Calling for a Hero: The Displacement of the Nezha Archetypal Image from Chinese Animated Film *Nezha Naohai* (1979) to *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021)

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Abstract

From the classical Chinese literary masterpiece *Investiture of the Gods* to contemporary film animation, Nezha's image is profound. Examining the portrayals of Nezha, namely in those most celebrated animated films, we argue that his role as the epitome of a 'god like figure' is in constant displacement and return. Using the framework of archetype and displacement as advanced by Northrop Frye, with a more pluralistic myth analysis extension found in the myth critique of Gilbert Durand, this article examines the multi-layered mythical mini structures within Nezha's displacement and return in Chinese animation, to explore the themes, images, and archetype represented by the character from the perspective of Chinese history and culture. We argue that Nezha's displacement and return in Chinese animation expresses the need and call for a traditional heroic image in a particular era. As such, Nezha's intertextuality exposes the profound inner patterns that form and refashion the Chinese collective unconscious, performing as a recurring mirror that symbolically inform and transform human experiences in China.

Keywords Chinese animation · Nezha · Archetype · Displacement · Return

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1 Introduction

Nezha, as a traditional cultural symbol, has a long recollection of the cultural call of the times in Chinese history. From *Journey to the West* to the *Investiture of the Gods*, from China's first color animation *The Monkey King* to the most recent animated films *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn*, the image, narrative, and value of Nezha presented in animation has not only undergone many changes but also unprecedented innovations. These evolutionary clues and processes provide a powerful starting point for us to truly delve inside Nezha's archetype and explore his image in contemporary Chinese animated films, while also providing a powerful grip on his actual position in Chinese history and culture.

Nowadays, the dissemination of literary images on screen has become a major trend. From text to image text, it is undoubtedly a conversion process completed with the help of a series of conversions and extensions of artistic codes that reinforce and defy the development of such past imagery in the particular times that it was created (Chengcheng 2019; Jay 2019). Although there are differences between the media and the artistic expression methods formed by these differences, the fundamental narrative structure, spiritual connotation, and character images present in cinematic broadcasting, albeit different, has not changed dramatically.

This article takes Northrop Frye's (1971) principle of 'displacement' at its center, which simply put, is a vital and powerful conception, showing how mythical formulas are adapted and reappear in realist texts, but in displaced form, in other words a reiteration of preceding situations that lead to an 'archetype.' Frye defines an archetype as: 'A symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognized as an element of one's literary experience as a whole' (Frye 1971, 365).¹ We use the framework of archetype and displacement by drawing on Frye, but with a more pluralistic myth analysis extension found in the myth critique of Gilbert Durand (1979) to dissect the multi-layered mythical mini structures (themes, images, and archetype) found in the most celebrated Nezha animated films: *Nezha Naohai* [哪吒闹海] (1979), *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* [哪吒之魔童降世] (2019) and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* [新神榜: 哪吒重生] (2021). Although we depart from a structuralist premise, to understand the archetype as a sign, we also argue that such formal structures do not allow an articulation of the literary object and its location per se. From this aspiration to retrieve the sense of the artistic object, figurative structuralism was born, a method to critically analyze the myth (Durand 1994). Durand's myth critique (1979) refers to a textual analysis that follows the same guidelines as mythical analysis in which images as symbols can disclose their redundancies. These recurring tropes and metaphors point to the so-called mythemes that constitute the structure of the text, which also permits a synchronous reading of the object of study, which takes as its initial exemplary the method of Levi-Strauss. This also corresponds to the moment of exploring how the characters

¹ In this article, we think of realist texts not just as literature but also film, as film represents a fictional world by using key codes, characterized by a coherent narrative, plausible characters, and with a linear structure as text goes from beginning to end.

intertwine with their textual settings. Accordingly, beyond its diachronicity and its synchronicity, the image of myths like Nezha would institute a larger semantic trajectory with some cultural, anthropological, and psychological support to integrate the full potential of its symbolic representation. As a complement to formal structuralism, Durand's myth critique enables us to reach a third semantic space that reveals the meaning of the text itself, since it is the interpretation of the former, the main goal of all critical reading. Using this framework is more conducive to returning to the original image and focusing on the displacement of the archetype over time in terms of the character's 'aesthetics value' and subject's movement from 'literary creation' to animated film (Chu, 2021, 302). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to start from the framework of archetype and displacement and combine this with the actual analysis of the most celebrated Nezha animated film works as illustrative cases to examine the displaced Nezha archetypes in Chinese animation. We argue that Nezha's displacement and return in Chinese animation expresses the necessity and call for a traditional heroic image in a particular era. As such, Nezha's intertextuality exposes the profound inner patterns that form and refashion the Chinese collective unconscious, performing as a recurring mirror that symbolically inform and transform human experiences in China.

2 From Text to Screen: A Background of Nezha and his Most Notable Incarnations

Nezha was originally an Indian deity first introduced to China through Buddhist scriptures during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) – his name is an abbreviated transliteration of the Sanskrit *Nalakūbara* (Young 2017, 104; Sheng 2013, 393).² By the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) Nezha was a 'popular hero' figure not only with a mythological cult but also increasingly widespread in popular entertainment (Chan 2008, 75). As presented in Buddhist and Daoist scriptures, novels, art, popular folklore, as well as contemporary 'Techno Nezha' in Taiwan, Nezha has undergone numerous changes and adaptations (Sheng 2013: 404). There have been many screen adaptations of Nezha's story: the earliest being *Nezha Chushi* [哪吒出世] (1927) a live-action film produced by the Great Wall Film Company in the late 1920s, but the most famous probably being SAFS's animated version *Nezha Nao Hai* [哪吒闹海] (1979) hereafter *Nezha* (1979), which was the first Chinese animation to be screened at the Cannes International Film Festival. In part due to the importance of Nezha as a figure in traditional Chinese culture, there is also a history of adaptation outside the PRC, with the Hong Kong production *Na Cha* [or, *Na Cha the Great*] (Chang Cheh 1974) and the Taiwanese film *Rebels of the Neon God* [Young Ne Zha] (Tsai Ming-Liang 1992), being two highly notable examples. There have been several

² Buddhism has long had an influence on literature throughout Chinese history, particularly when it comes to deities or supernatural events or characters, a prime example being the strange tales [志怪, *zhiguai*]. See Whyke (2020), Whyke & Brown (2020), Whyke & Yu (2020), Whyke & Brown (2021).

contemporary but less renowned animated adaptations in the PRC, including a celluloid animated CCTV television series *The Legend of Nezha* [哪吒传奇] (2003–4), and a 3-D animated film *I Am Nezha* [我是哪吒] in 2016.

Among the most well received animated adaptations is *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* [哪吒之魔童降世] (2019) hereafter *Nezha* (2019), which is perhaps the most obvious adaptation (albeit deviating from) of the traditional text *The Investiture of the Gods* [封神演義] after *Nezha* (1979). *The Investiture of the Gods* is a lengthy Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) text published between 1567–1619. The story is a romanticization of the overthrow of the last ruler of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 BC), King Zhou, by Ji Fa, (the founder of the Zhou Dynasty 1046–256 BC). The work integrates various mythological figures into the narrative, Nezha being a key one. In *The Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha is the third son of General Li Jing. Unaware of his own strength, Nezha accidentally kills Aobing, the son of the East Sea Dragon King Aoguang. Distraught, Aoguang threatens to flood all of China unless he receives retribution. Li Jing believes that he will have no choice but to kill Nezha to compensate Aoguang for Aobing. Seeing the repercussions of his actions, Nezha kills himself in an act of sacrifice. However, Nezha's soul does not find peace in death, and repeatedly comes to his mother in her dreams asking her to build a temple for him so he might be reincarnated. However, Li Jing destroys the temple, feeling that Nezha has already caused too much trouble. Nezha then goes to his Daoist master, Taiyi Zhenren; he reincarnates Nezha, who returns seeking to kill his father. Nezha is finally subdued when two Buddhas remind him of his filial duties prohibiting him from killing his father. The story thus navigates between various forms of patrilineal duty, ultimately being a parable of Confucian filial piety.

The most recent adaptation *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* [新神榜：哪吒重生] (2021) hereafter *Nezha* (2021), was released in February 2021 and is set in a different time line to the 2019 adaptation of *Nezha* (around three thousand years after) when he fought and conquered the East Sea Dragon King Aoguang and disappeared in mythological times. The film is set in a cyberpunk Shanghai, against a background of neon and corporate dictatorship that tells the story of Nezha's primordial soul been reunited with Li Yunxiang, a hot-blooded young man who lives in Donghai city and loves motorbike racing. Li Yunxiang and Nezha must realize the symbiosis between man and God in a new world where the dragon clan have not given up pursuing Nezha. As Nezha's reincarnation, Li Yunxiang cannot escape his fate and must cooperate with Nezha's primordial soul to become the hero of the resistance to the dragon clan and save Donghai city as it is on the verge of destruction.

3 Literature Review

Meir Shahar (2015) uses psychoanalysis to map out the development of Nezha's story and examine its Oedipus plot. Sean Macdonald (2015) performs an intertextual reading of the animation *Nezha* (1979), arguing that Nezha's defeat of the Dragon King marks the return to mythological themes in Chinese animated films and exposes the propensity of future social and cultural struggles. In their study on the national style in Chinese animation, Cui (2006) and Du (2019) argue that *Nezha*

(1979) forms part of the end of the stylistically uniformity or ‘national style,’ but also, the added value of well-crafted and internationally recognized ‘golden period’ (approximately 1950s–1980s) within the subsidized Shanghai Animation Film Studio and its cooperative model of socialist realism. Shen et al. (2020) uses image analysis to map the changes in Nezha’s visual image in Chinese film, and how this image is affected by multiculturalism in the world. Whyke et al. (2021) have focused on the presentation of the national style in *Nezha* (2019), in which traditions and modernity are interwoven, and the focus upon the ‘technological’ – its digitality – constitutes a refiguring of animation in China as symbolic of modernity. The authors argue that narratively and aesthetically *Nezha* (2019) mediates between the past and the present, embodying a ‘national style’ which is on the one hand hybrid in its inter/nationality, but also culturally delimited in terms of which cultural heritages are held up as emblematic of the nation.

Although previous scholarship has interpreted Nezha from different angles, against a framework of Frye’s (1979) archetype and displacement and Durand’s myth critique (1979), there is no traceable research on how, as a mythical archetype, Nezha is a typical or recurring image that has been adapted and reappeared in realist texts but in displaced form, or more specifically, how his image has been adapted from a literary myth and reappeared and changed over the years in animation. Therefore, this article does not delve into an exhaustive analysis of the mythological text of Nezha as first appeared in the earliest Nezha image in *The Investiture of the Gods*, but instead researches this original image in its displaced form in the most well-known animated film versions of Nezha, including *Nezha Naohai* (1979), *Nezha: Birth of the Devil* (2019) and *New Gods: Nezha Reborn* (2021). Although there have been at least 50 manifestations of Nezha in films and television both inside and outside of China between 1929–2021, our focus is on the most celebrated full-length animated film versions of Nezha hence our choice of the above. This article uses archetype and displacement as a framework to explore the change and evolution in the image of Nezha in these animations, focusing particularly on theme, motivation, character, and image.

4 Archetype and Displacement

The word archetype originates from the Greek word. It first draws from cultural anthropology, embodied by James George Frazer (1922) and his *The Golden Bough*, an encyclopedia of cultural anthropology. Here Frazer discusses the evolution from witchcraft to religion then to science. Frazer’s views have highly influenced the creation of myth-archetypal criticism.

The theories of Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, are also instrumental not only in psychology but also in fields like literature, philosophy, and anthropology. Carl Jung (1999) believes there is a connection between archetype and psychology, advancing his theory of collective unconsciousness. Jung derives the meaning of archetype from the Platonic concept of *pure* form, supposed to symbolize the essential characteristics of a thing, and shapes it in the psychological perspective. The unconsciousness cannot be observed. It needs to manifest itself in a

vehicle. Whereas for Freud archetypes are collective expressions that imaginatively fulfill repressed desires, Jung characterizes archetypes as syntactic expressions of innumerable experiences accumulated by humans in an evolutionary psychic process whose origin is lost in the prehuman phases of the human scale.

Archetypes commonly appear in mythologies. Studying archetypes is the process in which one associates the individual to the general. Northrop Frye wants to demonstrate that there is a conscious and unconscious emphasis on mythical structures in literature that contain the crucial elements of storytelling. Frye argues that the modern stories of modern writers are based on mythical structures. In the process, the course of retelling stories allows the existence of a flexible balance between the archetypal myth and the modern story (Agten 2019, 1). However, Frye claims that a one-to-one parallel between the archetypal myth and the displaced story is not to be expected because the adoption of structure of the myth proper leads to several practical challenges. Frye says that ‘displacement’ can overcome these challenges. Displacement is a concept that demonstrates how mythical formulas are adapted and reappear in realist texts, but in displaced form, in other words a reiteration of previous situations that lead to an archetype. The principle of ‘displacement’ (originally used by Freud to discuss the shift in emotional emphasis in dreams from important to unimportant objects) is applied by Frye to literary creation to describe literature’s tradition of adapting mythical forms to standards of believability or accepted morality, and the ‘devices used in solving these problems may be given the general name of displacement’ (Frye 1971, 136) which has been a powerful revelation in literary creation. Frye uses the example of ghosts to illustrate this. Displacement is a function of the kind of things you can have in a story that is decided by the kind of world assumed in the story, and that world is suggested by the powers of the protagonist. Frye’s archetypal theories thus provide a fresh approach to interpret both textual and visual works even though his achievements have the most far-reaching impacts on literary criticism. As Frye himself recognized in interviews in *A World in a Grain of Sand* (collected by Robert Denham 1991), film ‘is a literary art in itself, and it has a power of expressing symbolism that... is unmatched by any other form in the history of mankind’ (47) in its ‘extraordinary immediacy’ (202).

As seen above, Frye fully successfully develops the theory of myths as a system of mythology connected with displaced literary archetypes. One criticism of Frye’s idea of myth, however, is that it is somewhat ambivalent, and it is psychology in that the definition of myth is given as the imitation of actions about or within the same conceived limits of desires derived from the authentic psychoanalytic doctrine. For Lévi-Strauss (1958, 235–6), the myth is the reconstruction of certain imitation of the past, in other words, a restructuring of history. Accordingly, any set of fundamental generic units of narrative structure found in the plot of a written story (a relationship between a character, an event, and a theme) from which myths are thought to be formed crystallizes what Strauss calls a ‘mytheme,’ which gives certain symbolic consistency a la Jung to the main character’s deeds. Levi-Strauss claims that the same mini structures are also pervading throughout mythologies found in other non-western cultures. Here, we therefore claim that Jung’s *Archetypal Phenomenon* and Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* may be constrained in the Chinese context. For a critical analysis of these mini structures that make up the symbolic story, i.e., images,

archetype, and mythemes, we propose to extend it drawing from Gilbert Durand's (1979, 16) more sociological, psychoanalytic, and structuralist methods to deconstruct the multi-layered mythical thematic layers found in Nezha:

- (1) several "themes", that is to say, the recurring motifs, which constitute the mythical synchronicities throughout the Nezha animated films.
- (2) several different situations are examined in the same spirit, regarding combinatory possibilities between the characters and diegetic surroundings described in the animated films.
- (3) several extending readings of Nezha in animated films with subjective socio-cultural structures of a time and well-determined cultural spaces (by deducting some lessons in a manner similar to Lévi-Strauss).

5 The Displacement of Nezha as a Thematic Archetype

Some of the main characters in Nezha can be traced back to the legends of prehistoric civilization. These myths with vivid themes have taken root in the hearts of writers of the past generations, and they have been replaced by imagination generation after generation. Because this displacement was carried out unintentionally, the writer himself may not be aware of the results of its influence.

There has always been a tendency toward humanity's desire to conquer nature in ancient Chinese mythological stories. These mythological stories all express the spirit of a struggle between humanity and nature. This thematic archetype has formed an archetype chain with a unique cultural and artistic conception in the development of Chinese literature. If one is to read Chinese myth, one will find this exact cultural core of mythology but with the addition of the Chinese word resistance [抵抗]. A prime example is *Yugong Yishan* 愚公移山 [The Foolish Old Man Yugong Removed the Mountains], a fable essay written by the Chinese philosopher Liezi [列子, 450 AD-375 AD] during the Warring States Period (475–221 BCE), a period of immense social change and controversy among academic scholars. As a central part of Zhuizi's prose [诸子散文], the fable was an influential weapon for the Warring States to explain their political opinions and academic thoughts. The fable tells of an old man in his 90 s named Yugong, who lives directly across from a mountain. Suffering from the obstruction in the northern part of the mountainous area, Yugong is unable to get across to the southern part and therefore he attempted to dig up the steep mountain to make a road. The mountain god [山神, *shanshen*] got knowledge of Yugong's resolve and was worried that Yugong would dig the mountain ceaselessly. When the Emperor of Heaven [天帝, *tiandi*] got word of this from the mountain god, he was stirred by Yugong's genuineness, adversity, and determination. Consequently, the Emperor ordered the incumbering mountains to be removed. From this time, there was no high mountain barrier for Yugong (Mishra 2020).

Resistance is one of China's classic thematic archetypes. The Nezha story particularly embodies the displacement of this theme of resistance from fighting with

heaven to fighting with people. The object of resistance has thus changed from nature, as seen above, to society. From here, this reflects the life and emotions of another person in another era, and there are more image changes and cultural escalation taking place in the displacement.

The historical development of Nezha's image began with the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) novel *The Investiture of the Gods*, in which the character appears in chapters 12 and 14 and is based around the idea of a transition from 'I was once fierce' to 'Now I am very genuine.' *The Investiture of the Gods* is essentially a biography of Nezha. Its theme reflects the meaning of 'resistance.' In this novel, Nezha appears as an anti-feudal character and from beginning to end he not only resists feudal rule but more importantly rebels against traditional feudal morals. This is especially evident when Nezha sacrifices himself by committing suicide and returning his flesh and bones to his parents, fundamentally opposing the relationship between father and son in the traditional Confucian kinship system of the Five Cardinal Relationships [五倫]. That is, the relations of power between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friends, each of which demanded obedience from the other aside from egalitarian friendship, which required mutual respect.

In *Nezha Naohai* (1979), Nezha still represents a kind of resistance, but instead of completely been an anti-feudal story it is based on dedication, a kind of 'selfless' resistance that relies on traditional ethics. The year 1979 was the time when China was reforming and opening. Although the film did not deliberately cater to the atmosphere of the times, the image of 'breaking free from the shackles' that the movie portrays coincided with the spiritual consumption of the times and became a visual symbol of that era. *Nezha* (1979) is a film which was clearly a break away from the 'politicized cultural production of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)' (Macdonald 2015, 206). As Sun (2019) argues, the 1979 animated version still has a heavy influence on those people who grew up with it: 'the values [...], such as clear boundaries between good and evil, being independent and rebelling against the grown-up world, still heavily influence me today.' However, Nezha the resister in this story does not yet have a completely individualistic, personal self-consciousness as he does in recent animated versions. His self is still dependent on others, such as the succession of teachings from his Daoist master Taiyi Zhenren, or the harmonious group-self relationship. Therefore, Nezha's resistance is still a 'selfless' resistance under the framework of traditional ethics. *Nezha* (1979) dedicated its narrative to the framework of Nezha's birth, worship, trouble, self-proclamation, rebirth, and revenge. As a positive image, Nezha resents the Dragon King and rebels against him to save a captured girl, resist oppression against patriarchy and autocracy, sacrifice himself and save the people. This is thus a heroic narrative of 'sacrificing the individual and achieving the greater self' that was common on the screen of that era, instead of taking the 'I' at the center as it appears today, i.e., the heroic story centered on resolving the conflict between the individual and the destiny. As argued by Macdonald (2015), *Nezha* (1979) marked a return to mythological leitmotifs in Chinese film and had an ambiguous, open-ended climax, suggesting the partiality for future social and cultural contradictions. *Nezha* (1979) 'as a production [...] capped the Cultural Revolution and signaled a simultaneous continuation and shift in the

representation of the revolutionary hero' (206). In this animated film version, Nezha can therefore be understood as a premodern politicized figure portraying modern opposing elements of the 'hyper-politicized' Cultural Revolution in its widespread supremacy over all segments of Chinese society (Macdonald, 2015, 216). *Nezha* (1979) is a prime example of the appreciation and call for a traditional heroic image in a particular era.

Nezha: Birth of the Devil (2019) is a more current story that has been reconstructed, 'framed as an adaptation of this Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) text, not a "remake" of earlier screen versions [...] though *Nezha* (2019) departs significantly from all of these texts' (Whyke et al. 2021, 14). It explores how individuals who have gradually separated from the traditional ethical order can explore more free space in a society that is still hierarchical. The character of hero is still acting as one, who has to solve problems in some instances of the plot, but in others, one could doubt his heroism. Family values are also in crisis, a suggestion that implies the new contradictions in modern China. Nezha becomes a subject of transformation, or in the words of Gutierrez he argues the figure of the hero in literature sometimes goes against the enlightening epic narratives and pedagogies, attempting to prove their impossibility in contemporary China (Gutierrez 2011). The 'resistance' in *Nezha* (2019) is the struggle of a special individual against a restricted fate, it is a struggle of the 'self,' and calls for more tolerance of the differences between people. This story is accompanied by the changes in the social and family structure that continued after 1979, and only appeared in the context of the constant emphasis on individualism. In the process of China's development, the family structure has undergone great changes. The pyramid-shaped hierarchical structure of the traditional family supported by generation, age and gender has quietly collapsed, and the focus of the family, as it also appears in this modern version of the Nezha story, has changed to the children in the family. Young people who grow up in such a family structure are naturally free from the shackles of traditional ethics and have a strong sense of self. Not only do they no longer pursue seeking common ground while setting aside differences, but they also regard 'seeking differences' to achieve self-identity. When young people with these characteristics face the society, they ask how to let the society and the people around them accept and embrace them. The problem of being accepted by society, being oneself, and fighting against fate only arises in such a specific era. Such individualism and rebelliousness in the character of Nezha and his punk looks also reflects and contradicts the pretensions of the state, illustrating how, to borrow from the words of Dai (2015) 'Chinese society nowadays is facing great change and has absorbed more and more Western elements in every field' (341). This contradictory allegory between a collective and individual hero also acknowledges an intentionality to speak to local audiences in addition to set forth 'soft power' with international ones (Cappelletti, 2019). Nezha's fight against his fate as a 'demon' in this animated version is decreed clearly through his line: 'If fate is unfair, fight it to the end,' which in this modern version of the classic story is related to a more general fight against 'prejudice' and search for acceptance in instances that include the villager's prejudice of Nezha as the 'demon child' and their inability to see 'the good in him.' Since Nezha is a reincarnation of the demon orb, and people identify him as 'evil,' he finally chooses to fight against prejudice

and fate to become himself and control his own destiny. However, despite the efforts of this version, it is still a pending issue to develop an animation cultural industry that not only could have a significant international soft power as a diplomacy tool, but also entail narratives that can accommodate China's multiple ethnic and religious diversity (Chai 2021).

New Gods: Nezha Reborn (2021), like *Nezha* (2019), continues the exploration of individual free space in a hierarchical society but goes further by focusing on the question of 'who we are.' Like many Chinese youth today, Li Yunxiang is the epitome of China's 'lying flat movement' – a 'mindset, a lifestyle, and a personal choice for Chinese youth who have given up on the rat race [...] "lying flat" is widely acknowledged as a mass societal response to "neijuan" (or involution) [...] a term commonly used to describe the hyper-competitive lifestyle in China, where life is like a zero-sum game' (Teh 2021). Li Yunxiang is just lazing away his days and racing his motorbike for fun compared with his hard-working older brother Li Jinxiang who is employed by the Dexing Group – the largest enterprise in Donghai. It is here where one of the story's key focuses comes to light: the very refreshing and realistic depictions of the division between rich and poor, and class antagonism in modern society, as seen through an extreme version of a capitalist society. There are five zones in Donghai city: the rich area with tall buildings, the civilian area with old huts, the dusty depopulated zone filled with sand, the industrial area with roaring machines and the zone in a state of neglect with tower pavilions. The Dexing Group is located in the wealthy area and managed by the East China Sea Dragon King, thus naturally monopolizing all of the water systems in this city. Water is the source of life, but it just belongs to the Dexing Group in Donghai. Resonating with this location in the film, old Shanghai's essential electricity, water, gas, and sewer infrastructure had been in use under communism until 1983 and continued being associated with the 'most developed' side of the city under the emergence of global capitalism (Wei 1993, 54). The ghostly traces of the utopic colonial mercantilism, communism and neo-capitalism have been the utopias as well as catalysts of dystopic natural and socio-economic deformations that have shaped the collective conscience of the city and China by large. Quite different from western models of modernization, China's political economy identity has been absorbed by the so-called 'China Path' [中国道路, *zhongguo daolu*]. This also makes it a successful trend for Chinese nationalism as a strong ideology that has turned a blind eye to the real problems of the nation including economic inequality, social disorder as well as ecological disasters, enabling the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political agenda to shift away the debate from national to international concerns (Xu 2012). The geopolitical environmental ruins found in Donghai City in *Nezha* (2021) invites younger generations into both a thinkable and imaginable ontology open to overcome this narrow-minded patriotism that could have pervaded among Chinese Gen Z generation (the demographic segment born between 1996 and 2005). Among all this chaos, the 'resister' Li Yunxiang as a reincarnation of Nezha is an individual who is not bound by traditional ethics and gets caught up in a modern narrative engrossed in issues of poverty and poverty alleviation. Albeit he is very concerned about his own feelings, Li Yunxiang also strongly desires equality, freedom, and respect among people. His decision to face the injustice in the world surfaces when he witnesses those poor

families who always cannot afford the price of water. He waits for an opportunity and then boldly turns off the electric switch of the reservoir cutting off Dexing's water supply and rerouting it to the poorer people of Donghai city. Such individuals are only produced in an era when individualism is highly legitimized and thus naturally unquestionable. Once again 'Nezha' in his fresh human form is called upon as a hero for the modern times, which so happens to be resonant with the emphasis on China's goal of alleviating poverty on the year of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

As the story progresses, Li Yunxiang has the conventional run in and fight with the Dragon King's son Aobing, in this version stemming from Aobing's wish to steal Li Yunxiang's motorbike. At this point, the first glimpses of Nezha's primordial soul are seen, as Li Yunxiang's body is engrossed in flames, burning Aobing's left wrist and revealing the dragon scales below his skin. After Li Yunxiang's realization that Nezha exists within him, he recognizes that if he does not control the fire of Nezha inside of him, he will be destined to burn to death until his next reincarnation. The Monkey King himself, Sun Wukong, tells Li Yunxiang that he is just one of many reincarnations of Nezha, which have included Zhao Yunxiang, Wang Yunxiang, Sun Yunxiang and so on, and like them he is destined to be failure and incapable of stopping the Dragon King's torturous destruction of Donghai city: 'Too bad, Li Yunxiang. You can't do anything about it [...] You're not Nezha [...] You're not Nezha enough.' In this modern retelling of the classic story, Li Yunxiang is on the one hand forced to inherit Nezha's classic connection with destiny (i.e., killing the Dragon King's son Aobing and defeating his father Aoguang), but on the other hand he is also chained to many identity shackles. Faced with the rebellious Nezha soul, Li Yunxiang is left with the choice of escaping the identity of Nezha and using his own identity to seek justice from his enemies and the universe or realizing the symbiosis with Nezha's primordial soul. At first, Nezha's soul appears to him amid demonized flames, and Li Yunxiang tells Nezha: 'Listen, I'm going to save the people. Not just one person but the whole city [...] I assume that eons of selfish behavior means that there is no way you'll be helping me. So, I, Li Yunxiang, will go on my own.' This is clearly a resistance against social injustice, and a struggle against Nezha's historical reincarnation and destiny. Li Yunxiang's choice and commitment is a kind of personal growth and a return to himself. He represents an unwillingness to accept that 'that is all I can do,' which has become customary of today's younger generation. Such passivity in China has been internalized and constituted by educational systems, including schools and universities, which has instigated a kind of institutionalized passivity (Ma and Yang 2016).

Li Yunxiang must defend humanity regardless of whether he is Nezha or not. As Li Yunxiang faces certain death at the hands of the Dragon King in their final confrontation and is taunted by his sworn enemies' threat of submerging Donghai City in water and the words 'Your fate isn't in your hands. It's assigned by Heaven [...] You're not Nezha,' Li Yunxiang comes to the realization that no one can tell him who he is as this life is his own. The Dragon King is then destroyed in a burst of flames, and as Li Yunxiang lays on his deathbed Nezha appears to him in his half-complete primordial form. Nezha extends his classic weapon, the red ribbon, wrapping it around Li Yunxiang's body and consuming him in a ball of flames. Li

Yunxiang emerges in a symbiosis with Nezha as the primordial spirit infuses itself as a lotus fire print on Li Yunxiang's chest. The reborn Nezha uses his phenomenal strength and the red ribbon to drag the water dragons back to their underwater lair and saves the people of Donghai City. Such a transformative power is also perhaps an allegory of how Generation Z should no longer be seen as mere submissive receivers of Chinese pedagogy principles, but as dynamic agents of new technologies and alternative formulations of cultural diffusion (Huang 2017).

From *Nezha* (2019) to *Nezha* (2021) the major running themes in these films particularly resonate with those young people today who face the turmoil of fighting against the pain of being controlled by fate and unable to fully be themselves. *Nezha* (2021) begins with the line 'Everyone has an identity. In different times and different places. We all play different roles,' and concludes with Li Yunxiang finally acknowledging his hybrid identity at the end of the film, stating that 'He [Nezha] and I both know, in this world, if you don't want to accept fate, you have to fight it as hard as you can [...] I am Li Yunxiang. I am Nezha.' The questions of obeying destiny's arrangements and fighting against fate have thus become major themes in the displacement of Nezha's archetype in contemporary animated versions of the classic story, but this version goes further by uncovering the issue of finding one's true identity and finally embracing this identity. This subjective position of youth coincides with the search for an idealized double articulation identity that embraces the sanctioned contemporary discourses, which favor individual material goals within a collective harmonious society (Tan & Cheng 2020).

In following with these modern themes, *Nezha* (2021) also provides a continuity with *Nezha* (2019) in that it embraces the 'national style' that Whyke et al (2021) identify in the 2019 animated version, i.e., the intertwining between traditions and modernity. In *Nezha* (2019), tradition and modernity come together through a 'more reified notion of "traditional culture"' (18). There is a stress on the modern narrative with similarities to the ancient text, traditional Chinese aesthetic fidelity, an interpretation of 'contemporary culture' characterized by issues seen as significant specifically to the Chinese youth, and the 'modernization' of several relationships (18). In *Nezha* (2021), there appears to be traditional inspirations from *Nezha* (1979) in the sense that Nezha is a little rebellious hero. The major difference here is that Nezha is only an echo of Li Yunxiang's modern urban punk boy spirit and his sense of competition, telling Nezha's story from a different perspective that shows us an entirely grown-up version of the demon God and how he deals with the injustice of the modern world. On the one hand, *Nezha* (2019) has a "'modern take" on "ancient culture"' in terms of its story, but also semiotically references traditional Chinese culture 'through visual cues, including Han Chinese clothing, the "palatial style" (gongdian shi) architecture, and karst landscapes' (Whyke et al. 2021, 23). On the other hand, *Nezha* (2021) goes further than just constructing a modern version of an ancient story, but also aesthetically speaking the film presents a refreshed and reinvigorated fantasy world where mythology and technology (machinery) exist together to tell the more mysterious and novel Chinese story of Nezha by combining the Oriental culture of 1930s Republican era Shanghai with a modern western punk style/post-human world. A prime example is Li Yunxiang's two main outfits throughout the film: the former representing his own personality (a leather bikers

jacket with a red-blood like print on the left breast and a maroon scarf that embody a cool Oriental punk flavor and street racer appearance); and the latter representing the modernity of Nezha's ancient personality (crimson steel red, brown, and black armor plates, armguards, a thigh high waist band, vents on both shoulders, flames encircling his body and a flame-throwing spear which can be disassembled into two pieces and tied to the back). This is a fascinating resemblance of ancient ideals of *wu* or the ideal masculine fighter refashioned for the modern world (Louie 2014).

6 The Evolution of the Archetype of Nezha's Image

Images often express more meanings than languages. Sometimes it is difficult to express a clear idea even with the most abundant language, but a special visual image can do this. However, there are essential differences between the general image and the original image, that is the archetype. The meaning of general image is very limited, while the original image, in this case Nezha, has universality, collectivity and depth. It reflects the universal experience of Chinese people and their behaviors and contains rich metaphors. From the angry three-headed six-armed Buddhist patron saint to the upright and courageous Taoist child God of war, the evolution of Nezha's image not only shows the traditional signs of fusion of the three schools of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, but also reveals the absorption and innovation of heterogeneous culture among Chinese people. The archetypes of image frameworks often originate from ancient myths. Image frameworks are related to the thematic archetype, but image goes further, that is to say, the characters, events, environment and their relationships encompassing the image are combined into a structural unit, and its deep structure or matrix shows considerable stability in the process of displacement.

Compared with the image of Nezha in the original text *The Investiture of the Gods*, the 1979, 2019 and 2021 animated versions of Nezha separate his image from the original Nezha story in different ways. One of the notable features is the evolution of the character relationships, particularly the relationship between Nezha and his parents in the three versions. The plot of *Nezha* (1979) is simple and one sided, the characters are very stereotypical, and one can tell the good from the bad individuals immediately: Nezha is indefinite, the dragon king is cunning and cruel, the father Li Jing is docile and weak, and the mother is silent and almost absent. Sangren (2000) has picked up on this latter point with regards to the original Nezha story, arguing that the mother serves simply as a creator of the son. In *Nezha* (1979) the emphasis on the struggle between Nezha and the Dragon King further leads to the diminishing of the mother's role further, and even the father plays a subordinate role in this version (Macdonald 2015). Moreover, considering that the film was released in 1979 after the tempestuous times of the Cultural Revolution and on the threshold of China's economic reform under Deng Xiaoping, the unstable relationship between Nezha and his father is not so much as father-son conflict, but more of an immature nasty boy and a 'political father-figure' (Macdonald 2015, 210, emphasis in original).

On the contrary, in *Nezha* (2019), Nezha is a child beloved by his parents, and his parents are very open-minded and understand their child's education. Nezha's mother is very much like a modern professional woman facing a difficult choice, reflecting on her work too much and neglecting to accompany her son. She is alternately fighting demons while trying to care for Nezha, in effect projecting into the mythic past the 'perfect' 'modern woman' who balances social responsibilities and motherhood at the same time (Whyke et al. 2021). In this version, Nezha is directed by his parents to try and have a harmonious relationship with the community and abide by the ethics and filial piety of the community. Such Confucian values are greatly in line with the push for social harmony built around the concept of cultural harmony in Contemporary China, a strategic principle to make the past antiquity serve the modern present, and this includes the fulfillment of the great 'Chinese Dream,' which includes the consolidation and creation of socialist community values (Koptseva 2016). However, like many of the youth in China today Nezha is far from this social ideal. Instead, he has dark circles under his eyes, his hands are always inside the pockets of his saggy pants, and he is essentially a coddled little angry demon 'king' who cannot stop himself from pranking the local villagers. As such, despite doting on him his parents' attempt to confine him at home. Nezha rebels because he feels that his parents do not understand him, and detain him within the extensive, albeit walled, complex. Nezha does not initially offer to kill himself as in the original story and *Nezha Naohai*, his father offers himself instead. Although under the pressure of the Dragon King Nezha's father hesitates to kill his son before Nezha goes on to kill himself in *Nezha* (1979), this plot is still far from *Nezha* (2019), which completely inverts the patrilineal obligation as being of parents to child, rather than the other way around. This is also made clear in his parents' willingness to sacrifice everything – their home and responsibilities in the village – to protect him and please him. Nezha has here been recast as a stereotypical 'only child' of modern China, rather than the youngest of three sons in the original myth – much like his power, his social privilege is largely taken for granted within the narrative (Whyke et al. 2021).

In *Nezha* (2021) the character images are fuller, the relationships between the characters are more complicated, but there remains the cross over between past and the present eras in terms of the story of the dragon clan and their pursuit and revenge on Nezha. One of the principal diversions of this modern animated version from previous films is the addition of colorful female personalities, such as the jelly-fish girl, Kasha, and Dr. Su Junchu. Jelly-fish lady has the power of her tentacles than act as poison whips against Li Yunxiang, while Kasha is Li Yunxiang's attractive female friend and emotional support, but later loses her leg getting caught up in one of his battles with the dragon clan. When compared with the 1979 and 2019 animated versions, this is the first time that this largely male dominated story introduces strong female characters, as just one sign that issues like gender equality are becoming more outspoken in contemporary China. To the films detriment, however, the female character and narrative exploration and development is rather absent, making these women feel more like they have been pinned on to the main story.

Most notable is the female motorbike racer Dr. Su Junchu. After the motorbike race at the beginning of the film, Li Yunxiang first lays his eyes on Su Junchu and is

immediately attracted to her beautiful appearance. He attempts to flirt with her, but Junchu mistakenly believes that his best friend Kasha, who happens to be stood next to him, is his girlfriend. This attraction between the two characters is reciprocal, but the film sees their relationship develop only into a close friendship, leaving the audience to assume the 'attraction' between them. This is the first time the Nezha story has developed a male–female intimacy, evidently catering to a modern preference, especially among young audiences, for a 'male–female love story,' demonstrating the necessary displacement of the original Nezha image to fit a modern narrative. In this way, contrary to *Nezha* (2019) there is no development of a queerbaiting reading in the encounters between characters like Aobing and Nezha, whose deviated subtexts were interpreted as a BL (boys' love) story (Lin 2020). Li Yunxiang and Su Junchu's relationship is perceived through a male gaze. The various hypersexualized big-eyed women including Su Junchu, the third sister and the two dragon maids with their tight *qipaos* and perfect curvy and slender silhouettes re-orientalize, for the western 'other,' and self-orientalize, for the Chinese 'us,' the Chinese female body. As such, we assume that the female characters are not the ones unfolding the action, but they are simply bearers of the look. This oriental passivity is articulated through what Roh (2015) calls the hyper-sexualization of their desirable corporeal bodies. The eroticized bodies of Li Yunxiang's enemies jelly-fish girl and Caiyun, who herself is symbolic of a queer-punk fashionista assemblage, together with Kasha, who turns to an erotic cyborg when singing in the cabaret, are attempts to project male utopian hopes and fantasies into these hybrid entities. They are all immersed in fights, and they all end up dying or being punished for their witty or seducing roles. On the one hand, their punishment to die or to be wounded, particularly an asexual and legless Kasha, all reflect the perils of the biotechnological body as a promised transhuman utopia that can easily fail within their post-amputee and prosthetic experience (Smith & Morra 2006). On the other hand, these fighting girls become erotic objects of desire for a potential Chinese and non-Chinese otaku-like audience, who voyeuristically enjoys gazing at their bodies and identifying with the hero, in this sense, flattening the distinction between the real and the symbolic. These femme fatales and their technologized bodies reject the binary opposition between human beings and machines, but their promising feminized futures are condemned to be stopped by their masculinized past (Saitō 2011). In an attempt to represent other techno-tropes as a post-human imaginary beyond Shanghai's colonial past and China's hyper-technological futures, Nezha's latest male anxieties contribute to a Chinese and western cyberpunk experience grounded in the current times, in an age of resurging global myogenic violence and heavy xenophobia against China's post-pandemic rise.

Nezha (2021) flourishes most in enhancing the emotional plot lines between certain characters, particularly those depicting affection between family members. Unlike *Nezha* (1979) and *Nezha* (2019), Nezha's mother is completely absent in *Nezha* (2021). We get little back story as to Li Yunxiang's mother aside from a family portrait of her holding her son as a baby. Li Yunxiang's father Lao Li (a reference to his father's name Li Jing in the original story) later says that the family are not natives of the East China Sea, but that they fled there to avoid fighting and Li Yunxiang's mother fell ill on the way. Here the traditional Li Jing father figure

departs greatly from Confucian patriarchal ideal of ‘parent and man’ like we see in earlier versions of the story, seen in this modern version as the ‘mother figure’ that in the father’s own words ‘had to shoulder the pole.’ This largely represents fathers in today’s Chinese society, who are much more involved in child-rearing, with their parental role diverging from the traditional Confucian patriarchal ideal (Li 2020).

If there is a similarity with the traditional Nezha story, then it is that the father–son relationship between Li Yunxiang and Lao Li is still full of deep conflict. A particular stand out scene that highlights the close but also contentious relationship between father and son takes place when Li Yunxiang arrives home for dinner one night. When Li Yunxiang enters the house, his father is searching for a wrench, which his son throws over to him. The father is evidently happy with this as seen from the smile on his face, perhaps because his son shares his hobby and passion for fixing machinery. This kind of self-explanatory tacit understanding and warmth between the two characters is absent from the previous animated versions. However, as the family sits down to dinner, news spreads over the radio of the recent disruption to the city’s water supply (caused by Li Yunxiang), as his father utters ‘if I found him, I’d break his legs.’ Li Yunxiang’s brother goes on to toast his irritated father, as his father brings to light their family’s financial situation, which is ‘not rich, but not poor either.’ His father goes on to state that ‘it is better to have a proper job,’ going on to address his older son Li Jinxiang by saying that ‘I’m not worried about you’ and then to his younger son Li Yunxiang he utters ‘Shady business never ends well’ to which Li Yunxiang storms off. The conservatism of the father is challenged by the rebellious contemporary look-west of Li Yunxiang, whose clothes are manly and rugged. His act-west lifestyle contrasts with his older, who pours his father a drink and toasts for him, before kicking his younger brother’s leg to stop interrupting him, almost as if ‘whispering Confucian aphorisms about filial piety’ (Kim 1982, 177). The animation film seeks to create a new image of a hero, who aggressively asserts his masculinity, showing his eagerness for will power away from his father’s pretensions; on the one hand, his hyper-westernized hostile and rude attitude toward his father subverts masculine constructions of Nezha in classical Chinese literature. There is also a parallelism with the original story, when Nezha’s older brother Muzha reminds him to be filial and not to kill his father (more on which below). In this modern version, the father is disappointed with how his son makes his livelihood or lack thereof, and his hopes that Li Yunxiang get a ‘conventional’ job working for the Dexing Group like his older brother. This flawlessly reflects the high expectation placed on the children by the parents in China today to complete university and get jobs as professionals, business managers or civil servants (Zou et al. 2013). However, Li Yunxiang is the epitome of those many young people that either do not want to find a ‘stable’ job, or like many others, continue to struggle to find jobs, with the unemployment rate in China at an all-time low of 13.1% as of February 2021 (Cheng 2021).

Up to this point, the relationship between Li Yunxiang and his father resonates with the original Nezha narrative, in that one mouth never approves and the other is not obedient. However, this time, Nezha is caught with Li Yunxiang’s more complex modern identity, which also coincides with the issues of today’s younger generation, related to education, family, and indecisive position toward the Chinese

government's politics (de Kloet & Fung 2016). Thus, Li Yunxiang alludes to inter-generational problems within traditional family models while showing his ambivalent position with the rulers of the city, the Dexing Group. Moreover, our young hero seemingly embodies the 'sang' [喪] culture's defeatism and disenchantment among those youngsters, who have little space for participating in economic and social institutions, due to the standardization of education in China, which leaves behind those who do not reach good results in national examination tests (Tan & Cheng 2020). All of this is epitomized later in the film, when Li Yunxiang's father says he's always been 'causing trouble.' These modern elements become the epitome of the protagonist's 'trouble-causing' nature in *Nezha* (2021), which is a considerable departure from *Nezha* (1979), where this nature is shaped around a traditional story of patricide, regicide, and, more purposely, filial piety and political loyalty.

Arguably one of the most touching scenes of the film which differs greatly to the original story and subsequent animated films, is when the dragon clan destroys the hospital in their pursuit of Li Yunxiang and his father gets caught up in the wreckage and sadly dies. In the original story, after Nezha's mother secretly builds a temple for him so that he may receive worship and be reincarnated, and his father finds out and destroys it, Nezha decides to get revenge on his father in a fit of rage, only to be reminded by his second brother Muzha that parricide is the ultimate unfilial act and disruption of Confucian social order. Nezha responds to this by explaining that after having killed himself, ripping open his stomach, carving out his intestine, picking out his bones and returning them to his parents, the filial bond between them no longer exists. Meir Shahar (2015) argues that this is a prime example of an oedipal myth masked as a filial piety tale, which here is demonstrated through extreme practices of filial piety comprising of offspring trying to heal their parents by letting them feast on their flesh. This intense father-son conflict and subsequent revenge plot is non-existent in the 1979, 2019 and 2021 animated versions. This thinning of plots in recent animated treatment and subsequent appropriation to the relevant social and cultural context is warranted, but this has certainly had consequences for the father figure in these animations.

In *Nezha* (1979) for instance, to realize socialism and shape a better society, common themes in revolutionary films of that period, the father is a parental figure who Nezha must break with to annihilate the patriarchal and paternalistic family structures at the center of a feudal society. In this version, when the Dragon King requests that Li Jing give up his son, Li Jing is disloyal to his son and hides Nezha's two magical weapons, leading Nezha to instead slice his own throat after simply 'declaring' but not literally returning his flesh and bones to his parents. In *Nezha* (2019), Li Jing is supportive of his son's rebellion against his own fate and pursuit of valor. The father is no longer a sniveling official of the heavenly court, but instead an ideal husband and devoted father willing to give up his own life for his son, thus representing modern Chinese family ethics and relationships that contrast greatly with the revolutionary 1979 version. In *Nezha* (2021), the depiction of the father's death adds a new layer of sympathy to both the father figure and father-son relationship. As Lao Li lay on his deathbed, he tells his son that 'whatever trouble you get into now, I won't hassle you over it [...] I always knew I had an amazing son [...] keep going, for everyone's sake.

Live.’ Against the recent background of the COVID-19 pandemic, this scene will certainly resonate with those children who have faced the turmoil of losing their parents. At the same time, the importance of this scene for the modern Nezha story cannot be understated as an especially poignant moment that entirely inverts the traditional shamed father and unfilial son relationship in *Nezha* (1979) by demonstrating a father’s pride for his mischievous son that was in the past non-existent. Unlike the original narrative, a part of the son’s destiny is no longer his own death, but the death of his father.

From the above, it is therefore evident that based on the Nezha archetype from legend to textualization, and then to animated film, there is a combination of China’s progressing historical and cultural background embedded therein. The Nezha image is constantly breaking through the foundation of the original archetype, and in the process of displacement we are witnessing the rise and sublimation of shifting national emotions.

7 Conclusion

Archetype is a relatively stable unit in the development of literature, and the archetype can continuously multiply and grow as a deep structure or matrix. It is often unconsciously presented in different appearances under different writers through displacement mechanisms, thus forming an archetypal image system. Each displacement contains the imprint of the unique personality of different writers. This kind of archetype displacement provides rich and abundant creation.

Looking at the evolutionary history of Nezha, we can see that the archetypal image of Nezha tends to be more abstract. At present, the images of Nezha in Chinese animated films are very different from the past, but their spirit is rooted in the archetype. This requires us to grasp the new characteristics of Nezha and the Nezha story as they are manifested in the modern era, but also identify the injection of the personal spirit of new creators into the formation of this modern Nezha image, and thus complete the displacement of tradition in favor of modern high-quality content.

New Gods: Nezha Reborn is not the end of Nezha’s development in animated films, nor is it the typecast of Nezha’s characterization. In the changing times and cultural context, we will see Nezha’s birth in many new images. No matter which era is calling for heroes, after the accumulation of more than a thousand years of image development, Nezha has already stepped down from the mythological altar and has become a being with flesh and bones, a ‘young hero’ who is widely admired, a hero who seems to be just by our side accompanying us through the changing times. Activating the archetypal Nezha image that is already full of mythical colors, and adding new background and character, will make this legend forever novel and enduring. Overall, Nezha’s intertextuality unveils the deepest inner patterns that shape and refashion the Chinese collective unconscious, functioning as a cyclical mirror that symbolically inform and transform human experiences in China.

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