

# FROM HAVOC IN HEAVEN TO NEZHA: CHINESE ANIMATION'S JOURNEY IN CULTURAL IDENTITY

SI, J. Z.<sup>1</sup> – PADIL, M. N.<sup>1\*</sup> – ZHANG, Y.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Fine Art, College of Creative Arts, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Perak Branch, Perak, Malaysia.*

*\*Corresponding author  
e-mail: nagib746[at]uitm.edu.my*

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**Abstract.** This study aims to explore the aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation in cultural identity, focusing on two representative works, *Havoc in Heaven* and *Nezha*, and analyzing how Chinese animation promotes the construction of cultural identity and the dissemination of Chinese culture through the evolution of aesthetic style and the excavation of cultural connotation. The study adopts literature analysis, case study and comparative analysis, combining the visual art, narrative structure, character design and cultural elements of the two films to analyze their contributions in aesthetic innovation and cultural identity. The results show that *Havoc in Heaven* has laid the foundation for the cultural identity of Chinese animation through the integration of traditional ink painting style and opera elements, and successfully conveyed the core values of Chinese traditional culture. *Nezha*, while inheriting tradition, innovates, combines modern social values, recreates traditional myths, and shows the aesthetic breakthrough and deepening of cultural identity of Chinese animation in the new era. The research concludes that, driven by the dual promotion of aesthetic evolution and cultural identity, Chinese animation has not only improved the cultural literacy of domestic and foreign audiences, but also enhanced the global influence of Chinese culture. In the future, with the advancement of technological innovation and cultural integration, Chinese animation will occupy a more important position in global cultural exchanges.

**Keywords:** *Chinese animation, cultural identity, aesthetic evolution, Havoc in Heaven, Nezha*

## Introduction

Since its inception in the 1930s, Chinese animation has gone through several generations of exploration and innovation. Chinese animation has gradually stood out from imitating and introducing foreign cultures, and has gradually formed a unique artistic style and cultural expression. "*Havoc in Heaven*" in 1961 as well as "*Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World*" in 2019 are two milestone works in the history of Chinese animation. They not only made bold innovations in artistic expression, but also played an important role in the construction of cultural identity (Hu and Dong, 2014). The aesthetic evolution of the two works reflects the exploration and progress of the Chinese animation industry in cultural identity. "*Havoc in Heaven*" has become a classic expression of Chinese traditional culture in animation with its unique ink painting style, opera elements and the use of traditional cultural symbols. It combines ancient Chinese mythology with modern animation technology, presenting a unique aesthetic style and showing a profound national cultural heritage. With the continuous development of society and the changes in the audience's aesthetic concepts, the expression of traditional culture also needs to adapt to the needs of modernization. "*Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World*" released in 2019 is a representative of this trend. Through innovative character design and brand-new plot construction, the film has given a modern interpretation to the traditional myth, giving it a more social and universal

meaning. Especially in character creation, the image of Nezha has been endowed with more modern social values, such as "rebellion" and "self-salvation" (Yue, 2022), which makes the work not only carry the connotation of traditional Chinese culture, but also resonate with the emotions and thinking of contemporary young people. In the context of the new era, how to inherit and carry forward traditional culture, and how to strengthen cultural confidence and cultural identity in the context of globalization have become urgent issues that the Chinese animation industry needs to solve (Peng, 2023). This study aims to explore the aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation in cultural identity through a comparative analysis of the two works "Havoc in Heaven" and "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World", and how this evolution promotes the dissemination and recognition of Chinese culture on a global scale.

### ***Literature review***

One significant aspect of "Havoc in Heaven" is its use of Peking Opera masks, which are integral to the visual storytelling in the film (Tseng and Lin, 2013) (*Figure 1*). The exploration of traditional symbols in animation is also evident in the study by Whyke and Lopez-Mugica, which examines the archetypal images in Chinese animated films (Whyke and Mugica, 2022). Scholars agree that the use of these symbols enhances the national attributes of the film and strengthens the audience's identification with Chinese culture. The transformation of Nezha's image from traditional literature to modern animation also reflects broader societal changes in China. The film's narrative and aesthetic choices illustrate a blend of traditional elements with contemporary themes, creating a hybrid cultural product that resonates with both domestic and international audiences (Whyke and Mugica, 2022). The study contrasts mainstream and independent portrayals of mythology, revealing how "Ne Zha" resonates with both domestic and international viewers by invoking themes of nostalgia and youth, which are pivotal in the film's reception (Li et al., 2024). "Havoc in Heaven" uses traditional two-dimensional hand-painted technology, and its picture style and artistic language are full of the charm of traditional Chinese painting. The film's unique artistic style and cultural connotations have made it a quintessential example of national animation (Xinyi et al., 2024). In addition, the aesthetic choices made in "Havoc in Heaven," particularly the use of long shots and the overall visual style, are discussed in the context of national identity and cultural representation.



**Figure 1.** The movie poster of *Havoc in Heaven* in 1961.

"Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World" uses advanced 3D animation technology to create a more three-dimensional and delicate visual experience through complex light and shadow effects, real motion capture and smooth lens language. Through technological innovation, Chinese animation has built a cultural expression system that is both national and modern on a global scale. The film's visual aesthetics are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese art forms, which is crucial for its reception at international film festivals (*Figure 2*). According to Zhou, the integration of traditional cultural elements in animation can significantly enhance the audience's understanding and appreciation of the cultural narratives being presented (Pedersen and Mazza, 2011). Wang et al discuss how the film has contributed to a growing interest in Chinese animation on the global stage, emphasizing its role in shaping cultural identity and representation (Wei et al., 2023). "Havoc in Heaven" laid the cultural foundation of Chinese animation, while "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World" has injected new meaning into traditional culture in the context of globalization. Although there has been extensive research on "Havoc in Heaven" and "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World", there is still room for improvement in terms of research perspective. Most of the existing literature stays on the interpretation of a single dimension, lacking a dynamic development perspective to reveal the inheritance and innovation relationship between the two films in different historical contexts, and how they jointly promote the evolution of Chinese animation aesthetics and cultural expression. This study aims to

fill the research gap in this field by systematically comparing "Havoc in Heaven" and "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World", two landmark works, especially in-depth combing of their technological innovation, aesthetic evolution and cultural identity. These research results can show the unique cultural charm of Chinese animation in the context of the new era, thereby better promoting the inheritance and global dissemination of Chinese traditional culture.



*Figure 2. The movie poster of Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child in 2019.*

## Results and Discussion

Both "Havoc in Heaven" and "Nezha" are rooted in traditional Chinese art forms, which serve as a vital conduit for cultural expression (Wei et al., 2023). Both works have broken through the traditional image, reshaped the classic characters, made them closer to the emotional needs of contemporary audiences, and conveyed more contemporary cultural connotations. The integration of aesthetics and cultural identity reflects the dual value of Chinese animation in inheritance and innovation. It has not only aroused widespread resonance in China, but also demonstrated the unique cultural charm of Chinese animation on the international stage, further enhancing the global audience's sense of identity with Chinese culture.

### *"havoc in heaven": Aesthetic model and cultural identity of Chinese animation*

The Chinese animated film "Havoc in Heaven" is hailed as the pinnacle of the Chinese animation school, not only because of its outstanding artistic expression, but also because it profoundly conveys the spiritual core of Chinese national culture. This

animation has become a monument in the history of Chinese animation with its exquisite aesthetic style, innovative technical methods and strong national characteristics. Inheritance and innovation of traditional painting style. The art style of "Havoc in Heaven" emphasizes the importance of ink art in Chinese animation, its unique aesthetic qualities provide a rich source of inspiration for animated works (Khamwijit et al., 2024). The film uses a lot of soft and smooth lines, showing the unique "beauty of lines" in traditional Chinese art. The character modeling incorporates the expression form of Chinese opera art. The image of Sun Wukong is inspired by the "Monkey King" in Peking Opera, and the design of Taishang Laojun, Nezha, etc., incorporates the traditional elements of Taoist gods; the character movements incorporate the charm of Peking Opera martial arts; in scene drawing, the film uses multi-layer background technology to enhance the depth of the picture. The mountains and sea of clouds in the background are smudged with light ink, showing the unique "virtual and real combination" effect of Chinese painting, and a lot of traditional Chinese patterns such as landscapes and cloud patterns are used, showing the artistic technique of "leaving blank space" in traditional Chinese painting; the soundtrack of the film uses a lot of traditional Chinese musical instruments, such as pipa, flute and gongs and drums, highlighting the strong national style. Through the deep integration of traditional painting styles, folk art forms and national symbols, Chinese culture is successfully presented to the audience in a visual way.

In-depth excavation of cultural connotations. "Havoc in Heaven" is adapted from a classic chapter in "Journey to the West". The film unfolds through the personal growth of Sun Wukong and adopts a serial plot arrangement. From his disturbance at the Peach Festival, stealing the elixir, to the final confrontation with the Heavenly Palace, the entire narrative is progressive and logically clear. Each plot is closely related to the theme, which not only shows Sun Wukong's wisdom and courage, but also emphasizes his unremitting pursuit of freedom and justice. The narrative structure of the film is full of tension, shaping Sun Wukong into a rebellious and righteous national hero. The film not only retains the essence of the original work, but also combines the expression of modern animation to further strengthen the glorious image of Sun Wukong as a national hero and enhance the visibility and appeal of the story. Construction and dissemination of cultural identity. The global recognition of "Havoc in Heaven" has further solidified its status as a cornerstone of Chinese animation. the film's impact on cultural identity is profound, as it has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of Chinese animation on the international stage (Wei et al., 2023). The image of Sun Wukong in the film is particularly vivid. His rebellious spirit and will to pursue freedom resonate with the long-standing cultural psychology of the Chinese people. This resonance not only strengthens the audience's understanding of traditional culture, but also proves the unique value of Chinese culture in the global context and inspires people's recognition and love for the spirit of the Chinese nation.

### ***Nezha: The devil boy comes into the world: Aesthetic innovation and cultural identity of Chinese animation in the new era***

The Chinese animated film *Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World*, with its unique aesthetic style and profound cultural connotation, has set off a visual and spiritual feast in the field of Chinese animation in the new era. The film effectively integrates traditional cultural symbols with modern design elements, enhancing audience identification with the cultural themes presented (Yanan and Rahman, 2024)

not only a model of cultural innovation, but also a classic work that guides the audience to think and grow. Aesthetic style and visual expression. Nezha: "Nezha" effectively integrates traditional Chinese narratives with contemporary animation techniques, allowing for a fresh interpretation that appeals to both domestic and international audiences (Xinyi et al., 2024), which not only meets the audience's expectations for visual impact, but also strengthens their sense of identity with traditional culture. In terms of character design, the traditional character image is redefined. Nezha highlights his rebellious personality with his messy bun and exaggerated facial expressions, creating an individual who bravely fights against fate and has a complex inner heart, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional image. In terms of color matching, the overall tone of the film is bright and full, and the picture has a strong sense of hierarchy, creating a strong visual impact. Nezha's red and Ao Bing's blue not only form a sharp contrast, but also symbolize character and destiny, and also enhance the sense of hierarchy of the picture. In terms of dynamic design, the film uses a large number of slow motion and dynamic shots in the battle scenes to form a stronger visual impact.

In-depth excavation of cultural connotations. "Nezha: exemplifies the modern reinterpretation of mythological themes, focusing on the protagonist's struggle against predetermined fate and societal expectations (Li et al., 2024) reshapes Nezha's character image, and integrates the modern spirit of "fate is up to me, not the sky" into traditional mythological stories, conveying a positive attitude of not succumbing to fate and not being defined by others, reflecting the desire of young people in the new era for freedom and independence. The film adopts a multi-line narrative method, unfolding the growth lines of Nezha and Ao Bing in parallel, while interspersing multiple themes such as family, friendship and social prejudice. The film emphasizes the power of love and understanding. Through the discussion of fate and struggle, it conveys the core value of individual pursuit of freedom and self-realization in modern society, showing the profound discussion and sublimation of cultural connotations in Chinese animation in the new era. Strengthening and expanding cultural identity. The film "Nezha" serves as a contemporary representation of traditional Chinese values and mythology, which plays a crucial role in reinforcing cultural identity. the film successfully integrates traditional storytelling with modern cinematic techniques, thereby enhancing cultural self-confidence (Lu, 2022). The film's narrative structure and character creation not only show the core story of Chinese mythology, but also incorporate emotional elements that the audience can understand, allowing overseas audiences to feel the tenacity, courage and wisdom of traditional Chinese culture, and also allowing audiences around the world to have a deeper interest in Chinese culture and enhance their sense of identity with Chinese culture.

### ***From "havoc in heaven" to "nezha: the devil boy comes into the world": The dimension of aesthetic evolution***

From "Havoc in Heaven" to "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World", these two works not only represent the aesthetic style of Chinese animation in different historical periods, but also reflect the inheritance and innovation of Chinese animation in aesthetic style, showing the gradual evolution of its visual language and cultural connotation. This evolution is not only reflected in the transformation from linear narrative to multi-line narrative, to the transformation from traditional values to modern ideas, and then to the combination of technological progress and aesthetic evolution, which guides the future development of Chinese animation and promotes the further

dissemination of Chinese culture on the world stage. The evolution of visual aesthetics. The art style of "Havoc in Heaven" is directly derived from traditional Chinese art. It adopts the traditional hand-painted ink style. The lines of the picture are strong and delicate, and the colors are bright and expressive. It seems to be a continuation of traditional paintings, with distinct oriental characteristics. "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World" represents the innovative style of modern Chinese animation. It incorporates a lot of modern elements in the art style, and presents more complex visual effects in natural elements such as water, fire, and clouds. From "Havoc in Heaven" to "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World", from the initial 2D hand-painted ink animation to today's 3D digital animation, the advancement of animation technology has greatly expanded the expressiveness and cultural connotation of Chinese animation. Through digital animation technology, the film can present complex scenes and actions more realistically, and at the same time, it can better interpret the deep emotions and thoughts in Chinese traditional culture.

Changes in narrative structure. "Havoc in Heaven" adopts a traditional linear narrative structure. The narrative method of the film is relatively simple and the structure is clear. The narrative focuses on showing the rebellious spirit of the hero Sun Wukong, and promotes the development of the story through a single plot. The theme setting makes the emotional expression of the film relatively limited. Although it outlines a magnificent mythological world, it appears to be relatively flat at the narrative level, mainly focusing on one core issue. "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World" adopts a more complex multi-line narrative structure. The story in the film progresses layer by layer. It not only revolves around the character of Nezha, but also constructs a more three-dimensional narrative framework through the interaction of multiple characters. This diversified theme not only makes the film more profound, but also allows the audience to resonate emotionally from multiple angles, forming a more complex and diverse emotional experience. Evolution of cultural connotation. The creation of "Havoc in Heaven" was deeply influenced by Chinese traditional culture, especially the thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism. With the rebellious behavior of Sun Wukong as the main line, it showed the challenge to the authority of the heaven and the pursuit of freedom. The image of Sun Wukong is full of heroism and is also a symbol of rebellion against feudal authority. The film borrowed traditional myths and stories to deeply reflect the pursuit of democracy, freedom and justice in the society at that time. "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World" has a more profound modern interpretation of cultural connotation. Starting from the theme of "fate" and "self", the film conveys the exploration of individual liberation and self-identity. Through the analysis of multiple factors such as family, friendship, and social expectations, the film shows the growth process of individuals and the establishment of self-identity. This more complex and modern cultural connotation reflects the complex relationship between individuals and collectives in modern society.

### ***The cultural identity mechanism behind the evolution of chinese animation aesthetics***

From "Havoc in Heaven" released in 1959 to "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes to the World" released in 2019, these two works undoubtedly represent two important stages of Chinese animation aesthetics. They not only witness the leap of Chinese animation technology, but also profoundly reflect the changes in social and cultural context and the transformation of cultural identity. The international response to Nezha reflects its success in promoting Chinese culture around the world, the film's popularity marks a



milestone in the development of China's cultural industry, demonstrating the potential of animated films as cultural ambassadors (Chai, 2021). Inheritance and innovation of traditional culture. "Havoc in Heaven", as the founding work of Chinese animation, is the transmission of collective cultural memory. The film is faithful to the ancient Chinese mythology and presents a large number of cultural symbols with national characteristics, such as the Heavenly Palace, auspicious clouds, golden hoop, cranes, etc. Through the vivid presentation of these traditional symbols, the film successfully conveys the collective values and heroic ideals in Chinese traditional culture, and at the same time arouses the audience's identification and pride in national culture. Through the shaping of the classic image of Sun Wukong, the film conveys the yearning for freedom, justice and resistance to oppression. Sun Wukong is not only a heroic image in mythology, but also represents the Chinese people's spirit of struggle and national awakening in history. "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World" has carried out a bold modernization transformation on the basis of inheriting traditional cultural symbols. The reshaping of Nezha's image makes it more in line with the aesthetic and emotional needs of modern audiences. The relationship between Nezha and his parents and society in the film is no longer a simple binary opposition between good and evil, but full of emotional fluctuations and inner struggles. His growth process reflects the themes of individual identity, family pressure and self-struggle in modern society.

Changes in social and cultural context. In the late 1950s when "Havoc in Heaven" was born, China was in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The country had experienced the trauma of war, and the society was undergoing a series of political and cultural changes. More attention was focused on how to express the profoundness of Chinese traditional culture through art forms such as film. The focus of cultural output was to provide cultural identity for the Chinese people and strengthen national cultural confidence. "Nezha: The Devil Boy Comes into the World" In the 21st century's Internet and information wave, China's rapid economic development, the expression of cultural identity has changed, and Chinese animation has gradually moved towards the international market, hoping to form a force for cultural output on a global scale. Although its storyline is still centered on Chinese traditional culture, its expression and emotional connotation have become more in line with the aesthetic needs of global audiences. These two works undoubtedly represent two important stages in Chinese animation aesthetics. They not only witness the leap forward in Chinese animation technology, but also reflect the transformation and deepening of cultural identity in different social and cultural contexts. The fusion of modern technology and Chinese animation aesthetics. The aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation is a continuous breakthrough in technology and a process of reshaping the cultural identity mechanism. As a classic of Chinese animation, "Havoc in Heaven" has strong national characteristics, but the technology is still in the initial development stage, mainly relying on manual drawing and handcrafts. With the advancement of science and technology, the rise of digital animation technology has brought revolutionary changes to the visual effects of Chinese animation. In "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes to the World", Through CG technology, not only better showcase the depth and uniqueness of traditional culture but also achieve new aesthetic heights in audiovisual language (Zhou et al., 2024). The color matching, character modeling, scene design, etc. in the film have been comprehensively upgraded through modern scientific and technological means, allowing the audience to experience the profound heritage of traditional culture in a new visual language, enhancing the



symbolism and visual impact of culture. The integration of technology and culture has not only promoted the success of Chinese animation in the international market, but also further deepened the connotation of cultural identity, forming a unique cultural expression that has both national characteristics and modern aesthetics.

### ***The influence and significance of the aesthetic evolution of chinese animation in cultural identity***

The aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation is not only a leap in technology, but also a balance between cultural expression and market demand. Through the aesthetic transformation from traditional to modern, especially the innovation at the level of cultural identity, the cultural identity and understanding of Chinese animation are promoted worldwide. The driving role of the development of China's animation industry. The breakthroughs in the aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation in content creation, visual presentation, etc. have directly improved the overall quality of animation works, enabling Chinese animation to occupy a place in the increasingly competitive market. Especially with the introduction of 3D technology and the development of modern animation production technology, animation works have not only become more refined in visual effects, but also better express complex emotions and cultural connotations. Aesthetic evolution has not only promoted the updating of production technology, but also improved the competitiveness of animation works in domestic and foreign markets, allowing the Chinese animation industry to gradually go global. It not only improves the quality and market competitiveness of animation works, but also provides a strong driving force for the prosperity and development of China's animation industry. With the advancement of technology and the continuous innovation of cultural identity, Chinese animation has shown increasingly strong competitiveness and influence in global cultural communication.

Positive significance for cultural inheritance and communication. As a cultural carrier, Chinese animation carries profound national cultural traditions and spiritual values. From "Havoc in Heaven" to "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World", Chinese animation has skillfully, importance of incorporating Chinese elements in animated films to promote traditional culture and values (Wei et al., 2023). integrated China's traditional cultural elements with modern animation language with the help of modern technology and artistic means. It is not only a reproduction of traditional culture, but more importantly, it inspires the audience's cultural identity through aesthetic innovation. Chinese animation works have shown the world China's unique cultural charm through the dissemination of visual arts, emotional narratives, and national characteristics. It has also promoted the understanding and acceptance of Chinese culture on a global scale and promoted the exchange and collision of cultures around the world. As an important form of cultural communication, Chinese animation will continue to play an important role on the international stage and make greater contributions to enhancing cultural confidence and promoting global cultural diversity. The value of improving the audience's cultural literacy. The animated works "Journey to the West: Conquering the Demon Child" and "Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World" broke the boundaries between tradition and modernity through innovative artistic expression, vivid narrative and unique artistic style. At the same time, they also broadened their cultural horizons, enhanced the cultural literacy of the audience, especially the younger generation, promoted their understanding and identification of Chinese traditional culture, helped the audience improve their appreciation of artistic

forms and establish healthier values, gradually improved their cross-cultural understanding ability, learned to appreciate and respect the diversity of different cultures, and thus improved their cultural literacy.

## Conclusion

The aesthetic evolution of Chinese animation reflects both the advancement of artistic expression and the progressive deepening of cultural identity in a globalized era. Through the analysis of representative works such as *Havoc in Heaven* and *Nezha: The Devil Child Comes into the World*, it becomes evident that Chinese animation has transitioned from traditional visual styles and symbolic narratives to more technologically sophisticated and internationally resonant forms. These changes underscore a broader shift towards diversity, innovation, and inclusivity in animation aesthetics. Looking to the future, the development of Chinese animation should focus on three interrelated dimensions. First, aesthetic innovation must balance cultural heritage with modern sensibilities. By integrating the essence of Chinese traditional culture with cutting-edge global animation technologies, Chinese animation can cultivate unique visual styles that highlight national identity while appealing to a global audience. Second, cultural identity should be further deepened by exploring Chinese philosophical thought and utilizing iconic cultural symbols to create works that express universal human values through a Chinese lens. Such narratives can enhance international understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture. Lastly, strategic industrial development will be critical in shaping Chinese animation's global trajectory. Advancing technological capacity, expanding the industrial chain, and fostering collaboration with academic and international institutions are essential steps. Training interdisciplinary talents who are skilled in both art and technology, and attracting global creative teams to participate in production and innovation, will help China create animation with strong international competitiveness. Through cross-border cooperation and cultural exchange, Chinese animation will secure a more prominent role in global media and contribute significantly to the shaping of a distinctive, globally recognized cultural identity.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that no conflict of interest is involved with any parties in this research.

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