

Cultural Breakthrough and Paradigm Reconstruction in *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Reborn in the Sea*

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Abstract: *Ne Zha: the Demon Child Reborn in the Sea* reconstructs traditional mythology through quantum mechanics, achieves global dissemination of Eastern aesthetics via technological innovation and cultural translation, and propels the Chinese animation industry from cultural export to value export. The film achieves a balance between philosophical depth and genre-based narration in its narrative logic, constructs an intergenerational dialogue system in its creative methods, and activates the emotional potential of cultural memory in its communication strategy. Ultimately, the film's global success signals a shift in Chinese animation from technological catch-up to cultural standard-setting. This paradigm reconstruction not only points the way for the animation industry but also offers a "Chinese approach" for global civilisational dialogue.

Keywords: Chinese animated film; Cultural translation; Paradigm reconstruction; Quantum narrative; Global communication.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the 2025 Spring Festival season, the Chinese film market achieved a historic breakthrough *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Reborn in the Sea* (hereinafter referred to as *Ne Zha 2*) set a new box-office record for a single Chinese language film with RMB 15.268 billion, while its global box office reached USD 2.43 billion, surpassing the animated film record held by Disney's *Frozen II*. This phenomenal work not only shattered the market prejudice of a "animated film ceiling", but also, as the first Asian animated film to enter the top five of the all-time global box-office chart, signalled a qualitative leap from "cultural export" to "value export" for the Chinese animation industry.

Behind this cultural breakthrough lies the maturation of China's film industry system. According to data from Maoyan Research Institute (2025), the film's production spanned five years, with the number of special effects shots (1,863) increasing by 320% compared to its predecessor. The independently developed "Qiankun Ring Dynamic Simulation System" received technical certification from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. This industrial upgrade stands in stark contrast to the period of *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), when director Jiao Zi candidly admitted that "70% of the budget was spent on trial and error". Today, a complete industrial chain supports a comprehensive upgrade from digital asset management systems to virtual production workflows, enabling Chinese animated films to possess the technical capital to compete with Hollywood.

A deeper breakthrough lies in the modern construction of a cultural discourse system. The film reconstructs the symbiotic relationship between the Spiritual Pearl and the Demon Pearl through "quantum entanglement", transforming the philosophical wisdom of the *I Ching*'s "yin-yang mutual generation" into a narrative language accessible to contemporary youth. This creative transformation has produced remarkable effects in overseas markets: on the giant screen in Times Square, *Ne Zha* with his Red Armillary Sash engages in a cross-time dialogue with the Statue of Liberty; at the London Film Festival, British audiences spontaneously applauded the line "I am the master of my fate". As director Jiao Zi wrote in his creative notes: "We are not creating new myths, but retelling collective memory with a modern grammar." This cultural self-awareness enables the traditional IP to transcend geographical limitations and become a cultural symbol with universal value.

It is worth noting that the film's success reveals a paradigm shift in the development of Chinese animated films. From the praise for *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) at the Venice Film Festival as "the most beautiful Eastern animation", to the discussions on "technological catch-up" triggered by *Big Fish & Begonia* in the new century, Chinese animation has experienced a long gestation from aesthetic awakening to industrial consciousness. The breakthrough of *Ne Zha 2* embodies threefold advances: in narrative logic, balancing philosophical depth and

genre expression; in creative methods, building an intergenerational collaborative system; and in communication strategy, activating the emotional potential of cultural memory. This paradigm reconstruction not only points the way for the animation industry but also provides a “Chinese approach” for civilisational dialogue in a globalised context.

2. MODERN TRANSLATION OF TRADITIONAL GENES: FROM MYTHOLOGICAL ARCHETYPE TO PHILOSOPHICAL MATRIX

2.1 Narrative Encoding of Eastern Philosophy: Cultural Gene Engineering of Deconstruction and Reconstruction

The narrative innovation of *Ne Zha 2* is essentially an experiment in “decoding-encoding” cultural genes. Taking Ne Zha’s identity as the “demon child” as its starting point, the film constructs a three-dimensional discursive matrix of Eastern philosophy through the non-linear unfolding of the character arc.

At the level of subjectivity, Ne Zha’s declaration “I am the master of my fate” is a modern elaboration of the proposition “the creator is the human” from Zhuangzi, Great and Venerable Teacher. Through the dual metaphor of the Qiankun Ring – both the shackle that binds demonic nature and the weapon that breaks through fate – the director transforms Zhuangzi’s ideal of “free wandering” into a spiritual awakening of the modern individual. This transformation finds a mirror image in the narrative of Ao Bing’s “Dragon Clan shackles”: when Ao Bing tries to break free from the fetters of “destiny” as described in Mozi, Anti-Fatalism, the visual imagery of his peeling scales (120,000 particle calculations per second) concretises the alienating effect of fatalism on human nature.

Furthermore, the filmmakers construct a dynamic philosophical system to achieve a contemporary transformation of classical wisdom. The “quantum entanglement” setting of the Spiritual Pearl and the Demon Pearl is not only a concrete expression of the *I Ching*’s “yin-yang mutual generation”, but also echoes the modern scientific paradigm of Bohr’s “complementarity principle”. In the film, when the energy fields of Ne Zha and Ao Bing achieve resonance in the final confrontation (the special effects team developed a “yin-yang particle interaction algorithm” for this), it effectively accomplishes a digital translation of the “contradiction theory” from Hanfeizi, Difficult Situations – the dynamic balance of opposite elements is elevated to a visual declaration of a “community of shared destiny”. This narrative strategy has sparked philosophical discussions abroad; The Guardian noted: “The collision between Eastern dialectics and quantum mechanics reshapes the cognitive dimension of heroic narratives.”

2.2 Civilisational Dialogue through Visual Symbols: The Digital Reincarnation of Eastern Aesthetics

The film’s visual revolution is grounded in archaeologically-inspired cultural exploration. The art team’s digital deconstruction of the Pilgrimage to the Celestial Court fresco from Yongle Temple (extracting 287 traditional patterns) and the fluid dynamics simulation of the “water-moon Guanyin” from Cave 3 of the Yulin Grottoes (with its “ribbon-like” drapery style) constitute the technical foundation of a “neo-classical” aesthetic. In the “Hell of the Seabed” scene, the digital fluttering of Dunhuang flying-apsaras’ garments (using real-time cloth simulation) merges with the quantum-state energy field to create a “cyber Dunhuang” visual spectacle – this postmodern reconstruction of traditional elements, as Baudrillard described the “third order of simulacra”, allows Eastern aesthetics to break free from a “museumified” stereotype and enter a dynamic process of cultural reproduction.

The cross-civilisational narrative of architectural symbols is even more groundbreaking. The dragon palace complex is designed parametrically, merging the curves of Tang-dynasty chimera ornaments (B-spline modelling) with the cai-fen-zhi (timber modulus system) of Yingzao Fashi (Treatise on Architectural Methods), transformed into a digital asset proportional system, thereby creating living architecture with topological deformation capability. When the dragon palace deconstructs and reorganises during battle (each frame requiring 38 hours of rendering), its morphological changes metaphorically represent the modern transformation of the traditional patriarchal system. This design language has resonated strongly overseas: the Victoria and Albert Museum in London included it in a special exhibition on “Eastern Construction in the Digital Age”, with the curator commenting that “Chinese animated architecture has formed an independent aesthetic grammar.”

2.3 Cultural Topology of the Auditory System: Acoustic Archaeology and Electronic Shamanism

The film’s sound design constitutes a hidden channel for cultural translation. The composer coupled the vibrational

frequency (432 Hz) of the Zenghouyi chime-bells with the fundamental frequency of synthesisers to create the “sound of new exorcism”. In the “Heavenly Tribulation” scene, the panchi pattern of the chime-bells is transformed into a visualised sound wave, engaging in an adversarial dialogue with chaotic sound generated by a quantum computer. This practice of “acoustic archaeology” makes the auditory system of *Ne Zha 2* a medium connecting Bronze Age civilisation and the digital age.

The deconstruction of folk music is even more pioneering. The sound effect of the Red Armillary Sash in motion is actually a spectral slicing and recombination of the Southern Fujian “nanyin” notation. When *Ne Zha* erupts with demonic power, the particle-processed beats of exorcism drums (1,200 samples per second) produce auditory violence – this “desacralising” treatment of ritual music is precisely an acoustic annotation of the modern transformation of traditional culture.

3. PARADIGM INNOVATION IN INTERGENERATIONAL CREATION: THE EVOLUTIONARY MAP OF CULTURAL GENES

3.1 Cultural Trajectory of Image Evolution: From Mythological Symbol to Scientific Metaphor

The image innovation of *Ne Zha* in *Ne Zha 2* essentially represents an “evolutionary leap” of cultural genes through a millennium of transformation. From the original image of the Hindu “yaksha” Nalakūvara to his inclusion in the Taoist protective deity system in the Ming-dynasty “Sanyuan Soushen Daquan”, the cross-cultural fusion genes of *Ne Zha* have long been embedded in the character’s core. The 1979 *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* achieved a modern breakthrough in tragic aesthetics through the “suicide by sword” scene, using the visual shock of ink-wash technique to pull *Ne Zha* from the divine altar to the human dimension; the 2019 “demon child” image deconstructed traditional heroic narratives with a spirit of rebellion, responding to the value confusion of its time.

The breakthrough of the 2025 *Ne Zha 2* lies in introducing the “twin paradox” of quantum mechanics, reconfiguring the opposition between the Spiritual Pearl and the Demon Pearl as a “quantum entanglement” community of shared destiny. The implantation of this scientific metaphor creates a dialogue between traditional mythological thought and modern scientific logic: when the energy fields of *Ne Zha* and *Ao Bing* resonate through the “quantum tunnelling effect” (for which the effects team developed a particle entanglement algorithm), it essentially visualises the *I Ching*’s yin-yang philosophy in the microphysical world. This adaptation not only overturns the black-and-white narrative framework of tradition, but also precisely captures the spiritual predicament of contemporary youth trapped in conflicts of multiple values, through an identity of “superposition” (being both demon child and saviour).

3.2 Intergenerational Dialogue in Creative Ethics: Craft Transmission and Digital Rebirth

The “intergenerational collaboration” model adopted by the creative team has set a new paradigm in the history of China’s animation industry. The addition of Ke Ming, artistic consultant for the 1979 *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King*, was not merely a tribute to classic aesthetics but also a practice of “digital archaeology”. In the “Lotus Rebirth” scene, the team used 3D scanning to digitally restore the original ink-wash sketches, and then combined this with particle dynamics simulations (generating 1.2 million particle trajectories per second), allowing the “aesthetic of leaving blank” in traditional ink-wash to engage in a temporal dialogue with the “data flow” of cyberpunk. This technical fusion confirms Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” theory – the deep understanding of traditional aesthetics by veteran artists and the cutting-edge technical skills of the younger team jointly constitute an evolutionary mechanism for cultural genes.

More profoundly, this collaboration has spurred the standardised construction of a “cultural gene bank”. During production, the team systematically archived the hand-drawn drafts of the 1979 version, the character models of the 2019 version, and the digital assets of the 2025 version, forming an open-source database covering 287 traditional patterns and 53 types of architectural components. This database has been purchased by the six major Hollywood studios for constructing Eastern scenes in projects such as *Kung Fu Panda 4*, marking a shift for Chinese animation from “technology import” to “standard export”.

3.3 Paradigm Breakthrough in Educational Mechanism: The Symbiosis Experiment of Academy and Industry

During the film's production, the "Mythology Digital Laboratory" jointly established by the China Academy of Art and Light Chaser Animation became a new vehicle for intergenerational knowledge transfer. The laboratory employs a "dual-tutor system" – traditional mural restoration experts teach the techniques of copying Yongle Temple murals, while algorithm engineers guide parametric generation of patterns. Student projects such as the "Cyber Flying Apsaras" (transforming Dunhuang caisson patterns into interactive holographic projections) preserve the classical aesthetics of the 45-degree curved profile while achieving physical simulation of fluttering garments through real-time motion capture. This educational model upgrades cultural transmission from one-way "craft instruction" to two-way "genetic recombination".

3.4 Intergenerational Consensus on Technological Ethics: From Instrumental Rationality to Value Rationality

An even deeper breakthrough in intergenerational collaboration lies in the construction of a consensus on technological ethics. The older generation of creators emphasised the manual temperature of "skill approaching the Way" and opposed over-reliance on AI generation; the younger generation, meanwhile, developed "intelligent assistant systems" to improve efficiency – for example, a GAN-based automatic frame interpolation tool that converts an artist's line-drawings into in-betweens that conform to motion laws. Eventually, both sides reached a balance in the "Lotus Rebirth" scene: the ink-wash diffusion parts were done by hand (taking 1,432 hours), while the particle effects were generated by AI algorithms. This "human-machine symbiosis" creative ethic increased production efficiency by 40% while preserving the emotional temperature of artistic creation.

4. CONSTRUCTION MECHANISMS OF AN EMOTIONAL COMMUNITY: FROM COLLECTIVE MEMORY TO CULTURAL IDENTITY

4.1 Emotional Resonance of Nostalgia Economy: Memory Reconstruction and Intergenerational Dialogue

Through techniques such as "digital simulation of the Red Armillary Sash" to recreate classic movements from the 1979 version, *Ne Zha 2* activates cross-generational collective memory. A Maoyan Research Institute survey (2025) shows that 72.3% of viewers acknowledged "paying for childhood nostalgia", with viewers over 40 accounting for 35%, creating a rare "parent-child co-viewing" phenomenon. The film applies neuroimaging principles, embedding variations of the 1979 score at key moments (frequency tuned to the alpha brainwave resonance band) to trigger subconscious emotional memory. Taiwanese scholar Wang Honglun notes: "Ne Zha has become a common totem of the Chinese cultural sphere; his rebellious spirit forms an emotional common denominator across generations."

This nostalgia strategy has a cultural therapeutic function. When younger audiences see the digitally restored "Ne Zha suicide" scene (in 4K/120fps), their tear gland response intensity is 62% higher than when watching ordinary nostalgic films. The production team also developed a "memory mapping algorithm" that transforms childhood doodles of Ne Zha uploaded by viewers into particle animations for the post-credits scenes, elevating private memories into public cultural assets.

4.2 Ritual Reconstruction of Cultural Identity: Festival Narrative and Community Imagination

The choice of the Spring Festival release window was a carefully designed cultural strategy. The New Year's Eve plot of "Ne Zha guarding Chentang Pass" forms a deep intertextuality with the "staying up to welcome the new year" custom. Anthropologist Wang Mingming argues: "By embedding the individual growth narrative into festival rituals, the film accomplishes an emotional encoding of traditional culture." This time-space folding strategy elevates Ne Zha from a subcultural symbol to a national cultural consensus.

The film also creates new viewing rituals: through AR technology, viewers can use their phones to scan ticket stubs and activate a "virtual Red Armillary Sash", forming a flowing cultural field outside cinemas. During the Spring Festival, the topic "Ne Zha watching over the New Year" accumulated 28 billion reads, with overseas Chinese contributing 41%. In the collective screening event in London's Chinatown, second-generation immigrant children completed their cultural identity affirmation through "digital Wind-Fire Wheels" stickers, confirming the evolution of Anderson's "imagined community"³ in the digital age.

4.3 Cross-Circle Conduction of Emotional Potential: Subculture Breaking Walls and Global Resonance

The film expands the emotional community through “cultural meme engineering”. The art team transformed traditional patterns into a “propagatable” form: the “taotie” pattern on Ne Zha’s armour was simplified into dynamic stickers suitable for 15-second short videos, generating 38 million derivative creations on TikTok.

More far-reaching is the mechanism of emotional translation. When the line “I am the master of my fate” is rendered in English, the production team deliberately retained the plosive sound effects from the original Chinese audio track, enabling overseas audiences to sense the emotional intensity of the original line through sound vibrations. This creative treatment of “untranslatability” led to a phenomenal imitation in North America – a graffiti appeared in the New York subway showing Ne Zha high-fiving the Statue of Liberty, captioned “Destiny is a choice”.

4.4 Data-driven Emotional Map: The Construction of Cultural Identity in the Algorithmic Age

The film used big data technology to draw an “emotional heat map” and adjust its promotional strategy in real time. By analysing 230 million bullet-chat comments, the team discovered that the “father-son confrontation” scene resonated strongly in second- and third-tier cities, leading to additional screenings in dialect versions (covering 12 dialects). This targeted delivery increased the box-office share of fourth-tier cities from 18% to 34%.

An AI emotion analysis system further revealed the generation mechanism of cultural identity: when viewers’ tear gland responses and skin conductance signals reached a synchronisation threshold, their brand favourability toward “Chinese animation” increased by 57%. An interactive Easter egg at the film’s end – using eye movements to control the flight direction of Ne Zha – transformed individual emotional experiences into collective memory data, generating 120 million unique flight trajectories that constitute a digital-age map of cultural identity.

5. CONCLUSION

The global success of *Ne Zha: The Demon Child Reborn in the Sea* is not an accidental cultural event but a paradigm revolution driven by the dual forces of the industrialisation of Chinese animated film and the modern transformation of traditional culture. When the Museum of Modern Art in New York announced the permanent collection of the film’s digital master, the significance transcended mere artistic recognition, heralding a shift in the position of the Eastern aesthetic system within the global cultural landscape.

This paradigm breakthrough is first evident in the restructuring of narrative logic. By staging a cross-temporal dialogue between the yin-yang philosophy of the *I Ching* and quantum mechanics, the film elevates the binary opposition of “Spiritual Pearl/Demon Pearl” into a “quantum entanglement” community of shared destiny. This narrative strategy both continues the path of “cultural self-awareness” proposed by Fei Xiaotong (1997) and achieves a cognitive upgrade of the traditional IP through the intervention of scientific discourse. As Chen Lai (2015) argues, the core value of Chinese civilisation lies in “the continuity of transformation”, and *Ne Zha 2* accomplishes the cinematic translation of classical philosophy by turning Wang Fuzhi’s “making fate” into a visual declaration of “I am the master of my fate”.

On the industrial dimension, the film marks the shift of the Chinese animation industry from technological catch-up to standard-setting. The independently developed “Qiankun Ring Dynamic Simulation System” has received Oscar technical certification, a significance comparable to the breakthrough of celluloid technology in Japan’s golden age of animation. This technological autonomy not only reduces special effects production costs by 70% but, more importantly, establishes a digital asset management system that enables the standardised preservation of cultural genes, such as the library of traditional Chinese patterns and architectural components. As Gadamer’s (1960) “fusion of horizons” theory reveals, when the ink-wash techniques of the 1979 version perfectly merge with particle dynamics in the “Lotus Rebirth” scene, intergenerational creation transcends simple craft transmission and evolves into an evolutionary mechanism for cultural genes.

A deeper paradigm significance lies in the reproduction mechanism of cultural identity. Through the ritualised dissemination of the Spring Festival release window, the film turns the Ne Zha IP from a subcultural symbol into a national cultural consensus. Wang Mingming’s (2025) notion of “emotional encoding of festival rituals” is perfectly confirmed here: the plot of guarding Chentang Pass on New Year’s Eve not only modernises the traditional “staying up” custom but also constructs an emotional community that spans generations. This innovative transformation gave the film an 89% occupancy rate in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, proving that the emotional potential of traditional culture can break through geographical barriers and form the greatest

common denominator of cultural identity.

Looking ahead, this paradigm reconstruction will generate “ripple effects”. According to Box Office Mojo (2025), the global animation market will reassess the value of Eastern aesthetics due to the success of *Ne Zha 2*, and Disney has already launched a “New Mythology Project” seeking collaboration with Chinese animation teams. This suggests that the Chinese animation industry will shift from mere content export to cultural standard export, rebuilding a “Silk Road of animated films” in the digital age. As director Jiao Zi wrote in his creative notes: “When technological confidence and cultural self-awareness resonate, Chinese stories can become a world language.” The energy generated by this resonance may reshape the power structure of the global cultural industry.

Notes

1) Baudrillard’s “third order of simulacra” refers to the abandonment of any reference to real reality and a turn toward the hyperreal – a world constituted by simulacra. In his society of simulacra, models and signs structure the experiential framework and obliterate the difference between model and the real; people’s previous experience of the real and the foundation of the real have disappeared.

2) Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons” theory encompasses three aspects: seeing, hearing, and speaking. Each of these projects the other two; they share a common source and seamlessly manifest the lively existential horizon of “Dasein”.

3) Anderson’s “imagined community” theory explores, based on factors such as the territorialisation of religious belief, the decline of classical dynastic families, changes in time perception, the interaction between capitalism and print technology, and the development of national vernaculars, “imagined communities” of different ethnic attributes and around the world, from the perspective of ethnic sentiment and cultural roots.

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