

Innovation Strategies of Myths Films Towards Chinese Traditional Culture-Take *Ne Zha 2* As an Example

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Abstract. In recent years, Chinese animation has modernised and innovated on the basis of traditional cultural IPs, unleashing a new wave of creativity. With its subversive reconstruction of classical myths and accurate capture of the spiritual needs of the youth population, *Ne Zha 2* has become a benchmark at the global box office. Taking *Ne Zha 2* as a core case, this study integrates cinematographic, psychological and sociological perspectives, and explores its IP construction strategy and audience emotional connection mechanism through questionnaires and group interviews. The study finds that the film adopts a two-pronged strategy of "traditional base + modern expression" to reshape *Ne Zha*'s image into an anti-labelling character, build an emotional bridge between the audience and the character through the empathy effect, and directly address Generation Z's need for reflection on identity and social discipline, thus achieving innovation in cultural symbols and differentiated competition in IPs, and helps national comics export their value and upgrade the industry in the global context.

Keywords: myths adaption, animation film, mythological IP, audience's perception, *Ne Zha 2*.

1. Introduction

Since 2015, a new wave of Chinese animated films has emerged, giving rise to a large number of animated works that develop around ancient Chinese myths, such as *White Snake* and *Big Fish & Begonia*, which have formed phenomenon-level IPs. In 2025, *Ne Zha 2* made a stunning debut and directly achieved the top box office position among global animated films. A research by Shi & Ren indicates that, since the birth of Chinese animation art, it has shouldered the important mission of depicting the features of the times and conveying national emotions, summarizing the innovative code of domestic animated films from the perspective of the modernization of the connotation of traditional Chinese culture [1]. Previous analyses of films were mostly conducted from the perspectives of story creation and text analysis, but rarely took into account the feelings and emotional investment of the audience. McKee pointed out that, "the audience's emotional involvement is held by the glue of empathy" and "the protagonist must be empathetic" [2]. Similarly, there is an audience bond that connects the protagonist *Ne Zha* and the audience's emotion, which urgently needs to be explored. This research aims to integrate audience perception, connecting the story text with the audience's perceptions. Taking *Ne Zha 2* as an example, it studies the satisfaction of modern Chinese youth with *Ne Zha 2*, and further explores the successful experience of *Ne Zha 2* and its suggestions for the creation of myths IPs and animated films.

2. Literature Review

From the perspective of reexploring mythological classics, Fu & Guo, by reviewing the *White Snake* series of films, pointed out that while Chinese animated films are building a vast story system, there are also many obvious problems, mainly reflected in the lack of textual connotations in the films and the absence of coordinated narratives [3]. For instance, the imperfection of the protagonist's growth arc and the contradictions in their personalities, which would greatly affect the viewing experience

of the film. Yu & Zhou mentioned that for mythological IPs, how to awaken the "IP memory" of the fan groups while enabling audiences to have emotional resonance with contemporary mythological IPs has become the key point of IP reconstruction [4]. From the perspective of the audience of animated films, Peng proposed that for Chinese animations to achieve greater development, they should not limit their market to young children [5]. Instead, they should delve deeper into the content and significance of animated works, targeting youths and middle-aged people in order to expand the film market.

From these, it can be seen that the immaturity and imperfection of character development, as well as the weakness or even absence of emotional resonance among the audience, are the problems and challenges currently faced by mythological animated films. When adapting classic mythological stories, it is necessary to analyze the characteristics of the modern era, reshape characters and plots that conform to modern values, and establish and convey correct values to the public. This study will make comparison of *White Snake* and *Ne Zha 2*, and discuss how *Ne Zha 2* overcomes the shortcomings of mythological films, thereby pushing Chinese mythological stories to a new height in the context of modernization. Meanwhile, the previous literature only remained at the theoretical summary of IP creation strategies and failed to conduct practical tests through audience surveys.

3. Methods

3.1. Related Theory Fame

McKee defined five elements of a story, which are characters, plot, background, genre and meaning [2]. He believes that for a creator to write a good story, they need to master each of these five parts and then skillfully connect them, just like conducting the separate and ensemble sections of a symphony orchestra. Previous studies have focused on the cultural symbols of Chinese animation, the original texts of mythological stories, and the modern innovation of traditional culture, namely the two elements of "setting" and "genre" among the five elements of a story. However, compared with other animated IPs that are also based on ancient myths and adapted, such as the *White Snake* series and Legend of Deification, merely studying the "setting" and "genre" is not enough to explain the hit phenomenon and huge achievements of *Ne Zha 2*. Beyond the scope of mythological story adaptations, previous studies on film characters and plots have also remained at the level of text analysis, without considering the two-way relationship between the text and the audience. According to Stuart Hall's Encoding-decoding Model, because the decoding strategies of the film text by the audience are different, different audiences will have different understandings of the same text [6]. Therefore, it is insufficient to study the story solely from the perspective of text analysis. The active participation of the audience in the film industry needs to be taken into account. McKee also mentioned that the audience's emotional investment in a film stems from their empathy towards the characters and the attraction of the plot [2]. Therefore, the author believes that film analysis needs to study the audience's feelings, including the audience's perceptions on the characters, on the film, and the connections between them. Thus, the author makes up for the blank in film research from the elements of "characters", "plot" and "meaning".

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

The author designed two questionnaires, respectively for different target subjects. Questionnaire 1 was sent to all the audiences who had watched *Ne Zha 2*, regardless of demographic characteristics such as age and gender, aiming to investigate the degree of fondness and satisfaction of the general audience towards the film (see Table 1). Questionnaire 2 aims to investigate whether the plight of youth during the 1979 version, *Ne Zha's Ocean Adventure*, existed and was reflected (see Table 2). Questionnaire 1 combines the "Five Story Elements" theory proposed by McKee, and adds the medium element of film, "audio-visual effects", to design a total of six elements for the audience to rank and choose according to their personal degree of importance [2].

Table 1. Design of questionnaire 1

Question No.	Question	Question type & answer	Aim
1	What's your age?	Multiple choice A) Below 15 B) 15 to 35 C) Over 35	Divide the audience into clusters by ages, cluster of A is teenager, cluster of B is youth, cluster of C is the elderly
2	How many times have you watched <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	Multiple choice A) Once B) Twice C) Three times and above	Study the degree of fondness of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> among the audience
3	Will you actively follow up the contents about <i>Ne Zha 2</i> on social media and online streaming platforms?	Multiple choice A) Yes B) No	Study the involvement of discussion and attention of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> among the audience
4	How do you like <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	Scale Giving scores from 0 to 10 according to the degree of fondness, the higher the score is, the more the audience like the film	Study the degree of fondness of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> among the audience
5	How would you like to recommend <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	Scale Giving scores from 0 to 10 according to the degree of the recommendation willingness the higher the score is, the more the audience would like to recommend the film	Study the degree of recommendation of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> among the audience
6	How many points will you grade <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	Scale Giving scores from 0 to 10 according to the points you want to grade the film, the higher the point is, the more satisfactory is the audience	Study the degree of satisfactory of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> among the audience
7	What is your ranking of the importance you attach to each element of a film?	Ranking A) plot B) character C) genre D) setting E) meaning F) audio-visual effect Ranking the different elements according to the degree of importance, the first one is the element that the audience attach the most importance, the last one is the audience attach the least importance	Study the importance attached by the audience to different film elements
8	Which element do you like the most of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	Multiple choice A) plot B) character C) genre D) setting E) meaning F) audio-visual effect Choose the element of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> that you like the most	Study the element that audience like the most
9	Who is your favorite character in <i>Ne Zha 2</i> ?	blank fill-in fill-in with a favorite character of <i>Ne Zha</i>	Study the character that audience like the most
10	Why do you like he or she the most?	blank fill-in fill-in the reason	Collecting reasons to examine the importance of "character" element

Table 2. Design of questionnaire 2

Question No.	Question	Question type & answer	Aim
1	What's your age?	Multiple choice A) Below 25 B) 25 to 35 C) 36 to 45 D) Over 46	According to the age group refinement on the stratification of the audience, under 35 years old is mostly contemporary youth exploring the classics, and over 35 years old is the middle-aged group, mostly the film's contemporaries.
2	When did you watch the film?	Multiple choice A) Childhood (Below 12) B) Teenage (13 to 18) C) Adulthood (Over 19) D) Recently revisited	Determine the age stage at the time of viewing and explore the connection between age and empathy and identity.
3	What was the channel through which you watched Ne Zha's Ocean Adventure for the first time?	Multiple choice A) Cinema B) Open-air screenings C) Organisations D) Black and white TV	Understand the distribution path and media environment of the film.
4	How many times have you watched the film repeatedly?	Multiple choice A) 1 time B) 2-3 times C) 4 times or more D) Don't remember	Judging the film's emotional stickiness and influence on the audience indirectly reflects whether the characters or plots have empathic power.
5	Which scene made the deepest impression on you at that time?	Multiple choice A) Ne Zha fights the dragon in the sea B) Ne Zha cutting his own throat C) Ne Zha is reborn in the lotus flower D) Ne Zha confronts his father E) Others	Determine which key scenes are most emotionally resonant to the audience
6	Have you experienced similar identity dilemmas with some of the characters in the film?	Multiple choice A) Often B) Occasionally C) Rarely D) never	Explore the extent to which the content of the film connects to real life
7	What is your most impressive character in the film?	Blank fill-in _____	Analyse the appeal of the characterisation to the audience and examine the relationship between audience preference and character empathy

8	What were the reasons and qualities that impressed you about the character?	Blank fill-in _____	Understand the key factors that contribute to the success of the characterisation
9	What do you think is the essence of Ne Zha's "resistance" in the 1979 version?	Multiple choice A) A personal rebellion against family oppression. B) The people's complaint against the bureaucratic system C) An idealist's despair over reality D) A purely mythological story with no real-life metaphors E) Others	Explore how the audience understands the core values in the film
10	What do you think are the core differences in the identity dilemmas of today's youth compared to when they were young?	Multiple choice A) The shift from "material deprivation" to "spiritual emptiness" B) From "single identity" to "multiple roles" C) Essential difference D) Other	Compare the identity dilemmas faced by young people in different generations.
11	In today's context, would you choose to recommend the 1979 version of "Ne Zha's Ocean Adventure" to others?	Multiple choice A) Yes B) No	To assess the film's potential for dissemination and cultural extension value in contemporary times, and to judge the realistic basis for its IP continuity.

4. Result

4.1. Questionnaire 1: Audience's Fondness and Satisfaction of *Ne Zha 2*

4.1.1. The Overall Fondness of the Audience Towards the Film

In the scale question of question 4 in Table 1, the average score given by the respondents is 7.7 points, and the median is 8 points. The degree of fondness for *Ne Zha 2* is relatively high. In the scale question of question 5, the average score given by the respondents was 7.6 points, the median was 8 points, and the recommendation willingness for *Ne Zha 2* was relatively high. In the scale question of question 6, the average score given by the respondents was 8.3 points, the median was 9 points, and the evaluation score for *Ne Zha 2* was very high. Overall, this is in line with the phenomenon-level achievements of *Ne Zha 2*, and the audience's overall evaluation and satisfaction with the film are very high.

4.1.2. The Audience's Perception of Film Elements

The result of question 7 shows that the comprehensive ranking of the six elements by the respondents is as follows: "plot" first, "characters" second, "meaning" third, "type" fourth, "audio-visual effect" fifth, and "setting" sixth.

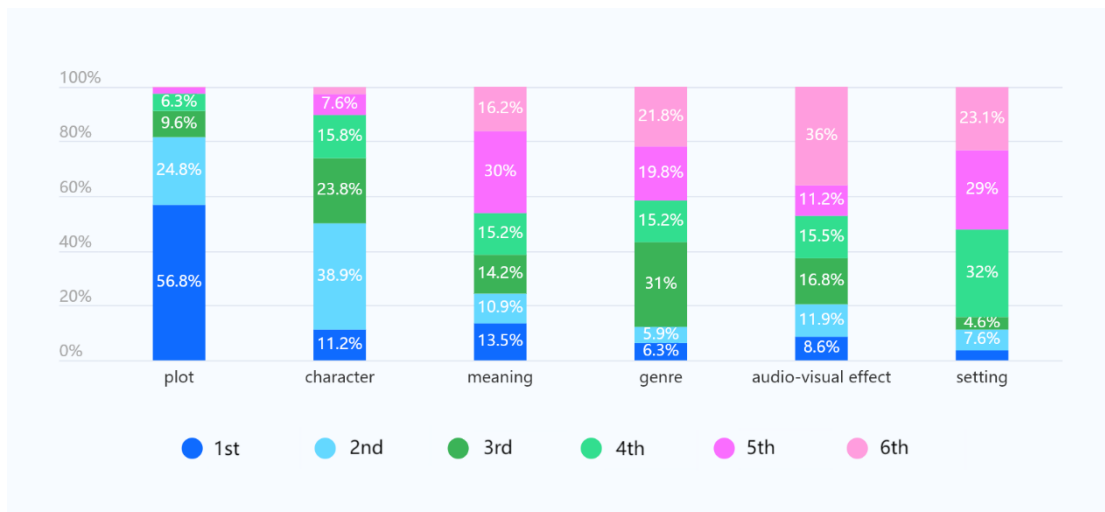


Figure 1. Ranking of film elements by the audience

As shown in Figure 1, among the first options, "plot" accounts for 56.8%, followed by "meaning" which makes up 13.5%. Among the six elements, they rank first and second respectively. It can be considered that the film elements that most audiences prioritize are "plot" and "meaning". Among the options placed at the sixth position, "audio-visual effects" account for 36%, "setting" for 23.1%, and "genre" for 21.8%. It can be considered that the film elements that most audiences value the least are "audio-visual effects", "setting", and "genre".

This may indicate that when audiences enter the cinema and face a wide variety of films, they do not evaluate the films mainly based on the genre of the film and the background settings of the film story, but rather treat them equally with the plot design and characters as the main evaluation contents. This might explain why what led to the phenomenon-level success of *Ne Zha 2* was not its mythological base or fantasy genre, but its ingenious plot design and rich and solid character images.

4.1.3. The Characters the Audience Loves Most and Reasons in *Ne Zha 2*

43.6% of the respondents' favorite character is the protagonist Ne Zha, ranking first. 16.5% of the respondents like Ao Bing the most, ranking second. The other respondents' favorite characters range from Shen Gongbao, Li Jing, Lady Yin to Lady Shi Ji, He Tong and so on. It can be seen that the characters in the film have been widely recognized and loved by the audience from different aspects. The reasons given by the respondents who love Ne Zha the most are rich and diverse, including "be yourself", "dare to fight, dare to love and hate", "inherit and innovate, vivid and lively", "full of passion, break the norm", "rebellious spirit", etc. All these can reflect that they have seen precious spiritual qualities and values in modern society from Ne Zha, for example, one respondent wrote like this: I strongly agree with the value that "my fate is in my own hands, not in the hands of heaven", this plot really resonates with me. Most of these reasons also conform to the spiritual needs and aspirations of modern youth. It can be seen that Ne Zha's portrayal has captured the ideological trend of the youth group.

The film could be seen as the growing path of Ne Zha, which is a metaphor about the growth journey of each individual. Everyone may experience belittlement and prejudice from others and suffer from self-doubt and the confusion of personalities and values, just like Ne Zha's first 3 years since he was born in the film. After that, when Ne Zha grows up and keeps in touch with the complex society, he realizes that unfairness and injustice exist, he then learns to make the decision of choosing his belief and value: be a good man, use the devil power out of a good purpose and break the prejudice.

Compared with Bai Niang Zi, the protagonist of *White Snake*, whose logic to take actions is not convincing and values are narrowly limited in valentines, Ne Zha has a more logical growing arc, making compelling decisions and delivers the values that concern with the individual growth, self-exploring and structure of human society. Compared with Jiang Zi Ya, the protagonist of *Legend Of Deification*, whose story is too far from reality to evoke empathy among the audience, Ne Zha, while is also based on an ancient fantasy setting, focuses on the mental thoughts and the recognition of self-identity that could be easily empathized with. To sum up, the youth group of audience deeply empathize with Ne Zha, in which way the film gains their love and praise.

4.2. Questionnaire 2: Whether the Plight of Youth Existed and Was Reflected in the 1979 Version of Ne Zha

The 1979 version of the questionnaire reflects several dilemmas. According to the questionnaire data, 20% of viewers aged 46 and over interpreted Ne Zha's 'rebellious nature' as a metaphor for "the people's complaint against the bureaucracy", while 32% interpreted it as "an idealist's despair over reality". This is closely related to the social context of the early years of reform and opening up - young people were confronted with the constraints of the old system, but also with idealistic passions during the transition from a planned to a market economy. Ne Zha's rebellion against the authority of the Dragon Palace symbolises the youth's criticism of bureaucratic structures and their desire to break free from their shackles. It is also worth noting that the intensity of the "father-son confrontation" episode reached a peak of 31% among young viewers, and that the 36-45 age group was more interested in "cutting one's own throat in white" (41%) and "rebirth of the lotus flower" (65%). The strong resonance of the 36-45 age group for "white suicide"(41%) and "rebirth of the lotus flower" (65%) reflects intergenerational conflicts in the context of the old society. This reflects the role struggles of the youth at that time in the midst of family ethics and social changes, such as the conflict between traditional filial piety and the modern sense of individuality, which fits the identity anxiety of the youth group in the value transition of the early reform and opening up period. And all these data further argue that the plight of the youth in this period existed and was reflected in the film.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Role of Empathy and the Modernity of Characterisation

The results of question 7 in Table 1 show that the least important element of a film is the "background", and the "genre" ranks only fourth in importance when viewers watch a film. This shows that viewers do not give priority to the genre and background of a film; whether a film is adapted from a familiar mythological base does not deeply affect their feelings and evaluations of the film, but they give priority to the plot and characters of the film. This also explains why *White Snake*, which lacks logical rigour in its plot, could not achieve the success of *Ne Zha 2*, even though it is also an adaptation of a myth. This also requires creators of myth-based films to focus on the coherence of the plot and characters when creating their IPs.

The study found that young viewers resonated strongly with the modernised and reinvented image of Ne Zha. Unlike the tragic hero who rebelled against his father's authority and destiny in the 1979 version of *Ne Zha's Ocean Adventure*, Ne Zha in *Ne Zha 2* is portrayed as an "anti-labelling" character who grows up, and whose declaration "I choose whether I am a devil or an immortal", and his struggle and awakening in the face of the mainstream value of "becoming immortal", accurately reflects the struggle of contemporary youth for identity and social discipline. His declaration "I decide whether I am a devil or an immortal", and his struggle and awakening in the face of the mainstream value of "becoming an immortal", accurately maps contemporary youth's reflection on identity and social discipline. From a psychological perspective, empathy plays a key role here: interviewees said that Ne Zha's dilemmas are highly compatible with their real-life experiences. This emotional connection allows the audience not only to passively accept the narrative, but also to actively participate in

reconstructing the meaning of the character's fate, creating a two-way interaction between the audience and the character.

5.2. Cultural Symbol Innovation and IP Differentiation Strategy

In comparison with similar mythological adaptations such as *White Snake* and *Jiang Ziya*, the author sums up the success of *Ne Zha 2* as its dual-track strategy of "traditional base + modern expression". The film embeds the classic IP of Ne Zha in the context of youth subculture, and conveys pluralistic values by deconstructing the dualistic narrative of "fairy-demon dichotomy". Analyses show that this innovation directly addresses Generation Z's demand for individual freedom and anti-authoritarian narratives, in contrast to *White Snake*, which focuses on the ethics of love, and *Jiang Zi Ya*, which explores grandiose fatalism. In addition, the film injects humanistic care into the intense conflict through the warm narrative of "family ties", which not only retains the sense of mythological epic, but also strengthens the point of realistic empathy, laying an emotional foundation for the long-term development of the IP.

5.3. Youth Spiritual Needs and Creative Revelations

The phenomenon of "Ne Zha 2" is not only the result of textual innovation, but also reflects the deep interaction between cultural consumption and the spiritual needs of young people. In terms of "meaning", the film uses Ne Zha's growth arc as a metaphor for the path of self-redemption for young people under the social pressures of schooling and careers, providing an outlet for the value of "accepting one's own self and resisting alienation". This kind of creative thinking confirms the principle of "story is a metaphor for life" put forward by McKee, that is, a good narrative needs to be rooted in the audience's collective mental picture [2]. Compared to the "empathy failure" of some mythological film adaptations due to their detachment from real-life contexts, *Ne Zha 2* proves that the modernisation of traditional cultural IPs needs to be anchored in the spiritual dilemmas of young people, and realise the organic unity of symbolic reconstruction and emotional resonance.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Research Findings

This study shows that the success of *Ne Zha 2* is not only due to the deep excavation of traditional culture, but also due to the precise combination of its modern narrative reconstruction and the audience's emotional resonance. The study further reveals that the modernisation and innovation of traditional cultural IPs should be centred on the psychological needs of the audience: on the one hand, the characterisation should be empathetic, so that the audience can project themselves into the fate of the characters; on the other hand, the narrative should be intertextualised with the reality of the society, for example, through the deconstruction of authority and the promotion of pluralistic values in response to the spiritual demands of the youth group. On the other hand, the narrative needs to be intertextual with social reality, such as responding to the spiritual demands of youth groups by deconstructing authority and advocating multiple values. This path not only provides a dual-drive mode of "cultural symbols + emotional resonance" for the creation of animation films, but also lays a sustainable emotional foundation for the long-term development of IP.

6.2. Research Limitations and Directions for Improvement

There is a geographical and age bias in the sample coverage. Respondents in the questionnaire were mainly college students (62%) and people over 36 years old (41%) in first-tier cities, and there was insufficient data on young people in third- and fourth-tier cities, which may have led to an over-interpretation of the phenomenon of "giving priority to audio-visual effects". In the future, we need to increase the diversity of geographic and educational backgrounds through stratified sampling, as well as pay attention to the film-viewing preferences of non-student groups and the sinking market.

Insufficient depth of longitudinal comparison. Although a comparison was made between the 1979 version of *Nezha's Ocean Adventure* and *Ne Zha 2*, the evolution of Ne Zha's image in other periods (e.g. the 2003 version of *The Legend of Ne Zha*) was not systematically analysed. In the future, we can construct a "generational map of character images" to quantitatively analyse the path of symbolic innovation in the light of social changes.

6.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can further explore the linkage between the creation and consumption ends, as well as the track differentiation strategy. In the author's view, most of the existing studies do not start from the audience's perception, but the construction of a film's story world needs to take into account both the creative intention and the audience's interpretation, so as to reveal the intrinsic driving force of the story world's construction. In this regard, in the future, it may be possible to introduce a statistical methodology to test the correlation between empathy and loyalty. In addition, to address the current homogenisation of mythological adaptations, a quantitative assessment framework can be established to systematically compare the differences in performance between IPs such as *Ne Zha 2* and *White Snake* and *Legend of Deification* in terms of "innovation of traditional symbols", "empathy", and ultimately refine a methodology that takes into account the cultural roots and commonalities of the times. In the end, a methodology that takes into account both cultural roots and commonalities of the times is refined to provide a strategic path for domestic animation in the game of globalisation and localisation.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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