

# THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE CULTURE SYMBOLS (TAKE 1979'S "NEZHA CONQUERS THE DRAGON KING" AND 2019'S "NEZHA: BIRTH OF THE DEMON CHILD" AS EXAMPLES)

Wang Yingli<sup>1,4\*</sup>

Nadzri Hj Mohd Shariff<sup>2</sup>

Liza Marziana Mohammad Noh<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> College of Creative Arts, University Technology MARA(UiTM), Malaysia, (2022964037@student.uitm.edu.my))

<sup>2</sup> College of Creative Arts, University Technology MARA(UiTM), Malaysia, (nadzri@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>3</sup> College of Creative Arts, University Technology MARA(UiTM), Malaysia, (Lizamarziana@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>4</sup> Chongqing College of Humanities ,Science & Technology(CCHST),China, (2022964037@student.uitm.edu.my)

\*Corresponding Author. Wang Yingli, Universiti Teknologi MARA; Chongqing College of Humanities, Science & Technology. E-Mail:2022964037@student.uitm.edu.my

## Article history

**Received date** : 4-9-2025

**Revised date** : 5-9-2025

**Accepted date** : 5-10-2025

**Published date** : 30-10-2025

## To cite this document:

Wang, Y., Mohd Shariff, N., & Mohammad Noh, L. M. (2025). The evolution of culture: The transformation of Chinese culture symbols (Take 1979's "Nezha conquers the dragon king" and 2019's "Nezha: Birth of the demon child" as examples). *Journal of Islamic, Social, Economics and Development (JISED)*, 10 (77), 1138 – 1145.

**Abstract:** *Animation, as an important carrier of cultural communication, can effectively present the evolution of cultural symbols. This paper takes Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King in 1979 and Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child in 2019 as the research objects, and comprehensively applies methods such as textual analysis, comparative study, audience reception research, and historical and cultural contextualization to deeply analyze the evolution of Chinese cultural symbols. The study finds that there are significant differences between the two films in terms of character images, story themes, cultural connotations, etc. These differences reflect the influence of the transformation of values triggered by changes in the level of survival security during the social development process on cultural creation. This study provides inspiration and reference for contemporary cultural creation.*

**Keywords:** *Ne Zha, Evolution of Cultural Symbols, Animated Films, Intergenerational Value Transformation*

## Introduction

In the era of cultural globalization and rapid social transformation, the study of the evolution of cultural symbols has become a crucial window for gaining insights into the development context of social culture (Wang Zhenpo, 2020). The social and economic changes in China are the deep driving force behind the evolution of cultural symbols (Fan Zhou, 2020). Since the Reform and Opening Up in 1978, the rapid economic growth has led to an all-round social transformation. The significant improvement in material life has promoted the shift of people's values from materialism to post-materialism, and the demand for spiritual and cultural life has been rising and becoming increasingly diverse and personalized (Li Xiangmin, 2020). This transformation is prominently reflected in the field of cultural consumption. Audiences' expectations of cultural products far exceed traditional narrative and artistic forms. They pursue deep emotional resonance, cultural identity, and ideological inspiration, which drives cultural creators to deeply explore the rich resources of traditional culture, integrate modern elements for innovation, accelerate the renewal of the connotations and the reshaping of the forms of cultural symbols (Yang Minggang, Liu Zhenyan, Hu Shan, 2014), and prompt classic cultural symbols to radiate new vitality and derive new meanings in animation creation, closely conforming to the development process of social culture and the spiritual demands of the public .

The story of Ne Zha has a long history in Chinese cultural traditions. Rooted in the soil of folk mythology, it carries rich cultural connotations and the national spirit, and is an important part of the cultural symbol system (Wang Limei, 2021). From *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* in 1979 to *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* in 2019, these two classic works span time and space, capturing the key nodes of social, economic, cultural psychological, and technological development, and have become excellent examples for observing the evolution of Chinese cultural symbols.

## Literature Review

Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was the first to construct the core framework of semiotics, serving as a key starting point for analyzing cultural symbols. Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* provides a systematic method for exploring the deep connotations of cultural symbols. A symbol is a perception considered to carry meaning (Zhao Yiheng, 2016, p.1). "Considered" emphasizes that the meaning of a symbol is not inherent in the symbol itself, but is subjectively assigned by people. This subjective assignment is formed as a consensus within a social group. When most people in a group assign the same meaning to a certain perception, this perception becomes a symbol carrying a specific meaning. The famous American political scientist and sociologist Ronald Inglehart published the book *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Reshaping the World*<sup>1</sup> This book continues Inglehart's previously proposed theory of intergenerational value transformation, that is, with the economic development and the improvement of survival security, people's values shift from materialistic values to post-materialistic values that emphasize free choice and self-expression, that is, from survival values to self-expression values. This theory has opened up a new perspective for the study of the evolution of cultural symbols and has been effectively verified in the comparison of cultural works in different eras. *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* in 1979 was created in a period of relatively scarce economy, highlighting collectivism and traditional moral concepts, and the character images were relatively simple; while *Ne Zha: Birth*

of the Demon Child after the rapid economic development pays more attention to individual growth and the integration of diverse values, with complex and three-dimensional character designs, which highly conforms to the transformation of social values. The image of "Ne Zha" has transformed from a collectivized expectation to personalized growth, and the core of the story has shifted from a grand narrative to an individual narrative. This transformation of the image and the change of the plot, as the variability at the "form" level, point to the deep driving force that prompts the transformation - culture. The reappearance of Ne Zha symbol in animation is a representation of Chinese culture, so the adaptation reflects the changes in the social and cultural ideology of China.(JinQi, 2020, P76) . It deeply reflects the profound shaping effect of the social and cultural ecology on the evolution of cultural symbols (Sun Weiwei, 2004), providing valuable theoretical and practical references for subsequent research.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a multi-dimensional research approach to comprehensively analyze the evolution of Chinese cultural symbols in the two animated films. By integrating methods of textual analysis, comparative study, and historical and cultural contextualization, it systematically explores the changes in character design, narrative themes, and visual presentations, as well as the internal connections between these changes and the evolution of the cultural environment.

#### **Textual Analysis Method**

As the cornerstone of this study, textual analysis plays an important role in analyzing these two animated film works. A meticulous examination is carried out on their scripts, dialogues, and visual elements from multiple dimensions. Through comprehensive and in-depth textual analysis, the presentation and transformation of values in the works can be accurately captured.

#### **Comparative Study Method**

The comparative method is crucial in this study. The two films are systematically compared from multiple dimensions, such as character design, narrative themes, and cultural connotations, to identify the differences between them and the changes in cultural values reflected by these differences, so as to recognize the trends and directions of the evolution of cultural symbols.

#### **Historical and Cultural Contextualization Research Method**

This study also places the two films in their respective historical and cultural contexts. It analyzes the emphasis on personal expression and self-actualization brought about by the rise of post-materialist values. By understanding the historical and cultural backgrounds of the two films, the reasons for the evolution of cultural symbols and their meanings in different eras can be better explained.

## Analysis And Findings

In 1979, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (Figure 1) was released, which was at the early stage of China's Reform and Opening Up. During this period, the overall domestic economic level and people's living standards were low, materials were extremely scarce, and the Engel coefficient remained high. Under such limitations of material conditions, materialistic values became the mainstream value orientation of society at that time. After the implementation of the Reform and Opening Up policy, China's economy has experienced more than 40 years of continuous and rapid growth and has become the world's second largest economy. The consumption structure of the people has undergone a fundamental transformation. People are no longer satisfied with basic living needs alone but have begun to pursue a higher-quality spiritual life (He Huaihong,2019).



**Figure 1: Nezha Conquers the Dragon King poster (1979)**

Source:<https://movie.douban.com/subject/1307315/photos?type=R>



**Figure 2: Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child poster (2019)**

Source:<https://movie.douban.com/subject/26794435/photos?type=R>

*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (Figure 2) in 2019 was born against such a background. The above series of social developments have laid an economic foundation for the transformation of materialistic values to post-materialistic values. This change in the economic foundation has a profound impact on the evolution direction of social values and is one of the important dimensions for understanding China's social changes.

Both Chinese animated films revolve around the Chinese cultural symbol of Nezha, and the differences are reflected in aspects such as character images, themes, cultural connotations, and production technologies.

## The Remolding of Character Images

### Differences in Personality Traits

In *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, Nezha's personality is one of unwavering justice. Bravery is his hallmark. When facing the powerful evil force of the Dragon King, he shows no fear at all. In order to protect the common people, he unhesitatingly steps forward and engages in a

fierce confrontation with the forces of the Dragon King. Nezha's resolute and fearless heroic spirit surpasses the timidity and hesitation of ordinary people when facing powerful authorities. This perfect portrayal of the character makes Nezha seem like an idol on a pedestal, carrying all the people's expectations of an ideal hero.

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*", Nezha's personality presents complex and three-dimensional characteristics. Due to his special identity as the reincarnation of the Demon Pill, from the moment of his birth, he has been mercilessly regarded with malicious eyes by the world, and the prejudice and misunderstanding of the people follow him like a shadow. Nezha gradually develops a rebellious side and responds to the injustice of the outside world in a cynical way. He played some pranks in the face of the frightened expressions of the villagers. However, behind these seemingly rebellious behaviors is his deep loneliness. He cares about what his parents think and cherishes his only friend, Ao Bing. Nezha is no longer a distant mythical figure but a flesh-and-blood individual living among us, searching for his own place in this complex world together with us.

### Changes in Appearance

In *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, Nezha has a traditional cute child image. He has two buns on his head, a determined look in his eyes, and wears a red bellyband, which is a symbol of traditional Chinese cultural elements. The Qiankun Circle and Hun Tian Ling in his hands add a bit of heroism to his image (Figure 3). The overall appearance design is as close to perfection as his character portrayal.

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Nezha's image has undergone a bold innovation. He presents a unique appearance of "dark circles under the eyes, shark teeth, and a flat nose", which is a rather cute and ugly image (Figure 4). This is an innovation in the perception of the traditional Nezha image. It breaks the audience's long-held inherent impression of Nezha's image. This innovative design is highly consistent with the identity setting of the reincarnation of the Demon Pill. The Demon Pill symbolizes evil and unruly behavior, and this unique Nezha image appropriately reflects the characteristics of the Demon Pill.



**Figure 3: Ne Zha in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979)**

Source: from the movie screenshot



**Figure 4: Ne Zha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019)**

Source: from the movie screenshot

### **The Focus of the Story Theme**

In "*Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*", the collective interest is given top priority. Its theme is justice and sacrifice, and the confrontation between justice and evil constitutes the main line of the story's development. The most prominent feature of this work lies in the spirit of sacrifice demonstrated by Nezha. When the confrontation with the Dragon King reaches a desperate situation, Nezha faces a difficult choice. He could have chosen to live a cowardly life, but in order to prevent his parents and innocent people from being implicated because of him, he resolutely chooses to commit suicide. This spirit of sacrifice demonstrates the individual's strong sense of responsibility towards the collective. The hero Nezha completely ignores his own needs and only aims to preserve the collective interests.

In "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*", the theme is self-identification and growth. This is a philosophical growth enlightenment, and its theme is self-identification and growth. The identity of the reincarnation of the Demon Pill makes Nezha an outsider in the eyes of the world, and prejudice shrouds his life like a haze. In the process of constantly fighting against his fate, he tries hard to find his own value. He dares to question the definition given to him by the outside world. After experiencing countless setbacks and confusions, it was these difficult experiences that become the steps for his growth. Finally, he breaks through the shackles of fate and achieves the recognition and growth of his self-worth.

This shift from emphasizing the supremacy of collective interests and ignoring individual needs to focusing on individual growth is a concrete manifestation of the transformation from materialistic values to post-materialistic values. This extensive cultural change has shifted from giving priority to economic security and personal safety and emphasizing individual obedience to group norms to increasingly emphasizing the freedom of individuals to choose their own ways of life, it reveals a profound shift in people's values and cultural identity, providing new contexts and possibilities for character creation and cultural expression in animation.

### **The Expansion of Cultural Connotations**

In the classic work "*Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*", the manifestation of family values is relatively thin and flat. Among them, Nezha's father, Li Jing, is portrayed as a rather strict and rigid "stern father" image. As a father, he adheres to traditional educational concepts and codes of conduct and shows a serious and tough attitude in the process of getting along with Nezha. This attitude makes the relationship between father and son constantly in a cold and tense state.

Nezha is naturally lively and free, and his thoughts and behaviors often conflict with the traditional concepts represented by Li Jing, and Li Jing fails to effectively understand and guide Nezha, thus exacerbating the estrangement between father and son.

In "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*", the deep and complex emotions between parents and children are demonstrated. Li Jing is no longer the rigid stern father image but a great father who is willing to sacrifice everything for his son. Facing Nezha's fate as the reincarnation of the Demon Pill, Li Jing never gives up. He silently endures great pressure and tries his best to find a way to save Nezha. This fatherly love as solid as a mountain is vividly shown in the film. In the film, the mother's love is always a haven for Nezha's soul. She plays with Nezha, cares about Nezha's joys and sorrows, and protects Nezha in her own way.

In addition, the film also profoundly reflects the value of tolerance. Through the presentation and reflection of the world's prejudice, we see the harm caused by the lack of tolerance, which prompts the audience to think about the importance of tolerance. The integration of these diverse values makes "*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*" a masterpiece with profound ideological connotations and educational significance, triggering the resonance and reflection of audiences of different ages.

This value of making three-dimensional, objective, and comprehensive evaluations of things and having a strong sense of tolerance is a specific manifestation of post-materialistic values.

## Conclusion

If people are raised under conditions of low-level survival security, they tend to have more authoritarian tendencies, and vice versa. In the decades after World War II, the rapid economic development and the long-term peaceful situation have brought an unprecedented sense of survival security to the people of developed industrial countries. Young social members grow up in an environment where survival is no longer a problem, which has led to the change of intergenerational values (Inglehart, 2024, p.16). During the decades of China's Reform and Opening Up, the social economy has also undergone earth-shaking changes. *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* released in 1979 and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* launched in 2019 happen to be in this important historical period. During this period, the sense of survival security of the Chinese people has significantly improved, and this reality is highly consistent with the social background of the "change of intergenerational values" discussed by Inglehart. The evolution of culture and values in human society is not only influenced by economic development and scientific and technological progress but also, at a deeper level, restricted by the level of survival security. With the continuous enhancement of social security, the values of individuals gradually shift from the traditional survival-oriented core to the direction of pursuing higher-level self-actualization. This theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for us to understand why the two animated films from different eras present completely different interpretations of the same mythical image. The differences in the interpretations of the same mythical image by the two animated films are not accidental but a concrete manifestation of the transformation of values triggered by the changes in the level of survival security during the social development process. It profoundly reflects the shaping effect of social reality on cultural creation and people's cognition, and reveals the close internal connection between culture and social development.

## References

- Clifford Geertz (USA). (2014,December). Translated by Yang Derui. *Local Knowledge: Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* . Beijing: Commercial Press.
- Ding Ersu. (2011). *Semiotics and Cross-Cultural Studies*, Shanghai Fudan University Press.
- Ferdinand de Saussure (Switzerland) (2011). *Manuscripts of General Linguistics*. Nanjing University Press.
- Fan, Z. (2013). The Innovation and Development of the Cultural Industry in the Digital Economic Transformation. *Social Science Front*.
- He, H. H. (2019). The Cultural and Value - driven Factors of China's Economic Development during the Reform and Opening - up Period. *Wuhan University Journal (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*.
- Han, S. (2020). On the game spirit in Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child. *Journal of Neijiang Normal University*.
- Inglehart, R. (2024). *Cultural Evolution: How Popular Motivations Are Reshaping the World* (L. Wang, Trans.). Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Jin, Q. (2020). A Study on the Animation Adaptation of the Chinese Traditional Cultural Symbol "Nezha" [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Hubei Minzu University.
- Li, X. M. (2020). New Era: The Era of Spiritual Economy Rising Rapidly. *Journal of Shandong University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*.
- Metz, C. (2021). *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Z. Wang, & B. Zhao, Trans.). Peking University Press.
- Pei Wen. Saussure(2003) *The State of Authenticity and Its Tension*. Commercial Press.
- Qi Longren(2013). *Film Semiotics*. Shanghai: Oriental Publishing Center.
- Qin, J. L. (2023). Analysis of Audiovisual Cultural Symbols in the 3D Animation Film *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*. *Toy World*.
- Ruan, J. (2023). Chinese Cultural Symbols and the Dissemination of Chinese Culture. *Journal of South - Central Minzu University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*.
- Peirce, C. S. (2014). *On Signs* (X. Zhao, Trans.). Sichuan University Press.
- Saussure, F. de. (1980). *Course in General Linguistics*. The Commercial Press.
- Saussure, F. D.(2007). *Course in general linguistics 1*. Jiuzhou Press.
- Sun, W. W. (2004). Culture: The Emergence and Unveiling of Significance. *Academic Exchange*.
- Wang, Z. P. (2020). Research on the Evolution Characteristics of Urban Symbols Based on Search Engine Attention. *Urban Development Studies*.
- Wang, L. M. (2022). The Image Changes of Traditional Cultural Symbols—Taking the Animation Adaptation of Nezha as an Example [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Sun Yat - sen University.
- Yang, M. G., Liu, Z. Y., & Hu, S. (2014). The Value and Application of Traditional Cultural Visual Elements in Animation Character Design. *Design*.
- Zhao, Y. T. (2021). *China in Symbols*. Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhao, Y. H. (2016). *Principles and Deductions of Semiotics*. Nanjing University Press.