ne Zha's series critical expression regarding power structures and historical justice.

2 The Shift in Power Narratives : The Dissolution of Destiny Theory and the Awakening of Institutional Critique

The traditional myth of Ne Zha is based on the logic of “heavenly mandate-compliance” : the bestowal of magical treasures by Taiyi Zhenren symbolizes the divine mandate, while Ne Zha's act of self-immolation represents a temporary concession to this mandate. In contrast, contemporary adaptations redistribute power discourse, shifting the narrative focus from “the individual confronting destiny” to “the collective challenging institutional structures.”

2.1 The “Heavenly Tribulation Curse” as an Ideological Apparatus

In traditional mythology, the “heavenly mandate” is an inviolable supreme law. In “Ne Zha,” it is embodied as the “Heavenly Tribulation Curse,” a constraint imposed by Yuanshi Tianzun, revealed by Taiyi Zhenren : “The demon orb must face heavenly tribulation; this is the way of heaven.” This shifts the heavenly mandate into a manipulable ideological tool. In “Ne Zha 2,” the curse is a governance tool, weakening demonic forces every hundred years, deconstructing the sanctity of “the way of heaven.” Ne Zha's resistance evolves from individual will in “Ne Zha,” where he says, “My fate is determined by me, not by heaven,” but ultimately sacrifices himself, to a direct challenge in “Ne Zha 2.” He teams with Ao Bing to shatter the “Ten Thousand Dragons Calamity” and questions Yuanshi Tianzun : “If the heavenly path requires sacrificing countless lives, what purpose does this heavenly path serve?” The film uses slow-motion imagery to depict the breaking of systemic oppression, reinforcing skepticism towards governance and elevating Ne Zha's rebellion against institutional injustice.

2.2 The Spatial Representation of Power Structures

In “Ne Zha 2,” the power system is depicted through technological aesthetics, contrasting a cyberpunk heavenly realm with an underwater hell to visualize oppression. The heavenly realm features geometric forms and data streams, symbolizing dehumanized algorithmic governance and surveillance. This design represents modern technological totalitarianism, where individuals are controlled by data algorithms. Conversely, the underwater hell uses fluid simulation to depict magma, symbolizing energy exploitation and biopolitics. The magma's viscosity evokes blood and oil, highlighting resource plunder and the exploitation of marginalized groups. The dragons' struggle represents resistance against systemic energy exploitation and critiques power structures and social injustice.

3. Mitigating Ethical Conflicts : From Familial Disruption to Institutional Critique

The core conflict of the traditional Ne Zha story arises from the irreconcilability of father-son ethics, with its dramatic tension stemming from the intense clash between personal freedom and familial responsibility. In contrast, modern adaptations shift the focus of conflict, expanding the narrative emphasis from familial disintegration to a critique of systemic oppression, thereby showcasing a transformation in conflicts that possesses greater social depth.

Table 3 Narrative Shifts in Ethical Conflicts

Dimension	Traditional Mythology	“Ne Zha”	Ne Zha 2
Core Conflict	Father-Son Ethics	Individual vs. Social Prejudice	Group vs. Institutional Oppression
Nature of the Antagonist	Embodiment of Individuals (Dragon King)	Mechanisms of Prejudice (Group Hostility)	Anonymized Power Structures (Heavenly Court)
Resolution Method	Self-Sacrifice and Deification (Ne Zha, through the act of removing his bones and flesh to repay his parents, transforms into a lotus flower to submit to divine authority.)	Self-Validation (Ne Zha attempts to gain social recognition by saving the people during his birthday celebration; however, he fails to eliminate the prevailing prejudices.) and Sacrifice	Collective Resistance and Institutional Reconstruction (Ne Zha and Ao Bing joined forces to dismantle the resource monopoly system of the Heavenly Court, thereby granting autonomy to both the Dragon Clan and the Demon Clan.)

3.1 The Functional Transformation of the Character Li Jing

In "Investiture of the Gods," Li Jing, the general of Chentang Pass, upholds family honor and ethical order, leading to Ne Zha's self-immolation after killing Ao Bing. He embodies a traditional patriarch. In “Ne Zha” (2019 film), Li Jing is humanized, becoming a protective father figure who shields Ne Zha from Heaven's punishment. In “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film), Li Jing actively supports Ne Zha's resistance against Heaven's oppression, reflecting a shift from patriarchal authority to broader social justice issues and evolving familial relationships in modern society.

3.2 The “depersonalization” of oppressive mechanisms

In traditional mythology, Ne Zha's adversaries are personified figures like the Dragon King and Shiji. In “Ne Zha 2,” the antagonist is the depersonalized “Elder Council of Heaven,” whose obscured faces and altered voices abstract oppression into a systemic issue. The sea witch highlights this by stating, “The suffering of our kind lies in our existence as mere numbers on the celestial ledger.” The film uses montage editing to show the suffering of various groups, creating a cross-ethnic community of victims and critiquing oppressive systems. The Ne Zha series deconstructs identity, power, and ethics, transforming traditional mythology through narrative reorganization and technological aesthetics. From “Ne Zha : Birth of the Demon Child” to “NeZha : The Devil's Wrath,” these films serve as a “cultural scalpel,” dissecting structural contradictions and addressing contemporary spirituality.

4. Re-encoding Mechanism : Pathways for the Integration of Modern Values

The deconstruction of traditional mythology in the Ne Zha series is not an end in itself, but rather a pathway for the integration of modern values. This article explores three dimensions :

the convergence of individualistic narratives, the explicit manifestation of anti-elitist discourse, and the cultural translation enabled by technology. It reveals how animation achieves ideological reproduction through symbolic reconfiguration and visual politics.

4.1 The Convergence of Individualistic Narratives : From Heroic Myths to Collective Action

The individualistic declaration “My fate is determined by me, not by heaven” in “Ne Zha” has resonated phenomenally with audiences. However, this narrative reveals limitations when addressing systemic oppression. The sequel, “Ne Zha 2,” adjusts its narrative strategy to achieve a transformation from the “superhero film paradigm” to an “aesthetic of collective resistance.”

1) The Dilemma and Breakthrough of Individual Heroism

The film “Ne Zha” illustrates that although Ne Zha manages to overturn his fate through individual effort, his victory is fundamentally a compromise—he must still sacrifice himself to secure peace for Chen Tang Pass, and the public's prejudice against the “demon orb” remains largely unaddressed. This reflects an inherent contradiction within neoliberal narratives of individualism : personal struggle cannot eliminate structural discrimination (Yan, 2025). In contrast, “Ne Zha 2” transcends this limitation on a narrative level by providing Ao Bing with a more complete arc of awakening and reconstructing the subject of resistance. When Ne Zha attempts to confront Heaven alone, Ao Bing challenges him with the question, “You once taught me to defy fate; why now do you accept it alone?” This provokes Ne Zha to recognize the limitations of solitary struggle and embrace the necessity of cross-ethnic alliances. This transformation elevates the film from “individual resistance” to “collective action,” marking a significant shift in Chinese animation as it begins to move beyond Hollywood’s paradigm of individual heroism towards a narrative structure imbued with greater collectivist themes.

Table 4 Comparison of Individual and Collective Narrative Characteristics.

Dimension	“Ne Zha”	“Ne Zha 2”
Agents of Resistance	Ne Zha (Individual)	Ne Zha + Ao Bing + Sea Demon Clan (Composite Entity)
Logic of Action	Self-Assertion	Resource Integration
Cost of Victory	Personal Sacrifice	Institutional Restructuring

2) The Reflective Projection of Generation Z's Mindset

The release of “Ne Zha” coincided with a narrative centered on individual struggle, aligning seamlessly with the rise of “lying flatism.” This film reflects the resistance and introspection of the younger generation in response to personal pressures within a highly competitive environment. Such storytelling addresses Generation Z's sentiments against social competition's alienation at an individual level, emphasizing the reconstruction of personal value and the pursuit of freedom. By 2025, when “Ne Zha 2” is released, there has been a notable shift in Generation Z's mindset—from focusing on individual dilemmas to confronting systemic injustices. The film narratively evolves from Ne Zha’s “individual struggle” to “collective action,” responding to contemporary youth’s critique and reflection on institutional oppression. This transformation not only mirrors changes in societal

discourse but also reveals the psychological journey of young people transitioning from personal endeavor to collective awakening.

4.2 The Manifestation of Anti-Elite Narratives : The Legitimacy Crisis of Heavenly Rule

The Ne Zha series gradually shifts the focus of its conflicts from individual moral flaws to systemic injustices. By deconstructing the “sacred facade” of power groups, it achieves a radical critique of elite narratives. In “Ne Zha,” Shen Gongbao suffers discrimination due to his identity as a demon, and his “darkening” is portrayed as a result of individual psychological imbalance, primarily illustrating how prejudice can lead to personal downfall. However, in “Ne Zha 2,” the character’s background is further developed and reinterpreted on a deeper level. The film introduces flashbacks where young Shen Gongbao witnesses the heavenly court burning historical texts related to demons. This narrative choice not only reveals the roots of Shen Gongbao’s transformation but also elevates him from a mere antagonist to a witness of systemic oppression. This reinterpretation endows Shen Gongbao with more complex symbolic significance; he becomes not just an embodiment of personal grievances but also a victim and rebel against an oppressive system. Shen Gongbao’s tragic identity transcends individual misfortune, becoming an epitome of structural violence that further reinforces the film’s critical theme regarding power oppression. Through this character transformation, the film surpasses traditional binary narratives of good versus evil, showcasing the complexity and multifaceted nature of individual destinies within contexts marked by systemic injustice.

4.3 Cultural Translation Empowered by Technology : A Visual Reconstruction of Resistance Aesthetics

The film “Ne Zha 2” achieves a dual breakthrough through technological innovation : it not only enhances the intensity of visual spectacle but also transforms traditional violent narratives into a critical aesthetic of resistance.

1) Disenchantment and Re-Meaning through Violence

In the 1979 version of “Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King,” Ne Zha’s extraction of the dragon’s tendons is depicted graphically and violently. In contrast, “Ne Zha 2” reinterprets this act as a visual metaphor, using particle effects to show violence aesthetically, symbolizing the deconstruction of closed power systems. This reduces sensory shock while emphasizing the symbolic nature of violence, representing a breakthrough over institutional constraints. The film uses fluid simulation technology to realistically depict the dragons’ suffering, with magma’s high viscosity and dragon scales carbonizing, symbolizing energy extraction and resource exploitation. By integrating technological aesthetics, the film elevates violence into a narrative language that critiques oppressive mechanisms, prompting reflection on violence and its institutional logic.

2) Political Metaphors of Technological Democratization

The depiction of the dragon clan under the searing heat of magma is achieved through highly realistic visual translation via Houdini fluid simulations. The viscous texture of the magma and the gradual carbonization details of the dragon’s scales present suffering in a visually encoded form before the audience. This process is imbued with a metaphor of “energy extraction,” symbolizing the exploitation and depletion of life within power and economic systems. Through an intervention rooted in technological aesthetics, the film transforms violence into a narrative language

rich with profound meaning, enhancing both its visual impact and deepening critiques of oppressive mechanisms.

4.4 The Political Metaphor of Technological Democratization

1) The Concept of an Open Source Arsenal

In the film, the weapons of the resistance no longer rely on divine artifacts; instead, they are reverse-engineered by demon craftsmen utilizing abandoned technologies from the Heavenly Court. This setting reflects the narrative strategy of “technological poaching” (Certeau, 1984), emphasizing how marginalized groups can reallocate technological resources through the repurposing of hegemonic technologies. Such narratives not only imbue technology with political metaphor but also illustrate how disadvantaged communities employ innovative technological means to resist oppression.

2) The Collectivity of the Rendering Farm

The film “Ne Zha 2” (2025 film) presents a decentralized resistance through its narrative and production methods. Rebels use reverse-engineered technology instead of divine artifacts, illustrating “technological poaching” (Certeau, 1984), where marginalized groups reappropriate hegemonic technologies for resource redistribution. This highlights how disadvantaged communities can leverage innovation to overcome oppression. The film’s production, using a distributed cloud rendering farm, allows independent animators to contribute, reflecting the film’s theme of collective resistance. Visuals, such as magma symbolizing exploitation and Ne Zha’s use of technology to break barriers, reinforce this metaphor. The credits, listing community contributors, emphasize collective intelligence against technological monopolies. This dual-layered design integrates technology into the film’s core ideology, making it more than just a visual medium.

Table 5 The Ideological Functions of Technological Empowerment

Technical Elements	Visual Presentation	Ideological Metaphors
Fluid Simulation	Viscosity of Magma and the Carbonization of Dragon Scales	The exploitation of biopolitics (the flesh and blood of dragons being converted into energy, utilized by the Celestial Court to maintain its ruling order)
Particle Effects	Breaking the Barrier of Mixed Sky Silk Data Stream	The potential for technological democratization (Ne Zha utilizes the fluidity of the Misty Silk to break through the digital blockade imposed by the Heavenly Court, symbolizing how marginalized groups can leverage technology to resist upper-tier power).
Distributed Rendering	End Credits Rolling List of Community Contributors	The collective intelligence in combating technological monopolies (the open production model of cloud rendering resonates with the cross-ethnic alliances depicted in films, symbolizing how decentralized collaborative approaches can effectively challenge centralized power structures).

The Ne Zha series successfully integrates modern values into the framework of traditional mythology through narrative logic transformation, an upgraded critical perspective, and innovative technical language. This re-encoding is not merely a simple injection of concepts; rather, it involves the restructuring of cultural genes, allowing this ancient intellectual property to resonate with the spirit of the times. The breakthrough of “Ne Zha 2” lies in its demonstration that commercial animation can not only reflect reality but also potentially prefigure pathways for social change through aesthetic experimentation.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study explores how the Ne Zha series of animated films achieves a modern reinterpretation of mythology through cultural deconstruction, technological empowerment, and value reconstruction. This aligns with Henry Jenkins' theory of “transmedia storytelling,” which posits that traditional cultural symbols must be dynamically adapted to rejuvenate in different media. For instance, “Ne Zha 2” transforms the traditional “Sea Riot” narrative into a collective struggle against institutional oppression, echoing Frye's narrative logic of “communal rebirth” within the framework of comedy—shifting from individual tragedy to collective liberation. While existing research often emphasizes the independent role of technological aesthetics, this study demonstrates that technological empowerment must be linked with ideological critique. For example, the metaphorical representation of algorithmic domination in a cyberpunk celestial realm materializes power oppression through cold data streams and geometric architectural forms. This reveals how technology can serve as a visual language for deconstructing the legitimacy of authority.

The study collected information on the narrative themes, character identities, and visual symbols of the films “Ne Zha” and “Ne Zha 2.” Through content analysis, it confirmed the complex interaction between individual actions and institutional structures. For instance, in “Ne Zha 2,” the cross-ethnic alliance between Ne Zha and Ao Bing not only reflects the agency of individuals breaking free from structural constraints but also dismantles the resource monopoly system of Heaven through collective collaboration. The fluid simulation of the Dragon Clan's suffering depicted in the film (such as magma viscosity and dragon scale carbonization) transforms abstract energy exploitation into perceptible visual politics, thereby deepening the critical potential of technological empowerment within mythological narratives.

This animated film study aims to reconstruct the critical functions of traditional myths through symbolic recontextualization and technological intervention. For instance, it reinterprets the “Heavenly Calamity Curse” from a symbol of fate into an ideological tool for celestial governance, and transforms the “Misty Silk” from a weapon of slaughter into a connective bond for marginalized groups' struggles. These adaptation strategies underscore animation's core purpose as a “cultural scalpel”—both dissecting historical contradictions (such as patriarchal ethics and institutional oppression) and suturing contemporary social issues (like Generation Z's reflections on structural injustice). Ultimately, the Ne Zha series demonstrates that the modernization of myth is not merely an aesthetic experiment but also a practical arena for cultural politics. Its three-dimensional translational mechanism (deconstruction—empowerment—reconstruction) provides a paradigm for critically revitalizing traditional cultural intellectual properties with both academic depth and public resonance.

Suggestions

The present study primarily focuses on the animated film series featuring Nezha, providing an in-depth analysis of its mythological adaptation strategies and technical aesthetic expressions. However, this research does have certain limitations. Future studies could further expand upon the following aspects.

1. Research Applicability and Expansion

The analytical framework presented in this paper is primarily applicable to the study of adaptations of mythological animated films, particularly demonstrating strong relevance in areas such as identity reconstruction, shifts in power narratives, and the empowerment of technological aesthetics. However, since the research focus is limited to the Ne Zha series of animated films, it does not encompass other traditional cultural intellectual properties (IPs), such as “Journey to the West” and “Investiture of Gods,” regarding their modernization adaptations. Future research could further expand to include various genres of traditional cultural audiovisual works to validate the applicability of this analytical framework and explore differences in adaptation strategies across different works.

2. Future Research Directions and Recommendations for Deepening Insights

The present study primarily analyzes the film's content, narrative strategies, and visual expressions, without delving into audience reception, market feedback, or cultural dissemination effects. Future research could incorporate methods such as audience surveys, box office data analysis, and social media commentary evaluation to explore how contemporary viewers interpret these adaptation strategies and assess the film's acceptance across different age groups and cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, cross-cultural comparative studies could be introduced to analyze the dissemination effects of Chinese animated films in international markets and their cultural adaptation strategies. This would provide more practically valuable references for the globalization of traditional cultural intellectual properties (IPs).

Acknowledgement

This research project was financially supported by Faculty of Informatics, Mahasarakham University.

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