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THE DESIGN OF THE CHARACTER OF NEZHA IN CHINESE MYTHICAL ANIMATION

*This article employs the theoretical framework of media image studies to examine the character of Nezha as depicted in the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. The animated character of Nezha is a classic figure in Chinese culture, with a significant and far-reaching historical impact. The character has undergone a transformation from its original literary representation to its current animated iteration. The creators have offered a multiplicity of interpretations of Nezha's image, exploring its representation from a variety of perspectives. The 2019 animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* was a notable success, with its innovative character design offering audiences a novel sensory experience. Scholars have conducted in-depth studies of Nezha's animation from a variety of perspectives, including historical evolution, social significance, philosophical background, and educational significance. These studies have reflected the interpretation of Nezha's image from diverse viewpoints.*

This paper seeks to describe and analyse Nezha's character design from the perspective of media image, drawing upon the insights of screenwriter Robert McKee regarding character design from three dimensions: character shaping, character truth, and character relationship. The textual analysis method is employed to achieve this. The study finds that in terms of character shaping, Nezha's image has shifted away from the traditional "truth, goodness, and beauty" to a modernised, personalised, and "ugly" design. In terms of character truth, Nezha takes the initiative to challenge his destiny, which is in line with current values. In terms of character relationship, conflict and reconciliation co-exist, and the character relationship is softer under love and understanding.

In the context of China's advocacy of cultural self-confidence, an analysis of the character designs in successful animation works and an examination of the rationale behind their image design can facilitate the creative transformation and innovative development of exemplary traditional culture. Furthermore, it is of great significance to the construction of national cultural self-confidence.

Key words: Animation, Character design, Nezha, Chinese mythology.

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ДИЗАЙН ПЕРСОНАЖА НЕЖА В КИТАЙСЬКІЙ МІФІЧНІЙ АНІМАЦІЇ

У цій статті на основі теоретичних засад медіа-іміджології розглядається образ Нежі в анімаційному фільмі «Нежа: Народження дитини-демона». Анімаційний персонаж Нежа є класичною фігурою в китайській культурі зі значним і далекосяжним історичним впливом. Персонаж зазнав трансформації від свого оригінального літературного представлення до нинішньої анімаційної ітерації. Творці запропонували

безліч інтерпретацій образу Нежі, досліджуючи його репрезентацію з різних точок зору. Анімаційний фільм 2019 року «Нежа: Народження дитини-демона» мав неабиякий успіх завдяки інноваційному дизайну персонажа, що пропонує глядачам новий чуттєвий досвід. Науковці провели глибокі дослідження анімації «Нежа» з різних точок зору, включаючи історичну еволюцію, соціальну значущість, філософське підґрунтя та освітнє значення. Ці дослідження відобразили інтерпретацію образу Нежі з різних точок зору.

Ця стаття прагне описати та проаналізувати образ Нежі з точки зору медіа-образу, спираючись на ідеї сценариста Роберта Маккі щодо створення образу персонажа у трьох вимірах: формування образу, правдивість образу та взаємовідносини персонажів. Для досягнення цієї мети застосовано метод текстового аналізу. Дослідження показало, що з точки зору формування характеру, образ Нежі відійшов від традиційної «правди, добра і краси» до модернізованого, персоналізованого і «потворного» дизайну. З точки зору правди характеру, Нежа бере на себе ініціативу кинути виклик своїй долі, що відповідає сучасним цінностям. З точки зору взаємовідносин персонажів, конфлікт і примирення співіснують, і взаємовідносини персонажів стають м'якшими за умови любові та розуміння.

У контексті просування Китаєм ідеї культурної самодостатності аналіз дизайну персонажів успішних анімаційних творів та вивчення обґрунтування дизайну їхніх образів може сприяти творчій трансформації та інноваційному розвитку вірцевої традиційної культури. Крім того, це має велике значення для формування національної культурної самосвідомості.

Ключові слова: анімація, дизайн персонажів, Нежа, китайська міфологія.

Problem Statement. A significant proportion of material used in Chinese animation is derived from folklore and mythology. From the mythological novel *The Investiture of the Gods* to the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the character of Nezha has been gradually established in the public consciousness. As a reflection of the historical moment, the classic mythological character Nezha has been reinterpreted in various ways across different historical periods. The 1979 animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* was the inaugural cinematic portrayal of Nezha, a seminal figure in Chinese folklore and a symbol of national pride. *The Legend of Nezha* represents a more comprehensive approach, with narratives from Nezha's perspective drawing upon established textual sources while portraying the protagonist as a child who grows up with us. The successful release of the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* in 2019 elicited a considerable response from academics and industry professionals alike.

In light of the successful release of the animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, it became imperative to undertake a detailed analysis of the character design of Nezha in this particular animated work. This excellent work offers novel perspectives and tools for the creation and dissemination of animation. In the context of globalisation, Chinese mythological animation must reconcile its cultural distinctiveness with the demands of the market. Accordingly, this study examines the character design of Nezha from this perspective.

Analysis of Research. The earliest portrayal of Nezha in Chinese animation can be found in the animated film *Havoc in Heaven*. In this film, however, Nezha is not depicted as an exceptional character, but rather as a mere functional figure. He is ultimately vanquished by the principal antagonist,

the Monkey King. It was only in the animated film entitled *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* that Nezha was accorded a prominent role. The film is based on the literary novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, which was creatively adapted by the author to suit the contemporary era. The film was released in 1979, marking the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. The work had two distinct yet interrelated purposes: to educate the public and to promote Chinese culture. Macdonald (Macdonald, S., 2015) employs an analysis of the political context of the time to posit that Nezha was portrayed as a neutral figure of courageous resistance to class tyranny. This perspective is further reinforced by Li (Li, Z., 2024), who posits that the portrayal of Nezha is shaped by the structural dynamics of the narrative, manifesting as a multifaceted representation of both benevolent and malevolent aspects, akin to the Yin and Yang principles of Taoist philosophy. In analysing the cultural elements of the film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979), it is determined that the film's rhetoric, aesthetic style, and character design are derived from traditional Chinese cultural norms.

The release of *The Legend of Nezha* in 2003 coincided with a period of globalisation, during which Chinese animation was significantly influenced by Western culture. Song, Y. & Zhang, Y. B. (Song, Zhang, 2008) proposed that, despite some foreign cultural influences, mainstream Chinese animation productions retained a strong national identity. The overarching themes of the works were those of social stability, collective interests and harmonious human relationships, which aligned with the social context of fostering tranquillity and prosperity in China at that time. Furthermore, there have been notable advancements in the techniques employed

in the production of animated content. The widespread use of computer technology at the time enabled *The Legend of Nezha* to be made more realistic through the use of advanced lighting technology and digital rendering techniques, thus creating a more powerful and exciting story world for the audience.

The animated film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, produced by Horgos Colourful Stripes Film and directed by Jiaozi, has amassed a box office gross of over 5 billion yuan in China. Such a word-of-mouth and box office-winning animated film has broken the stereotypical image of animation. You (You, C., 2022) posits that the new image of Nezha serves as a parodic deconstruction, which is used to deconstruct the myth of Nezha, as well as its animated predecessor. The reimagining of Nezha's image in animation, with its contemporary resonance, has played an important role in the film's success. Subsequently, there was a notable increase in the production of Nezha-themed animation, as well as that which featured traditional mythological themes. Notable examples include the film *White Snake* (2019), *Legend of Deification* (2020), *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021), *White Snake 2: Green Snake* (2022), and *New Gods: Yang Jian* (2022) were all presented for viewing and met with considerable acclaim. Furthermore, the list of subsequent creations of Nezha is even longer. Jin, Wang (Jin, J., & Wang, C. Y., 2023) highlighted that these developments reflect not only the evolving portrayal of Nezha and the impact of state ideology and commercialisation on children's representations, but also the shifting conceptions of subjectivity within the context of diverse social and political discourses in China. The reflection of social change through the utilisation of animated art forms.

The studies presented here reflect the social significance of the evolving image of Nezha across different animation works. They also recapitulate the significance of Nezha's cultural image for the development and export of Chinese culture. The extant literature on Nezha animation encompasses the historical evolution, social significance, philosophical background, educational significance, and other aspects of the subject matter.

Purpose of the article. The specific research objectives are as follows:

1. The aim is to identify the character of Nezha in the research object, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, and to conduct an in-depth analysis of Nezha's character design in this work.

2. The aim is to reveal the design of Nezha's image in this work from the three dimensions of characterisation, character truth and character

relationship, thus providing the audience with a resonant experience.

3. The aim is to demonstrate the expression of contemporary cultural values and illuminate the pioneering design of the image of Nezha in this work.

Presentation of the main material. In his work *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*, Robert McKee (Robert McKee, 2010) places great emphasis on the importance of character design in the context of storytelling. According to him, character shaping, character truth and character relationships are important elements in building character. These elements are clearly present in the design of Nezha's animated character. Using Robert McKee's concept of character design, the study analyses the design features of Nezha's animated image in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* from the three dimensions of character shaping, character truth and character relationship.

Character Shaping: Diversified Nezha Images

The image of Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* retains the traditional characteristics of Nezha in people's memory. Creators add innovation and ingenuity to details, presenting a younger and more vivid image to the audience. The character of Nezha in this animation is more contemporary than the traditional image of Nezha and can be readily distinguished from other animated characters. Furthermore, the character of Nezha in this work exhibits a pronounced sense of individuality. In contrast to the conventional portrayal of Nezha, he is not excessively elevated in status; rather, he is depicted as an ordinary adolescent. He displays a willingness to defy authority, a penchant for taking risks, and a proclivity for conflict with others. Additionally, he exhibits a tendency to become melancholy when his mother is absent. The portrayal of Nezha is more realistic and objective, which increases the likelihood of the audience empathising with him.

The work of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* challenges the conventional portrayal of Nezha as a heroic figure by drawing upon deconstructionist ideas. The character of Nezha deviates from the conventional Chinese stereotype and is depicted as a troubled child with dark circles under his eyes and his hands in his trousers, which represents a departure from the original Chinese stereotype. The creators employ the traditional Nezha image, characterised by its large red colour, but diverge from it in terms of facial features and costume design. The initial portrayal of Nezha is characterised by the application of smoky makeup reminiscent of that seen on rock stars, coupled with the inclusion of jagged "shark teeth." This unconventional aesthetic choice was made

with the intention of underscoring Nezha's demonic persona. Madame Yin, Nezha's mother, provided him with considerable care and attention, resulting in his growth into a childlike figure. The depiction of Nezha as a young boy represents a continuation of the classic elements observed in earlier animations, including the iconic double bun and red bib, as well as the distinctive marking on his forehead. In contrast to the conventional portrayal of Nezha in the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the crimson marking on Nezha's forehead serves as a visual representation of demon, while the mystical weapon encircling his neck is designed to subdue his demonic essence.

Following his demonic transformation, Nezha assumes the form of a teenage-like figure. Nezha is a physically attractive young man with an athletic physique and hair that is characterised by a distinctive, flame-like appearance. He exhibits the characteristics typically associated with a young man in Japanese manga, yet he also displays elements that are more closely aligned with Chinese cultural norms. The contrast between the initial and subsequent states of Nezha's transformation serves to illustrate the expectations held by contemporary audiences with regard to Nezha in the context of the present social milieu. This radical transformation represents a daring endeavour to present a novel and invigorating visual aesthetic to the audience. The image of Nezha is entirely consistent with the director's creative intent.

The image of Nezha is an accurate reflection of the director's creative vision, which is encapsulated in the following statement: "I would prefer to be perceived as unappealing rather than mediocre, as the latter would not leave a lasting impression." "I am more inclined to accept criticism than to adopt a bland image." (Chen, 2023).

Character Truth: Hero Who Change Individual Destiny

The inner world of Nezha is explored and depicted in greater detail in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* than in previous works, offering a more comprehensive insight into the character's inner life. The narrative commences with Nezha as the principal figure, delineating the dynamics between Nezha and his familial relations and between Nezha and the general public. The narrative reinforces the theme of overcoming stereotypes and fighting against injustice through the interactions between Nezha and Ao Bing.

In the opening passages of the narrative, Nezha is depicted as exhibiting rebellious and cynical behaviour, including the pranking of villagers and the bullying of his master. However, this is a consequence of his status as the reincarnation of a demon, which is met with discrimination, rejection and hostility

from the majority population. This is why he conceals his profound loneliness and sense of loss through a series of destructive behaviours. The desire to be accepted by the general public and to challenge the prejudices of others becomes the primary driving force throughout the narrative. This motivation serves as the foundation for the subsequent development of a friendship between Nezha and Ao Bing, and represents a key element in the narrative's conclusion. In the story's conclusion, Nezha confronts the thunderbolt and sacrifices his own life to save the people.

Nezha's intrinsic drive for external validation is exacerbated by the rejection he experiences from others. The onset of this phenomenon occurs during childhood, when the subject is subjected to strict parental control within the domestic environment. The intensity of this phenomenon is further compounded by the subject's experiences of ostracism and rejection by the local community upon leaving the domestic environment. Despite his efforts to rescue a young girl, the general public continues to view him with misunderstanding. He invites his only best friend to a birthday party, but got "stood up". The busyness of his parents, the rejection of the villagers and the absence of his best friend bring out Nezha's 'evil' side. Throughout the narrative, Nezha is depicted as a child who is driven by a longing for recognition and respect, and who seeks the approval of his parents and his social group. The work indirectly expresses Nezha's personality through the reactions of others, thereby highlighting his rebellious and withdrawn character.

The character of Nezha is shaped by two key factors: his birth as a demon and the neglect he experiences during his childhood. Nezha's formative years were characterised by solitude and bewilderment. He is subjected to the discriminatory attitudes of the local populace, while his parents, preoccupied with the eradication of demons and the pursuit of moral rectitude, fail to allocate sufficient time to his upbringing. Nevertheless, Nezha was nurtured in the love of his parents and the guidance of his mentor, fostering a profound sense of affection and compassion within him. Consequently, he is fundamentally benevolent and aspires to be acknowledged. This characterization facilitates the subsequent development of a friendship between Nezha and Ao Bing, which enables them to collaborate in an effort to save the world. Furthermore, it establishes the foundation for the character to dismantle his preconceptions and undergo a complete transformation. Nezha is depicted as a courageous, compassionate, resolute, and unyielding hero who is "born as a demon" yet "acts against heaven," aligning with the conventional portrayal of Nezha in traditional culture.

Character Relationship: Love and Understanding

The growth of the character Nezha in the animated work is an accurate reflection of the character's inner emotional state. From his initial defiance of his parents, Nezha progressively acknowledges his obligations and ultimately makes the ultimate sacrifice for justice. Furthermore, the work illustrates the complexity of Nezha's character through the portrayal of his interactions and conflicts with other characters.

On the one hand, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* has retained some of the character conflicts between Nezha and other characters from the original literary novels, and has explored the invisible relationships between the characters in depth. Conversely, certain relationships have been reinterpreted in accordance with the prevailing attitudes of the period, while the characters surrounding Nezha have been reinterpreted. Nezha's father, Li Jing, is a man of few words, yet he is preoccupied with the question of how to educate Nezha and is a significant influence on the latter's development. Nezha's mother, Madame Yin, is a woman who is adept at vanquishing malevolent spirits and demons, yet is constrained from spending any significant time with her son. The parents of Nezha can be seen as a reflection of the modern Chinese parent-child relationship. The reserved father and the active mother aspire to be present for their offspring. These characters serve as a reflection of the modern Chinese parent-child relationship and have garnered significant public appeal.

In the original literary novel, Nezha and Ao Bing were presented as opposing forces, with one representing good and the other evil. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the original positions of the two characters are reversed. From the moment of their birth, they were destined to fight each other. Their different life trajectories are also filled with unwillingness towards their own birth. The relationship

between the two characters progressed from one of friendship to one of enmity. Ultimately, however, they attain mutual comprehension and evolve from adversaries to allies. The exchange of personalities and multi-layered reversals serve to reinforce the narrative. Thematic ideas are embedded in the plot development and character growth, with reflections on the theme integrated into the plot advancement. Ultimately, the theme is elevated with the determination of both individuals to pursue themselves and fight against fate. The intricate relationships between these characters serve to illustrate the multifaceted nature of Nezha's character.

Conclusions. Character shaping, character truth and character relationship of Nezha are the three principal elements that inform the design of his animated image. The character shaping represents the most essential reason. Nezha is the reincarnation of a demon, and thus his identity necessitates a design that diverges from the conventional portrayal of Nezha. This is why the character has been moderately "uglified". Despite his outwardly unappealing appearance, Nezha is, in fact, a highly affectionate individual who craves the approval of others. The divergence between Nezha's outward appearance and his intrinsic character serves to differentiate him from other iterations of the character. Furthermore, Nezha's relationships with others reflect the confusion that is commonly experienced by young people in their social, familial and friendship relationships.

The analysis of the image of Nezha in modern Chinese animation is of great significance. On the one hand, the exploration of the deeper meaning of his character reflects the expression of contemporary cultural values. On the other hand, the design of Nezha's character is not limited to external ugliness or beauty, but creates a new classic image, which represents a pioneering design practice.

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