



Visual significations of *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

*Zhen Fang

Taylor's University, Malaysia

Qingdao Film Academy, China

fangzhen@sd.taylors.edu.my

Noraien Mansor

Taylor's University, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Visual signs can be differentiated into denotative and connotative messages, where denotative messages form the perceptual foundation of an image, and connotative messages engage with a deeper, culturally cognisant layer, imbued with subjective interpretations and aesthetic significations. This study embarks on a qualitative textual analysis with the main aim to elucidate the connotation and denotation of visual significations in two pivotal Chinese animated films, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. Guided by Roland Barthes' Semiotic theory and Chen's study, the research delves into the connotative and denotative meanings embodied in the films' visual elements. The focus is primarily on facial design, physical appearance, clothing, and props, providing a comparative analysis of how these elements function within each film's narrative framework. The key findings reveal that the visual significations in both films are not merely aesthetic choices but serve as substantial cultural and narrative tools. The characters' faces, physical appearances, clothing, and props are intricately tied to themes like Chinese opera masks, subversive reconstructions, natural elements, and intangible cultural heritage. These visual cues play a crucial role in reinforcing cultural heritage, spurring innovation, invoking nature reverence, and bolstering national sentiment within film storytelling. Contrasting with previous research that predominantly focused on characters, this study expands the analytical scope to include props, recognising their significance as visual signs in animation. By expanding the analysis to include props alongside characters and visual elements into the analysis, this research offers a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Chinese mythological animations. It enriches the academic discourse on animation studies, demonstrating how visual elements can profoundly influence narrative interpretation and cultural representation. The research affirms the cultural and narrative potency of visual signification in animation and underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation within the realm of Chinese animated films.

Keywords: **Visual signification, textual analysis, Chinese animation, Monkey King, Nezha**

INTRODUCTION

In the annals of contemporary Chinese animation, the epoch spanning 2012 to 2019 stands out as a period of unprecedented development and artistic efflorescence, a phase aptly characterised by scholars as the all-round development era (Chen & Kong, 2019). This era is distinguished by the emergence of several animated films that achieved remarkable commercial success and engendered significant scholarly discourse. Paramount among these are *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015), directed by Tian Xiaopeng, and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), directed by Yu Yang. Both films, drawing upon the rich tapestry of Ming dynasty mythological narratives — specifically, *The Journey to the West and Creation of the Gods* — have been instrumental in redefining the contours of Chinese animation (Chen, 2022).

Monkey King: Hero is Back, an adaptation of the venerable *The Journey to the West*, garnered a worldwide gross collection exceeding \$726 million and achieved the distinction of being the highest-grossing film among Monkey King-themed animations and the third highest in the annals of Chinese animated cinema (Maoyan, 2023). The film's narrative arc, tracing the redemptive journey of the disillusioned Monkey King, inspired by the youthful optimism of Liuer, who surmounts his existential ennui to vanquish demonic forces, has resonated profoundly with global audiences.

Similarly, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, loosely anchored in the narrative universe of *Creation of the Gods*, attained a global box office collection of over \$153 million. It topped the charts of Chinese animated films and set a new benchmark in thematic and narrative sophistication, as acknowledged by the critical acclaim it received (Hao & Dong, 2021; Maoyan, 2023). The film's central narrative, focusing on Nezha, a child endowed with extraordinary powers and perceived as a demon, who ultimately emerges as a defender against malevolent forces, has been lauded for its depth and cultural resonance.

Chinese audiences and the animation industry were in dire need of good stories (Fang & Noraien, 2023). With these two successful animated films as leaders, the creation of mythological animated films began to flourish. The present study seeks to interrogate the visual significations in these two cinematic oeuvres, probing how these visual elements embellish the narrative as well as encapsulate and reflect cultural motifs and ideologies.

While extant scholarship has predominantly focused on character representations in animation (Chen, 2020; Si & Zhao, 2021; Wang, 2021; Yuan, 2022), this investigation endeavours to redress the oversight of props, which constitute a vital aspect of the visual significance in animated narratives (Chen, 2020). Employing a theoretical lens forged from Barthes' semiotics (Barthes, 1977) and Chen's (2020) analytical framework, this study embarks on a meticulous exploration of the visual tapestry of these films.

The paper posited herein argues that *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* employ visual significations as pivotal instruments in narrative construction and cultural expression. These visual elements, encompassing facial designs, physical appearances, clothing and props, serve as allegories and signifiers of broader cultural themes, such as Chinese opera masks, subversive reconstructions, natural elements and the celebration of intangible cultural heritage, thereby weaving a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, innovation, reverence for nature and national sentiment throughout the cinematic narrative.

Structured in a quintet of sections, this paper aims to elucidate the connotation and denotation of visual significations in these seminal works of Chinese animated cinema, thereby contributing a nuanced understanding to the corpus of modern mythological animation studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The interplay between visual signification and cultural representation in animation has been a focal point of semiotic studies. Barthes' seminal work laid the groundwork for understanding the stratification of image meanings, categorising visual significations into denotative and connotative messages. Denotative messages constitute the perceptual layer of an image, while connotative messages entail a deeper level of cultural cognition, being more subjective and tied to aesthetic signification (Barthes, 1977).

Chen's (2020) analysis of Chinese animation is particularly insightful, offering a framework for visual signification through the examination of facial design, physical appearance, clothing, and props. This comprehensive approach allows for a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions embedded in animation.

Gao (2022) highlighted the aesthetic significance of digital filmmaking in animation, by fostering personalised enjoyment and emotional catharsis. This perspective is complemented by the works of Lin (2020) and Zhang (2020), who focused on narrative techniques and the importance of visual elements like lines and colours in animation. Lin (2020) underscored the role of character representation in conveying emotions, while Zhang (2020) drew attention to the crucial role of visual elements in defining animation.

Jia (2020) provided a comparative analysis of early and modern animations, noting the consistent emphasis on individualised character design. This aspect of visual signification, could benefit from an exploration of technological advancements and their impact on these features. Si and Zhao (2021) introduced a cultural and symbolic dimension to the discourse by examining the connection between symbols and mythological themes. Their conceptualisation of symbols as a bridge between objects and persons enriches the understanding of cultural representation in animation.

Chen (2020) and Zhong (2021) delved into the use of visual symbols in Chinese animation. Zhong's work highlighted the cultural context of traditional visual symbols, while Chen extended this analysis to include more tangible aspects such as clothing and props. This focus, however, may neglect the influence of global cultural elements and techniques in animation. Ren (2017) added another layer by exploring how elements from other artistic domains, such as opera, can enrich visual signification in animation. This approach offers a fresh perspective but could be expanded through a comparative analysis of symbols from different cultural art forms.

Despite these extensive analyses, there exists a noticeable research gap. Most studies (Chen, 2020; Si & Zhao, 2021; Wang, 2021; Yuan, 2022) tend to concentrate predominantly on characters, often overlooking other crucial aspects like props. Chen (2020) acknowledged the significance of props as visual signs, but a more comprehensive analysis across these overlooked areas could provide a more holistic understanding of visual representation in animation.

In summary, the literature reveals a rich tapestry of approaches to understanding visual signification in animation. From Barthes' foundational theory to the detailed analyses of specific elements in animation, there is a clear trajectory towards a deeper understanding of the cultural and aesthetic significance embedded within this medium. However, future research could benefit from a more inclusive approach that considers all elements of visual representation, including often-overlooked aspects like props and technological influences.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this study is rooted in a qualitative approach, focusing on the textual analysis of two prominent animated films, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. The primary source material for this research was obtained from the Tencent Online Video Platform, with English subtitles from yts-sub.com to ensure accurate dialogue translation. The films were segmented and diagrammed following Bordwell’s (2017) method, facilitating a detailed, linear analysis. This involved extracting film images as screenshots and documenting dialogues and shots in text form. The chosen scenes, dialogues, or visual elements were selected based on their relevance to the research objective, which is to identify the visual significations in two pivotal Chinese animated films.

The analytical framework focused on four key categories: Facial Design, Physical Appearance, Clothing, and Props. This categorisation was crucial for examining the visual significations within the films. The data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, following Bordwell’s (2017) method. The procedure involved two primary steps: first, the extraction of screenshots focusing on the characters’ faces, physical appearances, clothing, and props at each narrative stage. These were then organised using the “Table of Visual Significance of Archetypes” (Table 1). The second step entailed identifying and analysing the denoted and connoted information within these visual elements, with the findings recorded using the “Table of Denotations and Connotations” (Table 2).

Table 1. Table of visual significance of archetypes

Character	Facial design	Physical appearance	Clothing	Props

Defined based on Chen’s (2020) study.

Table 2. Table of denotations and connotations

Visual information	Denoted information	Connoted information
Facial design		
Physical appearance		
Clothing		
Props		

Defined based on Chen’s (2020) study and Barthes’ (1977) semiotics

In terms of ethical considerations, the study adhered to the principles of fair dealing with films for non-commercial research purposes, as outlined by Stokes (2019).

This included ensuring that the use of film clips and still frames from the animated films fell under the “fair use” doctrine, which permits limited use of copyrighted material for purposes like criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research. The research was conducted with a commitment to transparency and honesty, adopting Singer’s (2023) approach in data collection and analysis methods, ensuring objectivity in reporting findings. The subjective nature of textual analysis, particularly when interpreting connotative meanings, poses a limitation as different analysts might derive varied interpretations from the same visual elements.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In parallel with the objective of this research, analysing the visual significations of the two films, the findings identified similar visual signs in the two animated films. Visual significations serve as significant cultural and narrative tools, with character’s faces, physical appearances, clothing, and props reflecting and denoting Chinese opera masks, subversive reconstructions, natural elements, and intangible cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing cultural heritage, innovation, nature reverence, and national sentiment throughout the hero’s journey. A table of Visual Significations (Table 3) is summarised below, describing the denotation and connotations in the visual information in the two films.

Table 3. Table of visual significations

Visual information	Denoted information	Connoted information
Facial design	Chinese opera mask	Cultural heritage
Physical appearance	Subversive reconstructions	Cultural innovation
Clothing	Natural element	Reverence for nature
Props	Intangible cultural heritage	National sentiment

Defined based on Chen’s (2020) study and Barthes’s (1977) semiotics

Facial design

In the two animated film works, the facial designs of characters manifest the denoted information of Chinese opera facial masks, reflecting the connoted information of cultural heritage in both Chinese mythological animation pieces.

Generally, opera facial make-up, or *Lianpu* is the facial make-up used by actors on stage to shape their characters. It is a form of stylisation in opera performance and can be divided into *Junban* and *Caiban*. *Junban* is generally used in female and male roles, where actors use make-up to draw eyebrows and powder their faces, with beauty and elegance being their main features. On the other hand, *Caiban* is typically used in painted faces and comic roles, where actors alter their original appearance through the application of colourful ink and exaggerated designs (Ren, 2017). This is particularly noticeable in the drawing of eyebrows and eyes, characterised by patternization, decoration, and exaggeration. This style is much more complex and eye-catching than the make-up used for female and male roles. Usually, each actor in a stage performance will have a unique facial make-up, as one’s character and temperament are relatively stable. However, the design of the facial make-up can change to reflect different emotions and behaviours at different ages or in different situations. For example, the facial make-up of Cao Cao can be drawn with round or pointed eyes in different story situations. Different types of opera will also have different facial make-up, which is largely related to local customs and the understanding of the characters by the audience and performers (Zhao, 2023).

In *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the facial design of the Monkey King, Jiang Liuer, and the Devil Lord borrows elements from opera facial make-up, making the characters' traits more intuitively presented. The designers set three different facial designs for the Monkey King, two of which borrow from the make-ups of cross shape used in Peking Opera. The make-ups of cross shape refer to a straight black line drawn from the nose to the top of the head, connected to the centre of the eyebrows and the corners of the eyes, forming an overall cross shape, hence its name. In the culture of facial make-up, the masks with cross shapes are typically used to represent positive characters such as heroes or generals (Fu, 2023). The facial significations of the Monkey King, as depicted in the illustrations (Figure 1), progress through three distinct stages.

At the onset of the film, during the Monkey King's vigorous contest with the celestial soldiers in the Heavenly Palace, his face is predominantly red (Figure 1 (a)). In traditional operatic culture, red symbolises passion and boldness, thus emphasising the Monkey King's fearless demeanour and kingly presence at this juncture (Ren, 2017).

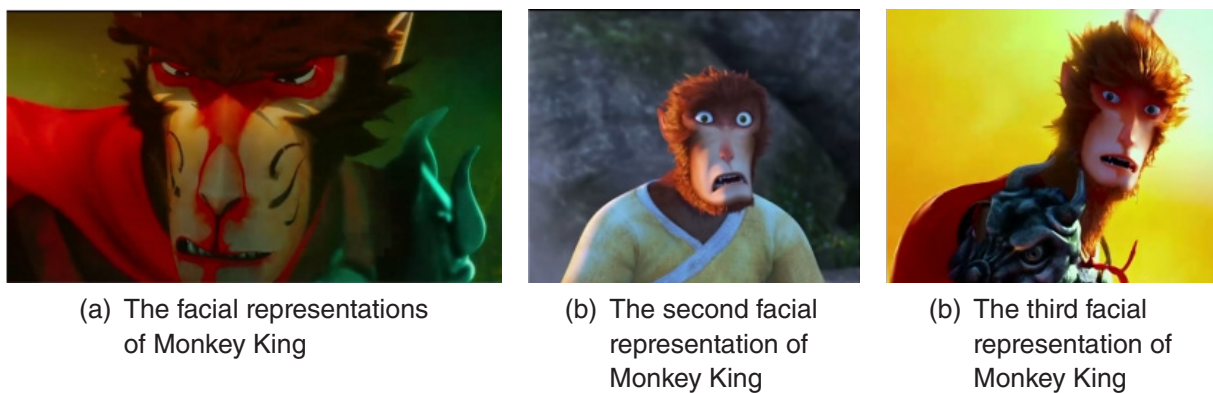


Figure 1. The facial representations of Monkey King

The second image portrays the Monkey King after his powers have been sealed. His face, now devoid of decorations, is simple and austere (Figure 1 (b)). This minimalist aesthetic symbolises his current state of decadence and desolation, suggesting that his prior courage and pride are no longer in evidence.

In the final signification, his facial design is even more restrained than the initial depiction. Intricate lines have been omitted, leaving only a faint red mark as a remnant of his earlier incarnation (Figure 1 (c)). This subtler rendition signifies his departure from his former impetuosity and recklessness. The experience of journeying with Jiang Liuer has introduced elements of gravity and sobriety into his character. These evolved facial features reflect the Monkey King's unwavering resolve and faith in protecting Jiang Liuer. The transformation in his facial design subtly encapsulates the evolution of the Monkey King's psyche, illustrating his journey from decline to the reacquisition of self-belief.

In contrast, the facial designs of the Devil Lord and Shen Gongbao incorporate features reminiscent of treacherous courtiers represented with white faces often described as "jade-faced" scholars, are usually endowed with extraordinary abilities, and hold esteemed positions. However, they are typically deceitful and suspicious, representing villainous characters in traditional Beijing opera (Ren, 2017). The character designs for the Devil Lord and Shen Gongbao share similarities with the design for Cao Cao, featuring lightly drawn eyebrows and sharp eyes. This style subtly conveys their cunning, underlining their outwardly refined yet inherently deceitful attributes.



(a) Shen Gongbao in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*



(b) Devil Lord in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*

Figure 2. Shen Gongbao in different animated films

In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, the facial depiction of the character Shadow, Shen Gongbao, as shown in the attached Figure 2 (a), is marked by short, light eyebrows, a white complexion, and dark shading around the eyes and lips. These features are symbolic of a treacherous scoundrel in operatic culture. Furthermore, the character's high cheekbones, brow bones, and elongated face align with his role as a leopard demon. Throughout *Nezha's* heroic journey, Shen Gongbao is characterised by his cunning and strategic manipulation, plotting a series of deceptive schemes for his ascension to immortality, putting countless innocent lives at risk.

In *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the facial signification of the Devil Lord, also depicted in the accompanying Figure 2 (b), closely parallels Shen Gongbao's facial characteristics, with short, light eyebrows and dark shading around the eyes and thin lips. Apart from a black teardrop-like pattern beneath each eye on the cheekbones, the Devil Lord's facial attributes are nearly identical to Shen Gongbao's. The Devil Lord, in his quest for elixirs of immortality, directs Trolls to capture children for potion brewing, symbolising his malevolent deeds.

The utilisation of operatic facial elements in both films is tightly interwoven with the characters' personalities, statuses, and destinies. The visual sign implanted into animation borrows from the formal features of traditional operatic facial elements, and offers significant revelations about the characters' personalities, statuses, destinies, and plot. It contributes to the creation of the artistic atmosphere. The aesthetic paradigm of traditional opera and the operatic facial designs in animation facilitate easy recognition and differentiation of characters. Therefore, the incorporation of operatic facial elements into character designs is a simplistic implantation and manages to integrate the artistic essence of traditional opera, which appears abstract yet is spiritually accurate, into its design. Based on this stylised foundation, unique character images are crafted. The incorporation of operatic facial elements, as fundamental components of traditional opera, into animated forms has made significant contributions to the formation and development of the "Chinese School" of animation (Ren, 2017). Therefore, the employment of operatic elements in both animations serves as character creation and becomes a testament to the continuity of the "Chinese School" animation style and Chinese cultural heritage, which forms the most crucial connoted information of this visual sign.

Physical appearance

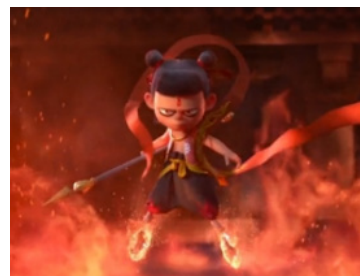
In the two animated films, the characters' physical appearances manifest obvious denoted information of subversive reconstructions, embodying the connoted information of cultural innovation in these two Chinese mythological animations.

Reconstruction pertains to slight adjustments, reorganisations, or even the introduction of new elements to the original paradigm. Such reconstruction usually aligns with the current mainstream value orientation, focusing on the emotional mainline of the masses and gravitating towards the features of the era. It could be argued that reconstruction is a subjective conception driven by the development of the objective environment. It serves as an essential pathway for the evolution of film and television productions and is extensively employed in their production (Yang & Luo, 2016). In the creation of animated films, a common method of reconstruction involves the use of classical elements to forge new combinations, thereby obtaining novel design elements and combination approaches. This approach offers audiences a sense of familiarity while concurrently providing a refreshed audio-visual experience. In the two animated films, this is specifically manifested as a reconstruction of intuitive visual elements within physical appearances. The creators underscore the characters' temporal backgrounds through the reconstruction of these symbolic elements, further highlighting the characters' characteristic traits.

Nezha, as a cultural symbol in traditional Chinese culture, has long been synonymous with justice, with his character portrayed in works such as *The Journey to the West* and *Creation of the Gods*. In 1979, the Shanghai Animation Studio produced the animated film *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, which has since become a fond childhood memory for many Chinese. In this film, Nezha skins the arrogant Dragon Prince Ao Bing, leaving the Dragon King unable to subdue him. The Dragon King then uses the lives of the Chentang Pass people as bargaining chips, putting pressure on Nezha's father, Li Jing. In order not to implicate his father and the people, Nezha takes his own life. Later, TaiyiZhenren reconstructs his true body from lotus roots, resurrecting him. The image of Nezha (Figure 3 (a)) from this film, which is highly recognised by the Chinese and carries traditional cultural features, is depicted as follows: dressed in a lotus leaf robe, hair bunched into a high bun, riding on a flaming chariot, wielding the *Qiankun* hoop, his arms wrapped in chaotic silk, and embodying righteousness (Xu & Guo, 2020).



(a) Nezha in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*



(b) Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

Figure 3. Nezha in different animated films

In contrast, the appearance of Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* differs significantly from the previously mentioned image, and the character's reconstruction can be described as subversive (Figure 3 (b)). His heavy bangs reveal a round forehead marked with a red Demon Pill. He has dark circles around his large eyes, a face full of freckles, a

flat nose, and jagged teeth that are quite conspicuous. He wears a red sleeveless top with yellow trim and embroidered lotus patterns, and loose lantern trousers with a low crotch. A bright yellow belt cinches his waist, and the trousers are gathered at the ankles, adorned with a red Demon Pill pattern. In the film, he never wears shoes, goes barefoot, often tucks his hands in his trouser waist, and exudes a cocky and ruffian style. His penchant for trouble and his volatile temperament starkly contrasts with the traditionally heroic image of benevolence and bravery. Ao Bing is another crucial character in the mythology of Nezha.

Uproar in Heaven, released between 1961 and 1964, is pivotal in establishing the Monkey King's image in Chinese animation, hailed as a symbolic figure by Wei (2021, p. 2). The character integrates traditional Chinese opera elements. The Monkey King's face features Peking Opera patterns, predominantly white with a red "upside-down peach" motif, green peach leaf-like eyebrows, and a Lei Gong-inspired mouth, creating a realistic, expressive look. The costume design draws inspiration from the Chinese folk tradition's "five elements of colour," namely red, yellow, blue, white, and black. Its most iconic ensemble consists of a yellow shirt, a light blue scarf, a white trimmed tiger-skin mini-skirt, paired with red tights and black boots, artistically blending these elemental hues (Figure 4 (a)). This ensemble, along with the monk's robes, reflects the character's spiritual and wild nature. The Monkey King's physique, with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and long limbs, emphasises his youthful, combative spirit.

Monkey King: Hero is Back reimagines the traditional Monkey King image, portraying a more mature, worldly hero instead of the radiant figure from *Uproar in Heaven* (Figure 4 (b)). The facial design adopts a realistic cross-shaped mask from Peking Opera, using bright red around the eyes, nose, and philtrum, symbolising loyalty, bravery, and righteousness. The head features a broad skull, an elongated face with a prominent nose, and a short forehead that blends into the eyes, giving him a gallant, world-weary middle-aged appearance. His hair is sharp and clustered, reflecting a firm personality. The body style is reminiscent of American cartoons: lanky yet powerful, with exaggerated proportions, broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and oversized hands and feet, emphasising his human characteristics. Initially, the Monkey King moves with a stooped back and heavy steps, indicating desolation. However, after regaining his powers, his posture becomes upright and proud, showcasing a revival of his fighting spirit.



(a) Monkey King in *Uproar in Heaven*



(b) Monkey King in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*

Figure 4. Monkey King in different animated films

The subversive reconstructions of physical appearances in these two animated films point to a higher layer of connoted information — cultural innovation. Song and Fu (2023) argue that cultural innovation in mythological animations involves more than simply mining literary heritage and artistic processing; it requires innovation in the process of promoting social development, inheriting history, and connecting reality. The reconstruction of character's physical appearances in this study effectively showcases the consciousness of cultural innovation in China.

Starting with the exploration of literary, national, and educational elements by the Chinese animation school in the 20th century, the cultural innovation of mythological animations has never ceased. Animated works of every era utilise the artistic means most in line with contemporary aesthetic trends to express their animated concepts, deeply influenced by the artistic and cultural trends of their times. *Uproar in Heaven* reflects a period when there was a strong emphasis on preserving and promoting traditional Chinese cultural and artistic forms. In contrast, *Monkey King: Hero is Back* represents a time when global influences and contemporary themes of realism and relatability have become more prominent in animation. Both works, however, are united in their goal to innovate within the cultural context of their production, thereby contributing to the ongoing evolution of animated storytelling. This process of repetitively displaying similar ideological values is not merely a reiteration of animation, but involves removing outdated imprints of the times, retaining classic elements intertwined within, relying on the serious ideological core, and creating animations that align with the current era and more readily accepted and recognised by the audience.

The character symbols depicted in these two animations, their burlesque reconstructions of classic images, and their carnivalesque deconstruction of traditional narratives, coupled with their jesting and rebellious nature, align perfectly with the sentimental attachment of the post-80s and 90s generation towards their youth. These factors highlight the subversive shift and evolution of aesthetic preferences of the younger generation in the age of media integration. Sociocultural and historical context can influence film narratives (Li et al., 2023). The expressive techniques and spiritual core of cultural and artistic creation are influenced by the aesthetic psychology of the nation, and the changes in aesthetic psychology are closely connected with a nation's political background, social trends, and cultural development (Gao, 2022). Therefore, artistic creation can be considered a crystallisation of the zeitgeist and national culture.

The changes in character design and narrative approach in animations like *Uproar in Heaven* and *Monkey King: Hero is Back* reflect a broader trend of cultural innovation, where traditional mythological stories are reimagined to resonate with modern audiences, particularly appealing to the sentimental and aesthetic preferences of the post-80s and 90s generations. This shift highlights the evolving aesthetic psychology influenced by contemporary societal trends, technological advancements, and the desire for narratives that challenge conventional norms. Through these creative adaptations, animations preserve cultural heritage and actively engage in its evolution, bridging tradition with modernity in a way that reflects and shapes the cultural and artistic consciousness of the era. The spirit expressed by a character never has a fixed referential meaning; it functions like a symbol or method rooted in national culture, always precisely matching the national spirit needed in various temporal contexts. Audiences from different times can find resonance in the character's embodiment, and this is how animation inherits history and connects reality.

The dissemination of Chinese animated films is inseparable from traditional culture. Excellent Chinese animated works capture the core of traditional culture, drawing nourishment and experience from it. With the blessing of traditional culture at its core,

animated films continuously expand their reach, making Chinese animated films a vehicle for inheriting and displaying traditional culture (Song & Fu, 2023). In recent years, China has actively promoted the integration and development of animated films and traditional culture, introducing relevant policies to encourage the innovative fusion of domestic animated films and Chinese traditional culture. For instance, in March 2024, the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council issued a report, *Opinions on Implementing the Project for the Inheritance and Development of Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture*, encouraging the creative transformation and innovative development of traditional Chinese culture in literary and artistic creation. The development of the animated film industry will boost China's cultural construction, and the innovative application of Chinese traditional culture in domestic animated films will lead to more excellent animated works on the global stage.

Clothing

In both animated films, the characters' clothing carries evident denoted information of natural elements, reflecting the connoted information of nature reverence. Throughout the course of societal development, clothing has emerged, evolved, and presently stands as a reflection of the level of economic development and cultural prosperity in different historical periods, thereby serving as an important marker of human civilisation. Within animated films, clothing forms a crucial component of character design. On a visual level, it functions to illustrate aspects such as a character's identity and personality traits. Animated works from different styles, themes, and historical periods require corresponding attire to convey the animation's theme, shape character imagery and further denote the character's temperament, personality, and societal status (Chen, 2021).

As animation offers an artistic interpretation and distillation of real life, it is characterised by creativity, extensibility, and virtuality. While the attire of various characters in animation is largely inspired by the clothing of the era in which the story is set, character designs in mythological animations often consider natural elements frequently present in ancient attire, such as trees, birds, insects, terrestrial and avian animals, and mythical beasts (Dai, 2016). These natural elements often constitute patterns of animals, plants, and geometric shapes, including taotie (beast face) motifs, bird patterns, water patterns, and dragon patterns. With animation design techniques that further exaggerate and innovate these elements, these patterns can become more expressive and aesthetically characteristic of animated character designs. In the analysis of these two films, the clothing design showcases a wealth of natural patterns that resonate with the character's skill attributes and personality traits, rendering the characters more delicately sculpted.

In *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, Devil Lord, a higher-ranking demon in the film, is always seen wearing a black gauze cap and an exquisite court robe (Figure 5). The black and white pattern on the robe bears a significant resemblance to Kui-dragon motifs. The Kui-dragon motif emerged during the Shang and Zhou dynasties and was one of the decorative patterns on bronze wares (Figure 6). The dragon, a creature from ancient Chinese legends, is typically depicted with a symmetrical image featuring a nose in the middle, eyes on both sides, and a body extending to both sides. If portrayed from the side, it appears as a long body with one claw. Based on the structure of the dragon motif, it can be broadly divided into crawling dragon motifs, coiling dragon motifs, interlacing dragon motifs, two-headed dragon motifs, and twin-bodied dragon motifs, among others. Since the Song dynasty, any claw-shaped motifs on bronze wares have been referred to as "Kui patterns" or "Kui dragon motifs" (Sun, 2023). The Kui dragon motif is primarily presented symmetrically. In modern design, the Kui dragon motif is symmetrically displayed in an upward, downward,

leftward, or rightward direction based on the central axis or midpoint. The traditional Kui dragon motif, with equal size and identical shape on both sides, exhibits a unified and orderly visual effect, revealing the solemnity of the Kui dragon motif as a traditional pattern. It possesses the primitive simplicity of the Shang and Zhou periods and symbolises status and power. Wearing a court robe adorned with the Kui dragon motif discloses Devil Lord's desire to attain immortality.



Figure 5. Devil Lord in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*



Figure 6. Kui-dragon pattern in bronze wares

In ancient mythology, Nezha was reborn through a lotus flower, embodying the essence of the lotus itself. The lotus holds profound significance in traditional Chinese culture, and the emergence of the lotus motif is associated with the prevalence of Buddhism. From its inception, the lotus motif was often used as decoration for ceramics. The three main religions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism all regard the lotus as the most holy and pure (Chen, 2021). In previous films, Nezha was always depicted in a top with lotus embroidery. Although Nezha's attire changes in this film, a lotus pattern is still incorporated into his vest, perpetuating his identity as an incarnation of the lotus (Figure 7). This subtly suggests that despite being a Demon Pill, Nezha retains an aspect of "purity" in his character, which foreshadows his actions in the later part of the story.

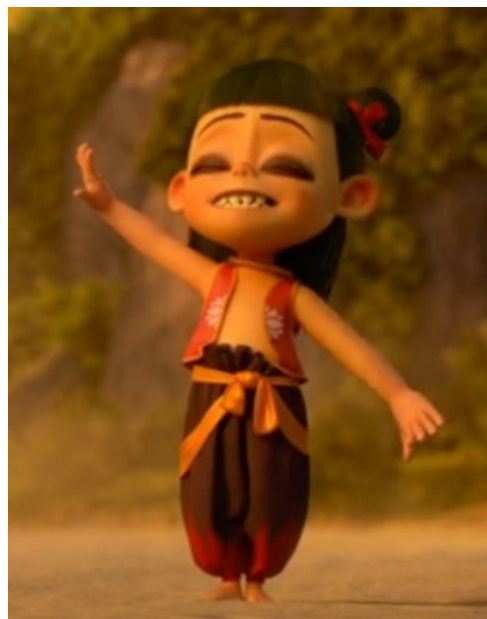


Figure 7. Nezha's cloth in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

In general, the natural elements depicted in clothing designs bear overwhelmingly positive connotations, with the film's symbolic signification of natural elements mirroring traditional Chinese culture's reverence for nature. The concepts of "respecting heaven" and "fearing heaven" in ancient Chinese ecological aesthetics originated from the reverence of ancient people for nature and were formed based on the primary aesthetic consciousness of "unity of heaven and man" and "unity of gods and humans". This reverence and fear have led to a psychological mechanism of awe and respect for all things natural (Tang, 2020). Flowers are viewed as having souls, grass as having life, and water as possessing charm. Everything in their environment is imbued with life, imbuing nature with a sense of sanctity. Thus, when characters embody these natural elements, they seem to be graced with divine power.

When Monkey King dons an armour adorned with divine beast totems, he becomes a valiant warrior; when Devil Lord wears a robe decorated with dragon motifs, he represents the ascendant king of the demons; when Nezha wears a vest with lotus patterns, he is a demon child turning towards goodness; when Ao Bing wears a white robe with water wave patterns, he is a hero saving a young girl. As can be seen from these examples, the role of these nature-patterned costumes in narrative structure, as well as the reverence for nature expressed in Chinese mythological animated films that utilise these patterns as symbolic language, is undeniable.

Props

In both animated films, the characters' props contain conspicuous information of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of China, reflecting the connoted information of national sentiment in the two Chinese mythological animated works.

In animated films, props refer to all items related to the setting and characters, which can also be understood as various movable objects displayed in the scene and equipped with the characters during their performance. In animated works, props are part of the character design and performance, interacting with characters, accentuating characters' personalities, and serving as tools for highlighting character traits and demonstrating epochal information. The design of props carries much information, lays the groundwork for the plot, explains the story background, promotes the extension of story content, expresses the theme of the film, and helps reveal the storyline. It assists characters in performing better and plays a positive role in characterising characters and expressing characters' emotions. In the analysis of the two films, the researchers found that many significant symbolic props belong to the Intangible Cultural Heritage of China. They help the film plot unfold smoothly, give specific meanings by the authors to advance the storyline, and display strong cultural attributes.

In *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, the Monkey King doll is a critical prop symbol, which represents Monkey King himself, as shown in Figure 8. Folk dolls were included in the municipal Intangible Cultural Heritage catalogue as early as 2010. Among doll craftsmen, Liu's dolls, with a history of over 120 years, are quite famous. They consist of seven major series and over a thousand types. As a form of folk art, its subject matter and artistic form are generated to accommodate rural characteristics, embodying a strong local flavour and regional features. The patterns of Liu's dolls mainly consist of designs passed down from generation to generation by older craftsmen, complemented by traditional auspicious patterns, which are painted according to the different forms of the dolls. They have accompanied the growth of several generations (Intangible Cultural Heritage Website, 2018). The doll that appears in this film also accompanies the growth of the Hero. The first appearance of the Monkey King doll is on the way when Jiang Liuer's parents

and villagers are avoiding the Mountain Trolls. The father is walking and telling the story of the Monkey King being suppressed under the Wuxing Mountain to Jiang Liuer in his swaddling clothes. A line of dialogue appears here, where the father looks at the Monkey King doll in Jiang Liuer's arms and says, "Don't worry, the Great Sage Equal to Heaven will never die. He is just...sleeping" (00:03:32- 00:03:38). This sentence metaphorically implies the entire story's outcome: even though Monkey King's magic power is sealed, he will make a splendid return one day.



Figure 8. Monkey King doll in *Monkey King: Hero is Back*

The Monkey King doll appears again in the inn where Monkey King and his party are staying. Jiang Liuer, holding the doll, tells the Silly Girl, "He will protect you. With him, there is nothing to be afraid of" (00:46:42-00:46:45). This statement embodies Jiang Liuer's trust in Monkey King, and it is this unconditional trust that awakens Monkey King's long-dormant heart. When Monkey King loses the fight against the monster, Devil Lord, the Monkey King doll appears once more. It is knocked into the water and aimlessly drifts, hinting at Monkey King's downcast and unwilling state of mind as he has lost his magical powers. At the end of the film, Jiang Liuer is injured by Devil Lord and lies in the ruins. Monkey King places the doll in his hand. At this point, Monkey King thinks Jiang Liuer has died, and his sorrow and anger trigger a massive outpouring of energy. The doll at this moment represents Monkey King's determination to defeat the monster. In the end, Monkey King regains his self and makes a magnificent comeback, once again becoming the hero in Jiang Liuer's mind.

In the film *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, as shown in Figure 9, the shuttlecock is a significant prop symbol that runs through the entire film, representing a link of emotions. The shuttlecock was included in the city-level intangible cultural heritage catalogue as early as 2008. The Qingzhou shuttlecock, a well-known example, has a history of more than 2,000 years. It adheres to traditional craftsmanship; not only is the Qingzhou shuttlecock sturdy and durable, but it also boasts brilliant colours, aesthetic design, and significant artistic value. Depending on the materials used and the functions, Qingzhou shuttlecocks are classified into three categories: decorative shuttlecocks, regular shuttlecocks, and competition shuttlecocks. Decorative shuttlecocks generally utilise peacock feathers or ostrich feathers; regular shuttlecocks typically employ rooster feathers, and competition shuttlecocks use turkey feathers.



Figure 9. Shuttlecock in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*

The Qingzhou shuttlecock sport is characterised by its variety of patterns, high skill level, elevated aesthetic standard, and rich cultural connotations. In this film, the shuttlecock also links Nezha's familial and friendly bonds. The shuttlecock first appears when Nezha is feeling lonely and bored. His mother, Lady Yin, takes out a shuttlecock to play with him, "Look at how much fun Nezha's having. It has been a long time since he smiled like that" (00:21:36-00:21:38). This statement highlights Lady Yin's love for Nezha, and it is through this shuttlecock play that their mother-son relationship is strengthened. The shuttlecock appears again in Nezha's memories. A young Nezha is watching his peer, a little girl named Yaya, bring him a shuttlecock. Just as he is about to receive it and play with her, Yaya is suddenly taken away by her family. Nezha picks up the shuttlecock from the ground in disappointment, only to be hit by villagers with ink and trash and verbally abused, "Go back to where you came from!" (00:40:15-00:40:17). "Little demon brat! No one likes you!" (00:40:17-00:40:19). At this moment, the shuttlecock, stained by the thrown garbage, symbolises his wounded emotions. After Nezha and Ao Bing save Yaya, Yaya brings another shuttlecock to give to Nezha. When Nezha is surprised that she is not afraid of him, she says, "You save Yaya from the bad guy". Nezha happily picks up Yaya and kicks the shuttlecock for her to watch. Then, Nezha kicks the shuttlecock to Ao Bing, and they start kicking it back and forth, becoming friends. In other words, the shuttlecock forms a connection and symbolises the friendship between Nezha and Ao Bing.

In their designs for these pivotal props, both films have opted for craft techniques recognised as intangible cultural heritage, employing traditional Chinese craftsmanship to shape characters and convey emotions. This decision also demonstrates the cultural identification between these two films. Cultural identification is the subject's tendency to recognize a particular culture. National cultural identification refers to the inclination to recognise one's own national culture. Based on this sense of identification, a sense of cultural pride emerges. China's intangible cultural heritage itself possesses a wealth of profound artistic connotations and national cultural heritage, providing vital artistic resources for these two animated films based on Chinese mythology. Furthermore, these animations have inherited and carried forward these artistic connotations and national cultural heritage, integrating intangible heritage elements into the film imagery, condensing national cultural elements, and demonstrating the cultural identification of Chinese mythological animated films. Additionally, both films rely on the animation industry for

the widespread and effective dissemination of national culture. Integrating The appeal, influence, and momentum of animation can promote the audience's identification with national culture by integrating excellent national culture into the cultural environment of animation audiences.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the analysis of character construction and narrative is based on the semiotic theory, which identified similar visual signs in the character construction and narrative of the two animated films. The visual significations in the two films serve as significant cultural and narrative tools, with character's faces, physical appearances, clothing, and props reflecting and denoting Chinese opera masks, subversive reconstructions, natural elements, and intangible cultural heritage, thereby reinforcing cultural heritage, innovation, nature reverence, and national sentiment throughout the film storytelling. In this pattern of visual signification, Chinese animation inherits traditional culture while also embodying a spirit of innovation, reflecting a reverence for nature and national sentiment. These symbols represent the cultural genes of Chinese animation and mythological stories, which are more likely to trigger cultural identification in the audience. Thus, the current study notably expands the scope by including props, recognising them as significant signs in animation. Hence, by introducing a broader and more nuanced analytical lens that encompasses characters, clothing, props, and visual elements in the narrative, this study deepens the understanding of Chinese mythological animations, advancing the scholarly discourse on animation studies.

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Zhen Fang (Dr)

is currently an associate professor at Qingdao Film Academy and an animation artist. She graduated from Taylor's University in media and communication studies.

Noraien Mansor (Professor Dato' Dr)

is currently attached with Taylor's University as Senior Research Fellow supervising international and local PhD students. She has a great passion for research and publications in the field of education, media and technology.
