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A Study on the Adaptation of Ancient Deity and Demonism Novel Characters in Film and Television: Taking the Character Ne Zha in Creation of The Gods as an Example

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Abstract. Creation of the Gods is one of the most significant deity and demonism novels in China. While Ne Zha is an important character in the novel, he has a rich and complete storyline and strong dramatic tension, making him an inexhaustible source for subsequent film and television adaptations. This article focuses on the character of Ne Zha and the related film and television adaptations of his character in modern times. By using the comparative analysis method, the reasons for the changes in its image characteristics over different periods were studied. It mainly encompasses the evolution of mainstream social ideas, the change of the audience's role, and the updates in scientific and technological levels, all of which exert various influences. Based on the above analysis, this article puts forward some suggestions for the future film adaptation of Ne Zha: keep updating the targets of resistance in line with the times, build a grand worldview rather than merely praising individual heroism. By integrating new technologies with new Chinese-style aesthetics, the classic IP of Ne Zha is able to continuously maintain and even enhance its vitality.

Keywords: Ne Zha, Creation of The Gods, Adaptation into Film and Television

1. Introduction

Creation of the Gods holds an extremely significant historical position among ancient Chinese literary works. It is an important representative of ancient deity and demonism novel and has provided a considerable amount of rich resources for subsequent film and television adaptations [1]. In recent years, Creation of the Gods has not only been featured in live-action series and on the big screen, but its animation adaptation has also become widely known and has continuously drawn significant public attention. Ne Zha, as an important character in Creation of the Gods, has gained enduring popularity among audiences due to its strong dramatic elements, complete storyline, and character development process. With the development of time, Ne Zha, who initially was depicted as a chaotic devil who violated moral norms and "killed his father and mother", has transformed into the heroic figure of the latest animated film Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child, who says "my fate is determined by myself, not by heaven". And the factors influencing this change are also diverse [2].

In this context, this study focuses on the character traits of Ne Zha in various film and television adaptations over time. Taking the three representative animated works, namely Prince Ne Zha's

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Triumph Against Dragon King (1979), The Legend of Ne Zha (2003), and Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), as examples, it examines the different character traits presented in these adaptations. The literature analysis method was employed to search for and read relevant materials and documents. An in-depth exploration was conducted on the social and historical factors that influenced the changes in the filmic characteristics of the Ne Zha character in Creation of the Gods. Ultimately, the research goal of this study was achieved, which was to propose relevant suggestions for future adaptations of the Ne Zha character on how to create a more "touching" and more artistically appealing image in the adaptation process.

2. The significant role of the Ne Zha Character in the Creation of the Gods

From the Tang Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, the image of Ne Zha underwent a long process of evolution. The familiar image of Ne Zha that is widely known today and the related stories originated from the twelfth to the fourteenth chapters of the Ming Dynasty's deity and demonism novel Creation of the Gods. Creation of the Gods is a deity and demonism novel adapted based on the historical event of King Wu's campaign against the Shang Dynasty. Ne Zha, as a non-main character, is vividly depicted, which clearly demonstrates his unique position in the entire story.

These three chapters mainly tell familiar plots to people, such as the story of Ne Zha being born as a divine pearl, fighting against the dragon kings, and sacrificing himself then be reborn in the form of a lotus flower. In the latter part of the story, along with the main plot of King Wu's campaign against King Zhou, there is also the subplot of Ne Zha becoming the vanguard of the campaign against King Zhou. Eventually, he achieved remarkable military accomplishments in the Great Divine War and was bestowed the titles of Middle Altar Marshal and Three Altar Sea-God, achieving the transformation of his physical body into a god.

From this, it can be seen that the author has spent a considerable amount of space depicting for the audience a young hero who is brave in love and hate, and skilled in battle. It fully demonstrates the significant role and symbolic meaning of the Ne Zha character in Creation of the Gods. And precisely because Ne Zha has an extremely complete and highly dramatic storyline for the character, this image has become a favored source for subsequent film and television adaptations.

Han Meifeng, in her article The research of Nalaküvara in The Apotheosizing Tales, explored the evolution process of Ne Zha's image from ancient times to its final established character image in Creation of The Gods. She pointed out that the final formation of this image was a product of the progressive thoughts in the late Ming Dynasty, and deeply explored the spiritual value and significance of this image [3]. Fu Fangyan's The Research on the Evolvement of the Image of Ne Zha systematically and comprehensively examines the image of Ne Zha throughout the history of literature, and explores the reasons for the evolution of this image [4]. However, the content related to the filmic adaptation of the character Ne Zha is not extensively covered in these studies. This article will mainly conduct research based on the historical development and changes of Ne Zha's filmic adaptations, aiming to fill the existing research gaps.

3. Compare the image characteristics of the Ne Zha character in different periods of film and television adaptations

The image of Ne Zha has evolved over the course of history, and there are now over a hundred film and television adaptations of him. Including but not limited to TV series, films, as well as animated cartoons and other various forms of expression, their adaptations for the screen also exhibit rich

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characteristics of the times and profound cultural connotations. In this article, only a few representative film and television works are selected for analysis.

3.1. 1979, Shanghai animation film studio, prince Ne Zha's Triumph Against Dragon King

This animated film, as a landmark work in the history of Chinese animation, features an exceptionally classic portrayal of the character Ne Zha. The entire animation presents to the audience an image of a young hero who dares to defy authority and is willing to sacrifice himself for righteousness. In Prince Ne Zha's Triumph Against Dragon King, a significant amount of time is devoted to depicting the core plot of The Flood in Chen Tang Pass, placing Ne Zha in a dilemma between loyalty, righteousness and duty. And in the scene of suicide, the famous line Father, I will return your children to you! profoundly reveals the sharp conflict between Ne Zha and feudal ethics, as well as the intense resistance he shows towards the strict father-son relationship in ancient society [5]. The self-sacrificing and resolute attitude of Ne Zha, who protected the people and did not fear resistance against powerful authorities, became an artistic reflection of the social public sentiment during the early stage of China's reform and opening up.

3.2. 2003, The animated TV series The Legend of Ne Zha

The animated series The Legend of Ne Zha, which was aired in 2003 and was mainly targeted at children, had its creative team incorporate numerous touching scenes in the series where Ne Zha and his friends helped each other and grew together. In this work, Ne Zha not only has human friends such as Xiao Longnv and Lei Zhenzi, but also has his best animal companion, the little raccoon [6]. All of these fully demonstrate the sincere, kind and friendly personality traits of Ne Zha. In the entire storyline of the animation, which revolves around the Battle with Shi Ji and The Conquest of King Zhou of Shang, Ne Zha overcomes difficulties through mutual assistance with his friends, creating a lively and adorable image of a young boy. He possesses both the innocence and playfulness of a child, as well as the courage and responsibility of a hero. The portrayal of the character of Ne Zha in this animation fully embodies the emphasis on collectivism and friendship in the contemporary Chinese education system.

3.3. The 2019 animated film Ne Zha: birth of the demon child

This work has carried out a revolutionary deconstruction and re-creation of the traditional image of Ne Zha. Unlike the consistently "heroic" image of Ne Zha in Creation of The Gods, the film presents a "villainous" version of Ne Zha, where he is depicted as the reincarnation of the "demon pearl". Its image exudes a distinct rebellious spirit, placing Ne Zha in a situation of being misunderstood and discriminated against. Moreover, the language and actions it presents are more modern in style.

As the story progressed in the later stages, the image of Ne Zha became more complex and three-dimensional. Ne Zha has an outwardly rebellious and defiant appearance, often going against his parents and the master in his words and deeds. However, deep down, he longs to be accepted. Eventually, through heroic self-sacrifice and a sudden realization of "my fate is determined by myself, not by heaven", he broke through the conventional stereotypes and preconceptions, and completed the transformation from a "demon child" to a hero. This portrayal of the Ne Zha figure not only embodies the pursuit of individual value among contemporary youth, but also reflects a powerful critique of the stereotypical perceptions of certain social groups. Nowadays, this image has become a distinctive cultural symbol of the times [7].

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4. Analysis of the reasons for the changes in the filmic representation of Ne Zha's characteristics

The evolution of the cinematic portrayal of Ne Zha's character is by no means accidental or isolated. This character not only serves the purpose of narrative, but also encompasses the requirements of the entire era for the themes and emotions expressed in film and television works, the spiritual aesthetic demands of the people, the aesthetic orientation of the film production team, and the technological means for film and television production that the era can achieve.

From the exploration of national aesthetics in Chinese traditional art films during the early days of reform and opening up, to the profound reflections on the themes of friendship and unity expressed by animation teams for children's audiences in the millennium era, to the modern narrative attempts and the contemplation of new issues bestowed by the times in the current rise of Chinese animation.

Every time Ne Zha "reborn", it responds to the new requirements of mainstream social values for the creation of literary and artistic works, and also reflects the aesthetic needs and emotional release points of the people [8].

4.1. The changes in the actual national conditions and the advancement of social development

Prince Ne Zha's Triumph Against Dragon King (1979), was born during the early stage of China's reform and opening up. At that time, the main social ideology in China was to liberate the mind and pursue truth from facts. The rebellious behavior of Ne Zha, such as "reducing his bones to repay his father and sacrificing his flesh to repay his mother", was an artistic portrayal of the art of breaking through the darkness and shackles of the old era that society yearned for at that time [5].

The Legend of Ne Zha (2003), which was broadcast in the early 21st century, was a period when China's society and economy were stable. Mass cultural consumption was concentrated in home entertainment through television, and there was a greater need for films and TV series that met the aesthetic standards of families and children. Therefore, during this period, the re-creation of the Ne Zha character greatly weakened the "heroic sacrifice" and "resistance against patriarchal authority" plots in the original work and previous portrayals. Instead, it more prominently showcased the power of friendship and teamwork. All of this clearly reflects that China's educational policy for children places greater emphasis on the importance of unity, kindness, and integrity.

Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), which was based on the reincarnation of the "Demon Pearl", completely shattered the traditional image of Ne Zha. The film profoundly reflects the bravery of today's young people in refusing to be labeled and daring to break free from the constraints of stereotypes. The famous line in the film, "My destiny is determined by myself, not by fate," is a manifestation of the young people's resistance to fate and their condemnation of prejudice. The character of Li Jing in the film has been transformed from being stern to appearing stern on the outside but kind-hearted inside, which also reflects the shift in modern society's views on family education.

From this, it can be seen that every change in the cinematic portrayal of Ne Zha was gradually accomplished under the influence of the changes in social reality.

4.2. The change of consumer groups and the shift in aesthetic demands

The target audience of the 1979 version of Prince Ne Zha's Triumph Against Dragon King was rather ambiguous. It was impossible to determine whether it was aimed at "the masses" or

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"children". Moreover, the films produced during this period inevitably carried a "top-down" didactic and enlightenment purpose. In this version, the image of Ne Zha follows the typical aesthetic template of heroic figures, attempting to promote and enhance the national aesthetics and give it an artistic value that transcends time.

The 2003 animated series The Legend of Ne Zha precisely targeted the "00s" generation of viewers who were sitting in front of the TV. Under the family planning policy, most of the post-2000 generation, as the only child in their families, became the core of the family. Their aesthetic demands were to make the characters in films and TV shows more adorable and kind, and to shape positive values based on this. This version of Ne Zha follows the industrial aesthetic model of children's animated series, with brighter colors and rounder lines [6].

In Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019), the core audience of the film has shifted to the "Millennial Generation", who have grown up and have the power to make consumption decisions. Due to their more open and inclusive upbringing, as well as the profound influence of the Internet, their self-awareness has been highly awakened and they are extremely resistant to one-way preaching. Therefore, they are more eager to obtain a sense of self-identity through their film and television works. Therefore, despite being rebellious, the "demon child" character of Ne Zha who longs for recognition quickly became popular [7]. The smoky makeup, sad expression, and the habit of putting his hands in his pockets when walking of the character in the movie incorporated more elements of subculture, which perfectly met the unique aesthetic demands of the Z Generation for individuality.

4.3. The upgrading of technical means and industrial standards

In the era of Prince Ne Zha's Triumph Against Dragon King in 1979, the core technology for creating the animation was hand-drawn ink paintings. This technology endowed the character of Ne Zha with the most exquisite oriental ink-wash aesthetics and ethnic artistic characteristics [8]. However, its presentation dimension is limited to a two-dimensional plane, and there are certain flaws in the micro-expressions of the character and the smoothness of its movements.

By 2003, The Legend of Ne Zha mainly utilized basic software such as Flash for production. Its advantages were high standards, high efficiency, and low costs, making it highly suitable for the creation of large-scale animated series. However, to some extent, it also led to the stereotyped and symbolized portrayal of characters (such as round faces and big eyes, etc.).

In recent years, Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child (2019) has integrated mature film and television production techniques such as 3D modeling, particle effects, and motion capture. It has completely liberated the image of Ne Zha from a two-dimensional plane to a three-dimensional space, making the character more "dynamic and aesthetically pleasing", the scenes more grand and powerful, and the special effects more dazzling.This new era's digital aesthetic has made the ancient mythological characters remain fresh and vibrant for generations, giving them a tangible and vivid quality that greatly enhances the audience's sense of immersion and belief [9].

5. Suggestions for the film adaptation of the future version of Ne Zha

Resistance is the eternal core of the character of Ne Zha. However, as society progresses, the targets of resistance also need to keep evolving. Film and television adapters should not merely focus on the initial confrontation with patriarchy and feudal hierarchy, but rather should delve deeper into the common identity-related dilemmas faced by contemporary people. At the same time, efforts should be made to further deepen the modern interpretation of the characters around Ne Zha. For instance,

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the complex relationship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing, which is both adversarial and friendly, as well as the more contemporary emotional interpretations of the parent-child relationship (Li Jing and Mrs. Yin), the master-disciple relationship (Taiyi Zhenren), and the brotherhood relationship (Mu Zha and Jin Zha).

The future adaptation of the Ne Zha character should break away from the previous series' celebration of "individual heroism", and instead integrate the protagonist's story more deeply into the world view and cosmic perspective they have created [10]. Drawing inspiration from the long-term effects resulting from the interweaving and interaction of multiple hero storylines in American Marvel comics, in the future, for the remaining characters such as Taiyi Zhenren and Li Jing who appear in the Ne Zha storyline of the original work Creation of The Gods, as well as even the inherent villainous characters like Ao Bing and Shen Gongbao, we can establish a more multi-faceted narrative dimension through character reimagining, thereby injecting continuous vitality into this IP. In the future, more cutting-edge technologies should be employed and the potential charm of Chinese aesthetics should be fully exploited. The artistic styles of traditional Chinese ink paintings and meticulous paintings should be transformed into unique visual expressions through modern technological means [11]. The cultural symbols of Ne Zha in Creation of The Gods such as Qiankun Ring, Huntian Silk and Huojian Spear were modernized and translated. Technology was used to give them an ancient yet fresh and new texture, creating a new Eastern mythological system that originated from Chinese culture but was unprecedented.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that the film and television adaptations of the role of Ne Zha in Creation of The Gods are diverse and constantly change along with the evolution of society and the times. There are many factors influencing the film and television adaptations of this character, mainly including social demands, public aesthetic demands, and the advancement of technological means, which jointly contribute to the outcome.

This article analyzes the reasons for the differences in the roles of the Ne Zha character in the various film and television adaptations over different periods. Based on this analysis, it summarizes relevant suggestions for the future film and television adaptations of the Ne Zha character. Screenwriters should carry out timely adaptations, construct a grand cosmic and world view, and combine more of the new Chinese aesthetics with future technologies, so that the classic IP of Ne Zha can rejuvenate and regain vitality in the new era. He is no longer merely a mythological figure; he can also become a cultural symbol with continuous generative power, and demonstrates the innovative efforts of Chinese animation in seeking balance between nationality and modernity, as well as commerciality.

In the future, as technology progresses and values evolve in diversity, the image of Ne Zha will continue to carry new era themes and actively participate in the construction and dissemination of Chinese cultural expression.

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