

Cultural Narrative, Symbol System and Cross-Cultural Communication: the Globalization Path of the Chinese-Style Animation "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King"

Dong Zhou

Jinan University, Zhuhai, China

Abstract: In recent years, with the diversified development of the global cultural market, China's animation industry has gradually broken through the dilemma of "cultural discount" and formed a new narrative strategy in international communication. As a phenomenal work in 2025, "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" not only realizes the modern reconstruction of traditional mythology, but also makes in-depth innovations in visual style, symbol system and cross-cultural communication path. Through text analysis, semiotic interpretation and cross-cultural communication theory, this paper explores how this work establishes meaning resonance in the global cultural market, and analyzes its communication strategies and challenges in the postcolonial context. The study found that the film established a new cultural narrative model between local mythology and global popular culture through cultural translation, double coding and dynamic identity construction, which not only strengthened the global appeal of national style aesthetics, but also reflected the complex dialectics of discourse power in the process of cultural output.

Keywords: Chinese-Style Animation; Cultural Translation; Cross-Cultural Communication; Semiotics; Identity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the global film and television landscape centered on Hollywood has begun to undergo subtle but significant changes. Narratives and aesthetic standards previously dominated by the West are gradually shifting toward more diverse cultural expressions. With this change, China's animation industry is gradually emerging from the dilemma of "cultural discount"[1] that it has faced for a

long time, and is exploring a cultural output model with greater global appeal. Among them, the global success of "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" in 2025 is particularly noteworthy. This success is not just the accumulation of commercial benefits or the innovation of animation technology, but more reflects a more proactive cultural narrative practice: that is, how local mythological symbols are re-understood, interpreted and given new cross-cultural meanings in global communication.

Unlike early domestic animations that either overemphasized the purity of local culture or deliberately catered to Western audiences' demand for the spectacle of Eastern culture, Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King has made complex and detailed adjustments in narrative and visual language. The film does not stick to the single interpretation of fate, heaven and authority in the traditional Chinese mythology system, but reflects the tension between "individual subjectivity" and "institutional authority" that is prevalent in the global cultural context through the narrative of the new power relationship between Nezha and Yuxu Palace. This adjustment makes Nezha no longer a tragic figure who simply passively accepts or resists fate in isolation, but a subject symbol with more cross-cultural interpretation possibilities.

For example, the visual design of Yuxu Palace in the film has clearly surpassed the symbolic meaning of traditional Taoist temples and is more similar to the authoritarian space commonly seen in modern films (such as the capital city in *The Hunger Games*). This symbolic intertextual relationship[2] enables the audience to give this space a richer and more specific meaning based on different cultural backgrounds and historical experiences. Therefore, the success of Nezha

is not simply the "internationalization" of oriental narratives, but the construction of a positive "dialogue space"[3] between different audience groups through clever cultural mixing[4]. This dialogue space does not eliminate cultural differences or ignore the gap in understanding between different audiences, but seeks new ways of producing meaning on the premise of fully recognizing differences.

However, this cultural export model still raises a core theoretical question: after the success of the Oriental narrative in the global market, has it truly transcended the Orientalist gaze of the Other criticized by Said[5]? In other words, when the image of Nezha and the symbol of Yuxu Palace are accepted by the global market, are they reproduced in a new subjective way, or do they still unconsciously reproduce a certain exoticized imagination of the West about the East? This question involves the complexity and fluidity of identity in the process of global communication[6], which deserves further analysis and discussion.

Therefore, this article will go beyond the description of the superficial market success of "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" and deeply analyze the complex mechanisms presented by the film in terms of cultural narrative strategy, visual symbol system and cross-cultural communication path. Through in-depth analysis of the film's specific plot, visual details and communication phenomena, this article aims to explore how Chinese-style animation can maintain the subjectivity of local culture in the context of globalization and actively respond to the cultural needs of global audiences, thereby providing a more theoretically valuable and practical reference for future cultural export practices.

2. Helpful Hints

The core analysis of this article involves three key theoretical concepts, namely, "Cultural Translation", "Double Coding" and "Dynamic Identity Construction". In order to understand the subsequent discussion more clearly, it is necessary to clarify the specific connotations of these terms.

First, the term "cultural translation" was first proposed by Bhabha in his postcolonial theory[7]. Bhabha pointed out that cross-cultural communication is not just the simple flow or migration of texts or symbols

between different cultures; on the contrary, more importantly, when different cultural symbols collide and blend with each other, a new hybrid space will be generated, the so-called "Third Space"[8]. In this space, the cultural connotation of the original symbol is not completely replaced or eliminated, but has acquired a new way of interpretation and meaning. This paper uses this theory mainly to analyze how "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" avoids simply catering to Western mainstream aesthetics and is not limited to the simple reproduction of traditional Eastern mythology in the process of global dissemination, but actively realizes a symbol reconstruction and meaning reconstruction in a cross-cultural context. Secondly, the "Double Coding" theory comes from the semiotician Umberto Eco[9], which means that the narrative or visual symbols of the same work can simultaneously construct meaning for two (or more) different audience groups. This concept is particularly important for understanding the film because it explains how the film simultaneously exploits the local audience's familiarity with traditional mythology and visual style, while reconstructing the global universality of Eastern narratives for international audiences. Specifically, the film's "dark national style" visual style and the reshaping of the classic character of Nezha can be interpreted by Chinese audiences as a modern variation of local mythology, and can also be given more universal cultural significance by overseas audiences, thus achieving effective cross-cultural communication.

Finally, the theory of "Dynamic Identity Construction" used in this paper draws on the cultural research perspective of Stuart Hall[10,11]. Hall pointed out that cultural identity is not fixed, but a process of constant reconstruction and renegotiation as the social and historical environment changes. In the analysis of this paper, this theory is used to explain how the global dissemination of "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" allows the audience to identify their identity in a dynamic rather than fixed way based on their own cultural experience. This theoretical perspective emphasizes the fluidity and negotiation space of identity provided by the film's narrative and visual expression, rather than a single, fixed cultural label.

3. Results

3.1 The Modern Transformation of Narrative: Power Metaphor and Cross-Cultural Reconstruction of Subject Identity

For a long time, Chinese animation has often been in an awkward situation in global communication: on the one hand, it is eager to get out of the dilemma of closed local narratives, and on the other hand, it is easy to unconsciously cater to the consumer imagination of the Western market for Eastern elements. "Nezha" is a classic mythological figure. In previous film and television works, "Nezha" is often presented as a rebel of traditional ethics or a fatalistic tragic hero, and it is difficult to break away from the established "heavenly order" and "family ethics" framework. However, "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" re-enters this classic character in a significantly different way, successfully achieving a more modern narrative transformation.

In the film, Yuxu Palace, as a recurring spatial image, is endowed with a meaning that is completely different from traditional mythology. In previous works, Yuxu Palace is often a simple symbol of Taoist majesty and authority, symbolizing the power of "heaven's will" and the futility of individual resistance; in this film, it is transformed into a broader metaphor of power. Specifically, the film deliberately shapes Yuxu Palace into an empty, gloomy and highly orderly architectural space. Through the regular and symmetrical layout, rigid and rigorous ritual procedures, and the highly disciplined behavior of Yuxu disciples, it vividly embodies the meticulous penetration of disciplinary power in space and behavior described by Foucault[12]. In particular, the scene where Nezha is repeatedly brought into Yuxu Palace for scrutiny and questioning actually visualizes the process of how individual subjects are constantly shaped, disciplined, and even tamed under the pressure of external authority.

It is worth noting that the film does not stop at the level of simple power criticism, but further realizes the reconstruction of subjectivity in narrative strategy. The subjective expression of the character Nezha has a clear

development path in the film: from the self-resistance and doubt after being labeled as a "demon boy" by Yuxu Palace, to the gradual desire to resist, and finally clearly express the declaration of autonomous identity - "I am a demon, so what?" - This transformation clearly responds to the modern subjectivity problem emphasized by Giddens[13], that is, how individuals actively negotiate, resist and finally rebuild themselves between the role labels assigned by society and institutions. This narrative strategy not only has an obvious intertextual relationship with the classic Western "hero's journey" narrative, but more importantly, it does not copy the Western model[14], but on the basis of integrating into the global mainstream narrative framework, it retains obvious local philosophical imprints, such as the idea of "going against the will of heaven and changing fate" advocated by traditional Chinese Taoism[15].

In addition, the film also shows a clear vigilance against the trap of Orientalism in the process of global communication. Said pointed out that the biggest problem of Orientalism is that Oriental culture is regarded as an exotic object to be gazed at and consumed, thus further consolidating the unequal power relationship between the East and the West. "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" shows a strong sense of subjectivity on this issue, and does not try to cater to the global audience's simple curiosity about Oriental elements. On the contrary, the film deliberately highlights the universal identity dilemma in character creation and narrative structure: Nezha refuses to accept the fixed labels given by the outside world, but continues to fight against the definition of authority, emphasizing the fluidity and autonomy of individual identity. Such a narrative strategy has a universal interpretation space around the world, allowing audiences from different cultural backgrounds to resonate emotionally, rather than just watching the Oriental narrative from the perspective of consuming exotic wonders.

As Hall pointed out, identity is not a fixed essence, but a process that is constantly redefined in different social contexts[6]. The film's cross-cultural reconstruction of Nezha's subjectivity actually reflects the flow and reproduction logic of identity in the context of globalization. This strategy not only

successfully responds to the universal experience of global audiences in modern subjectivity anxiety, but also provides useful inspiration for how Eastern narratives can re-establish their initiative in the global cultural market.

Therefore, the narrative transformation of Nezha cannot be simply attributed to technological progress or the victory of marketing strategy, but is also a profound practice of consciously redefining the relationship between local narrative symbols and cross-cultural identity recognition in the context of globalization.

3.2 Global Reshaping of the Symbol System: Visual Hybridity and Cross-Cultural Negotiation of Identity

In the globalized cultural market, visual symbols have always been the key medium for cultural products to achieve cross-cultural communication[16]. Traditionally, when Chinese local mythology animations enter the international market, they often find it difficult to escape the fate of being simplified as "Oriental wonders", so that they have been in an awkward marginal position for a long time. However, "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King", which attracted widespread attention in 2025, made a breakthrough attempt in the visual symbol system, allowing local narrative elements to be recoded and enter the readable space of global popular culture. This kind of hybrid and reconstruction of the visual system does not cater to Western aesthetics in a random manner, but realizes a more complex identity negotiation process in the dialogue and collision of Eastern and Western visual traditions.

The film's visual reshaping of the protagonist Nezha is the most representative. In the past, Nezha in Chinese animation works was mostly a young hero in the fairy-tale paradigm, with brightly colored clothes and a simple and positive image; however, this film deliberately turned to a darker visual style, such as red pupils, black armor, flame special effects, and the destructive and violent sense highlighted in the action design. This setting with a strong visual impact makes Nezha, a classic mythological character, have a dual coding of both Eastern and Western visual systems: [9] Eastern audiences can feel the novel re-creation of traditional mythological

characters, while Western audiences are more likely to associate it with Hollywood-style anti-hero images, such as the Dark Knight in the Batman series or the rebellious characters in Marvel movies (such as Venom). However, it is worth emphasizing that this visual strategy is not a simple copy of the Western visual model, nor does it fall into the misunderstanding of self-orientalization to cater to the overseas market[17], but actively opens a dialogue between the two cultural aesthetic systems, thereby creating a new cross-cultural visual space.

In addition, the film's reconstruction of the important visual image of Yuxu Palace further highlights the cross-cultural metaphor that the film attempts to achieve. Yuxu Palace originally symbolized the majestic Taoist order in traditional Chinese mythology and had localized cultural symbolic significance; however, this film has undergone a substantial modern reshaping of it, such as the minimalist layout with cold colors, the empty and solemn space design, and the extremely symmetrical geometric structure. These features clearly borrow from the visual expression of institutional power in classic Western science fiction films, such as the matrix world in *The Matrix* or the "Capitol" in *The Hunger Games*. Through this obvious visual intertextuality strategy, the film has given the oriental symbol of Yuxu Palace a universal power metaphor, transcending cultural differences and triggering universal associations and recognition among audiences in different regions.

However, the most successful part of this film is that this visual strategy of mixed symbols always maintains a close interactive relationship with the identity issues expressed in the film. Nezha is frequently in the process of identity anxiety and self-definition in the film. He is repeatedly defined as a "demon boy" by Yuxu Palace and the surrounding environment, and constantly tries to get rid of or redefine this label. As Hall pointed out[6], the identity of modern subjects is not a priori and fixed, but a process of continuous reproduction in different historical contexts and power relations. In the film, Nezha shows the fluidity and variability of the subject's identity in the context of globalization through the visual process of breaking free from established labels - from clothing design to

body language. This visual "dynamic identity construction" strategy enables audiences from different cultural backgrounds to generate diverse and extensive psychological resonance based on their own experience projection.

It should be pointed out that the film's visual hybrid strategy is not intended to eliminate or dilute the cultural differences between the East and the West, but to consciously use this difference for active negotiation. The film actively places Eastern and Western visual symbols in the same narrative space, avoiding the passive catering of Chinese animation works in international communication in the past, and not falling into the trap of Orientalism of cultural othering. On the contrary, the film reshapes the subjective status of Chinese animation in the international context with a conscious attitude of identity negotiation. This strategy enables the film to transcend simple visual consumption or cultural curiosity, and truly realizes active identity negotiation in the context of cross-cultural communication.

In summary, "Nezha" not only successfully broke through the aesthetic barriers that have long made it difficult for Chinese animation to be disseminated in the global market through its deep blending and cross-cultural reconstruction of traditional visual symbols, but also provided a very realistic example of how to actively construct cultural subjectivity and identity in the future under the background of globalization.

3.3 The Dialectics of Power Discourse and Cultural Output: Reshaping Cultural Subjectivity from the Perspective of Orientalism

Although Nezha has achieved remarkable commercial success and cultural recognition worldwide, the power relations it embodies and the reconstruction of its cultural significance still deserve in-depth examination. According to the Orientalism theory proposed by Said, the Western mainstream market has long tended to consume Eastern cultural symbols in an othering gaze. This gaze essentially reflects an unequal power relationship - Eastern images, stories and characters are often simplified into exotic spectacles to meet the cultural imagination and cognitive needs of Western society[18,19]. In the global cultural circulation, this Orientalist

power structure is often replicated and reinforced, and previous Chinese cultural works, such as the Hollywood version of Mulan, have fallen into the dilemma of "self-orientalizing" in their attempts to adapt to this power structure.

However, Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King attempts to transcend this dilemma in the global narrative and creates a more complex cultural strategy - this strategy is embodied in the "third space"[3] proposed by Bhabha, that is, neither orientalism nor catering to Western consumption, but establishing a dialectical narrative tension between the two. Specifically, on the one hand, the film uses the unique aesthetic symbols and plots of Eastern mythology (for example, Nezha wears black armor and has wind-fire wheels on his head, which are typical Eastern visual elements), retaining the emotional resonance of Eastern mythology narratives in the hearts of local audiences; on the other hand, it cleverly transforms the traditional Eastern narrative of fate and family ethical conflicts into a metaphorical model of conflict between individual subjects and power institutions that is common in Western narrative systems, making it successfully intertextual with the mainstream Western power discourse. For example, the huge space and palace design of Yuxu Palace in the film, with its extremely symmetrical and solemn architectural aesthetic style, directly reproduces the visual metaphor of "panopticism" discussed by Foucault [20], that is, power completes invisible monitoring and discipline of the subject through spatial layout. This design not only reminds Chinese audiences of the value of "order first" in the traditional Taoist system, but also reminds Western audiences of the power control structure that is prevalent in their own society, thus enhancing the readability and interpretation space of the film in global dissemination.

At the same time, the film is not satisfied with the superficial visual resonance and narrative structure, but actively criticizes and reshapes the power structure of traditional Orientalism. In the film, Nezha always resists the negative identity label of "demon boy". This struggle is not just a resistance to individual destiny, but also a subjective resistance to disciplinary discourse. Specifically, the classic line of the film "My fate is determined by me, not by

God" is no longer a simple rebellion against fate, but a reflection and questioning of any social label imposed on individuals, reflecting the resistance consciousness of modern subjects to authoritative discourse[21]. This reconstruction of subjectivity can resonate in both Eastern and Western cultural backgrounds, because it actually responds to the universal problem faced by identity politics in the context of globalization-how individuals can resist the definition of external power in modern society and obtain autonomous self-construction space[6].

In addition, another important reason for the film's success is the transformation of its cross-cultural communication path - the one-dimensional Oriental narrative production model dominated by traditional Western film companies has gradually shifted to a global fan culture model driven by social media platforms [22]. The secondary creation and secondary dissemination of the film on short video platforms (such as TikTok) have objectively promoted the multi-dimensional reinterpretation and reproduction of the film's visual symbols and narrative elements on a global scale. Compared with the traditional Hollywood Orientalist production model (such as the Disney version of Mulan), this bottom-up global communication model has transformed the audience from a passive consumer of exotic wonders to an active cultural participant and re-creator. Therefore, the film's dissemination path itself also reflects a certain challenge and transformation to the Orientalist production mode, thereby further breaking the power model of the Western mainstream market's one-way gaze at Eastern culture[23].

Of course, this dialectical cultural strategy does not completely eliminate the risk of Orientalism. The success of the film in the international market may still lead to a new round of self-Orientalization concerns, that is, the Western market may once again shape it into a spectacle for consumption. But it is undeniable that "Nezha: The Devil Boy Conquers the Dragon King" provides a new and active cross-cultural narrative path. By consciously integrating Eastern philosophy and the globally accepted subject-power discourse relationship, it reshapes the initiative and subjectivity of Eastern cultural subjects in the context of global communication. This is

not only a successful practice of Chinese animation narrative strategy, but also provides an inspiring theoretical contribution to the study of how to transcend the dilemma of Orientalism and self-Orientalization in the process of global cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

The global distribution of Nezha's Magic Child Haunts the Sea should not be seen simply as a fortuitous success of domestic animation, but rather as a process of active negotiation between cultural subjectivity and the globalised market. The film modernises and reconstructs traditional myths in its narrative, and through its cross-cultural mixing of visual symbols and resistance to the Orientalist gaze, it embodies the dialectical construction of discourse in the process of international dissemination.

The film's modern reimagining of the space of the Jade Palace embodies a metaphorical expression of power structures, creating an intertextual effect between oriental myths and global popular narratives. At the same time, Nezha's identity dilemma and subject construction provide a resonant space of identity for viewers from different cultural backgrounds. This subtle double-coding strategy not only avoids the stereotype of traditional Orientalism, but also transcends the simple logic of market adaptation and realises the dynamic reproduction of cultural meaning. Therefore, the significance of the film goes beyond its commercial success, further enriching the horizon of intercultural communication theory and prompting us to re-examine the complexity of the construction of subjectivity and the negotiation of global discourse in cultural production.

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