

The Universal Tragic Spirit in Myths: A Comparative Study of Ne Zha and Oedipus

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Abstract: According to Peter Szondi, ancient Greek tragedy depicts the tragic struggle of humans against fate, which is fully manifested in the classic story of Oedipus' efforts to avoid his tragic fate, to be a good ruler and his final self-exile. Although ancient Greek tragedies often emphasize the inevitability of Moira to contrast human resistance, the fatalistic undertone of these tragedies is effectively balanced by the heroism that the tragic protagonists display in confronting their fate. A comparative study of the personal development narratives of Ne Zha and Oedipus Rex may reveal the universal theme of humanity's endeavor to challenge and even control fate while exhibiting the diversity of mythological traditions across cultures. Different from ancient Greek tragedies represented by Oedipus Rex which ends with the protagonist's failure or death to intensify the tragic tone and reinforce the theme of fate, Chinese myths often end with the protagonist's ultimate victory or regeneration as typified by Ne Zha's story.

Keywords: Nezha; The Investiture of the Gods; Oedipus Rex; Tragic Spirit; Myths.

1. Introduction:

The 2025 blockbuster animated film *Ne Zha* portrays the coming-of-age story of the most defiant Chinese mythical protagonist. This spirit, while deeply resonant with contemporary aspirations, is also deeply rooted within the ancient literary tradition from which the figure of Nezha originates. Although the film portrays Nezha as a rebellious teenager, this character is in fact one of the most distinctive deities in Chinese mythology, starkly contrasting with the stereotypical perception of East Asians as invariably mild-mannered and polite. To understand Nezha is to understand the rebellious dimension of Chinese mythology.

The image of Nezha embodies a confluence of defining characteristics: the rebelliousness intrinsic to Chinese myths, the syncretism of diverse religious elements, and the anthropomorphic tendencies of its literary tradition. These features present intriguing parallels to the hero figures found in ancient Greek mythology. Furthermore, an analysis of the traditional narratives surrounding Nezha reveals that the dramatic principles of "revelment and peripeteia" are manifest within his literary stories. Previously, the most renowned application of this theoretical framework was in the monumental ancient Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*.

2. The Evolution of the Figure of Nezha

The figure of Nezha is not indigenous to China but originated from a deity in Buddhism. The name "Nezha" is a transliteration of the Sanskrit "Nalakuvara" or "Nalakubara." During the Sui, Tang, and Five Dynasties periods, Buddhism flourished. Benefiting from the patronage of rulers and the active translation and promotion efforts of Buddhist monks, the image and stories of Nezha were transmitted to China, where they gradually became widely known. Analysis of extant Buddhist scriptures and texts can reveal details about Nezha's name, origins, physical appearance, personality traits, divine functions, and the extraordinary narrative of him cutting his flesh and returning his bones to his parents.

By the late Song and early Yuan dynasties, Nezha's story

underwent new developments. He transformed from a Dharma-protecting deity in the early Buddhist texts into a valiant warrior general, renowned for his exceptional prowess in subduing demons and capturing monsters, becoming a formidable figure. The *Comprehensive Compilation of Investigations into the Origins of the Three Religions*, published during the early Ming Dynasty Yongle era, provides a complete and highly summarized account of Nezha, where the story began to take its classic form [1]. Wu Cheng'en, writing in the Ming Dynasty, drew upon Buddhist stories of Nezha, script-based narratives, and folk legends to create a new incarnation of the character in his mythical novel *Journey to the West*. Through the author's adaptation and creation, Nezha became the Third Prince of Pagoda-Bearing Heavenly King Li Jing, the commander of the Jade Emperor's celestial troops. Furthermore, the Ming Dynasty mythical novel *Investiture of the Gods* played a definitive role in shaping and solidifying Nezha's appearance, weapons, magical abilities, and personality [2].

The late Qing dynasty renowned scholar Yu Quyu pointed out in his work *Minor Floating Plum Casual Conversations* that the matter of Nezha seemingly originates from Buddhist scriptures. Among modern scholars, the prominent sinologist Liu Cunren, in his article *The Relationship Between Father and Son Heavenly King Vaishnavana and Chinese Fiction*, also noted that "instances of the name Nezha in Yuan-era zaju plays consistently remain 'Nezha,' no different from the transliteration based on the Sanskrit 'Nata' found in the previously cited Esoteric classics." Academic papers such as "*Research on Chinese Martial Deities: Primarily on the Dark Heaven Emperor and Nezha*" by Professor Nikaidō Yoshihiro of the Faculty of Letters, Kansai University, have also dedicated chapters to the analysis and discussion of the figure of Nezha.

The Sound and Meaning of the Entire Buddhist Canon, compiled by Huilin of the Tang Dynasty, records two sutras related to Nezha: "The Sutra of Nalakuvara's Attainment of Accomplishment" and "The Dharani Sutra of Prince Nalakuvara's Quest for Accomplishment." [3] In the evolution of Nezha's image, a crucial figure is Vaishnavana Heavenly

King. Within the Chinese-translated Buddhist canon, Nezha himself occupies relatively little textual space and mostly appears alongside Vaishravana Heavenly King. During the Tang Dynasty, due to the prevalence and widespread dissemination of the Vaishravana faith, Nezha's image gradually entered public awareness alongside that of the Heavenly King.

Regarding the relationship between Vaishravana Heavenly King and Nezha, there are primarily two theories: the first posits a father-son relationship, while the second suggests a grandfather-grandson relationship. As the son of Vaishravana, Nezha accompanies the Heavenly King on his journeys, holds his pagoda for him, and bears the responsibility of exorcising ghosts and deities to bring peace to the people. As a Buddhist deity, Nezha's physical characteristics are distinctive. Buddhist sutras often describe him with a fierce, yaksha-like appearance, "casting malevolent glances in all four directions" and possessing "three heads and six arms," embodying a formidable and powerful spirit that loathes evil. In Buddhist texts from the Song Dynasty onwards, Nezha frequently appears in a wrathful manifestation. This wrathfulness constitutes both his defining physical attribute and his core character trait, serving to highlight the deity's fierce and majestic.

With the development of Yuan-era zaju drama, Ming-Qing fiction, and other literary forms, Nezha ultimately became established as the son of Vaishravana Heavenly King, and his title "Third Prince" became deeply ingrained in the popular consciousness, making him a household name. By the late Tang period, Nezha's divine image and narrative began to undergo significant transformations, most notably with the emergence of the extraordinary tale of him "cutting his flesh and returning his bones to his parents." The prototype for this story and the early translated Buddhist scriptures related to it are now lost, making their origins untraceable. However, this narrative became more prevalent in Buddhist texts from the Song Dynasty onwards.

During the Northern Song Dynasty, Nezha's image began to incorporate Daoist elements. By the time of the compilation *Dao Fa Hui Yuan*, Nezha had acquired the status of a Daoist deity. In the Yuan Dynasty, stories about Nezha became more popularized and comprehensive. The zaju play *God Erlang Drunkenly Shoots the Demon-Locking Mirror* [4], attributed to an anonymous Yuan author, marked Nezha's first appearance on the theatrical stage. This period also saw the creation of the song lyric pattern *Nezha Ling* [5], inspired by the Nezha stories. Prominent playwrights like Guan Hanqing utilized this pattern in works such as *Lord Guan Goes to the Feast*, *Wen Taizhen and the Jade Mirror Stand*, *Yuchi Gong Snatches the Spear Single-handed*, *Judge Bao Thrice Investigates the Butterfly Dream*, and *Zhao Pan'er: A Windflower Courtesan Comes to the Rescue* [6]. By this era, works featuring Nezha as a subject had become relatively abundant, primarily focusing on his exploits of subduing demons and monsters. The application of the Nezha Ling pattern further indicates the figure's considerable social dissemination and influence [7].

In the *Comprehensive Compilation of Investigations into the Origins of the Three Religions*, Nezha's origins and story bear a strong resemblance to the plot later found in Xu Zhonglin's *Investiture of the Gods*. He is depicted with three heads and eight arms, becoming the son of Pagoda-Bearing Heavenly King Li Jing. This Li Jing is a literary amalgamation of the Tang Dynasty's famous strategist, Li

Jing, and the figure of Vaishravana Heavenly King; he, too, was granted Daoist deity status, becoming the Pagoda-Bearing Heavenly King in Daoist mythology.

The mythical novel *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng'en during the Ming Dynasty, created a new incarnation of Nezha. Wu provided a complete account of Nezha's background. The pagoda became a tool bestowed by the Buddha upon Li Jing to subdue and control Nezha. The story incorporated considerable elaboration and modification, transforming Nezha into a Daoist child deity with an elegantly handsome Dharma Body and boundless magical power. Yet, he retained his original Buddhist attributes of three heads and six arms, along with his wrathful and fierce true form, effectively becoming a deity who was "Daoist inside, Buddhist outside."

The most detailed and influential portrayal of Nezha's image is found in the Ming Dynasty novel *Investiture of the Gods*, compiled by Xu Zhonglin. The author dedicated three full chapters—from Chapter 12, "*Nezha is Born in Chentang Pass*," to Chapter 14, "*Nezha Reveals His Lotus Root Body*"—providing an extensive literary depiction of the deity. It can be argued that *Investiture of the Gods* solidified the canonical portrayal of Nezha for subsequent generations, rendering his image thoroughly Sinicized, localized, and Daoistized.

Within the narrative of *Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha is burdened with a celestial mandate. Although he is born into the household of Li Jing, his true role is that of a key warrior in the campaign to overthrow the Shang Dynasty. His ultimate earthly mission is to topple the Shang and assist Ji Fa in establishing the new Zhou Dynasty. From his birth, Nezha possesses a recalcitrant and mischievous nature. He kills a yaksha in the Eastern Sea, and then proceeds to flay the skin and pull out the tendons of the Third Prince of the Dragon King, Ao Bing. When confronted by Ao Bing's father, the Dragon King Ao Guang, Nezha feigns repentance. Upon learning that the Dragon King intends to bring his grievance before the Jade Emperor, Nezha violently assaults him. Compelled by the concept of the "celestial mandate" invoked by Nezha's master, Taiyi Zhenren, Li Jing finds himself powerless to control his son and is forced to relent.

Later, Nezha uses his divine bow and magical treasures to kill a young Daoist acolyte, yet again receiving the protection and indulgence of Taiyi Zhenren. However, the Dragon Kings of the Four Seas petition the Jade Emperor and lead their troops to apprehend Li Jing and his family. To protect his parents, Nezha commits suicide at Chentang Pass by stripping his bones and cutting his flesh to return them to his parents. To enable Nezha to fulfill his celestial destiny, Taiyi Zhenren instructs his soul to appear to his mother in a dream. She builds a temple and erects a divine statue, allowing Nezha to receive three years of incense offerings, after which period he would be able to reconstruct his physical form. However, Li Jing, resentful, destroys the statue and burns the temple, depriving Nezha's soul of its anchor. Nezha then pleads with Taiyi Zhenren, who reconstructs a new physical body for him from lotus roots and leaves. Immediately, Nezha seeks vengeance against his father. Li Jing is defeated and flees, only subduing Nezha after encountering the Daoist Randeng, who bestows upon him the magical Pagoda treasure. Ultimately, through divine mediation, father and son are reconciled.

A pivotal element in the *Investiture of the Gods* narrative is Nezha's suicide, undertaken to save his parents. This act, deeply resonant with traditional Chinese familial ethics,

significantly contributed to the character's widespread appeal and enduring place in the popular consciousness. Furthermore, his unconstrained and rebellious spirit, his loathing of evil, his mischievous yet pure childlike heart, combined with his staunch courage, sense of justice, and unwavering perseverance, have cemented his status as a deity revered and worshipped by the people.

3. A Narrative Comparison of Nezha and King Oedipus

Most contemporary literary and cinematic works featuring Nezha draw their story material from the foundation provided by *Investiture of the Gods*. The animated film Nezha mentioned at the beginning of this article likewise adapts most of its plot from this source. In the narrative of *Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha experiences a considerably prolonged period of rebellion before his eventual subjugation by the Pagoda. The text provides an explanation for this early on: Nezha is designated by the Chan (Esoteric) Branch as the first warrior to overthrow the Shang Dynasty, and his master, Taiyi Zhenren, foresees his tribulations, calculating that he must commit 1,700 killings to fulfill his destiny. This terrifying and bloody fate allows Nezha's inherently fearless and disruptive nature as a veritable hellion to manifest itself fully. He causes trouble willfully until the incident where the Dragon Kings of the Four Seas confront his parents at Chentang Pass. It is at this pivotal moment that Nezha first demonstrates remorse and publicly commits suicide.

His reception of incense offerings from worshippers at the temple marks Nezha's first transformation. He ceases to interact with people through violence and instead adopts a benevolent stance. During this stage, his image shifts from a wrathful deity to a friendly god who responds to the pleas of the populace. However, his rebellious spirit does not vanish entirely, as evidenced by his relentless pursuit of Li Jing, demonstrating his persistent character traits of exacting revenge and maintaining a clear distinction between good and evil.

Nezha's second transformation occurs when Li Jing uses the Exquisite Pagoda to subdue him. He no longer persists in his headstrong ways but rather comprehends his mission, chooses to relinquish his hatred, follows his master in spiritual cultivation, and patiently awaits the opportune moment to campaign against the Shang Dynasty. These two transformative experiences constitute Nezha's mortal journey as a human—they are both his destined path and his necessary progression from man to god.

Nezha's experiences can be summarized by a developmental model: Prophecy (learning his fate) - Fulfillment (enduring tribulation) - Suicide - Self-Knowledge (understanding fate). Within this model, events containing elements of revelation and peripeteia are present [8]. However, these events do not unfold in the tightly sequential order often found in dramatic structure but rather develop according to a logical progression. It is necessary to introduce the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* here to facilitate a comparative analysis. Oedipus's experiences follow a pattern similar to the developmental model mentioned above, which can be summarized as: Prophecy (learning his fate) - Fleeing Fate (which ironically leads to its fulfillment) - Self-Inflicted Harm - Recognition of Fate (Self-Knowledge). The Delphic maxim "Know Thyself"[9] encapsulates the tragic theme of *Oedipus Rex* and represents the inescapable riddle of fate that

Oedipus must confront.

Within this similar narrative structure, the crucial distinction in the actions of Nezha and Oedipus lies in their consciousness of fate. Oedipus is often interpreted as a character who unconsciously endures his destiny. It is only when he decides to take responsibility for the plague devastating Thebes and for his own crimes that he consciously confronts his fate [10]. In contrast, Nezha is aware of his destiny from birth. He does not flee to avoid the mandate of 1,700 killings; instead, he actively fulfills this quota, embodying a wrathful persona. This readily creates a misleading impression that Nezha's agency constitutes not a rebellion against fate, but an acquiescence to it.

To refute this, we must differentiate between Nezha's fate as a god—his divine mandate—and his fate as a human—his earthly destiny. It is true that Nezha knows the killings must be completed, but his actions are arbitrary and self-centered. He does not comprehend that his conduct will impact his mortal parents, Li Jing and his wife. The climax arrives at Chentang Pass when the Dragon Kings of the Four Seas prepare to punish Li Jing's family. Here, his divine and human fates converge. Nezha refrains from further slaughter and makes a choice that runs counter to his divine trajectory: he saves Li Jing and his wife by sacrificing his own life. This act elevates his character, embodying both the principle of sacrificing life for righteousness and, more significantly, the expression of filial piety—a virtue supremely valued in Chinese culture.

In this moment, the blood-stained, wrathful deity protects others for the first time. This constitutes a defiance of external oppressive fate through his humanity—resisting his human destiny by acting contrary to the methods of a god. This complex defiance continues into his second transformation. After the bond of gratitude with his parents is severed, what ultimately persuades Nezha to abandon his vengeance is his genuine recognition of a higher mission: to forsake personal vendetta for the sake of social justice.

This wrathful deity's twofold renunciation of violence undeniably resonates with the concept of anthropomorphism in ancient Greek mythological thought. He refuses to use his divine power to resist oppression, acknowledging the social principle of individual accountability. He also sets aside the human impulse for revenge to fulfill his divine mission. Thus, while Nezha is always conscious of his fate as a god, his understanding of humanity is learned gradually. Through his continual struggle with destiny, he comes to realize that the part of his fate pertaining to his humanity cannot be resolved or evaded by any divine power. Like Oedipus, it is only after Nezha is reconstituted in the lotus root body—a return to the source of life—that he truly comprehends the workings of his dual fate as both god and human. He courageously shoulders the consequences of both his mortal and divine existences without complaint.

In the classic plot of *Oedipus Rex*, revelation and peripeteia occur almost simultaneously. As we know, in the scene where Oedipus learns from the messenger of his crimes of patricide and incest, and subsequently chooses to blind himself and go into exile to end the plague ravaging Thebes, the protagonist's moment of discovery—the realization that the prophecy has been fulfilled—is immediately followed by a drastic peripeteia in his life's circumstances. He plummets from a revered king to a criminal and a wandering blind man. Oedipus undergoes an instantaneous transformation, engineered through intricate plot construction.

In Nezha's story, however, the protagonist's growth is marked by suicide as the pivotal moment of peripeteia. After his death, he transforms not only from a violent, slaughterous wrathful deity into a responsive god who answers prayers, but his societal perception also shifts dramatically from a demon everyone shuns to a benevolent deity trusted by the common people. This reversal concludes the state of being despised that characterized his life before death. However, the element of revelation—the moment of profound understanding—does not truly exert its influence on Nezha as an external catalyst until he encounters the Exquisite Pagoda, the artifact capable of subduing him. The two events—his suicide and his subsequent relinquishment of vengeance against Li Jing—jointly facilitate Nezha's anagnorisis regarding his own situation.

When we are appalled by Nezha's casual killing of the yaksha, Ao Bing, and other monsters, we might consider that, from a divine perspective, these were merely necessary minor actions to complete the quota of 1,700 killings. Yet, it is precisely through the plotlines of his suicide for his parents and his pursuit of Li Jing that we come to understand this: when confronted with a complex destiny, Nezha possesses the heart of a mortal—daring to act and accept the consequences, forthright and upright. In stark contrast to the tragic conclusion of Oedipus, Nezha, despite his more overtly violent and externalized rebellion against destiny, ultimately achieves a symbiotic, win-win resolution with his fate. This exemplifies an intrinsic optimism within Chinese mythology, which posits that the protagonist need not engage in a mutually destructive struggle with fate. Instead, it affirms the possibility of attaining a harmonious and fulfilling outcome through relentless personal endeavor.

The narrative of Nezha is not an isolated case in point. The fable *The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* from the ancient text *Liezi* recounts how the Foolish Old Man and his descendants, through generations of unyielding labor to move two great mountains, moved the Celestial Emperor, who subsequently dispatched deities to relocate them, thereby securing unimpeded passage for his progeny. "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains" has since evolved into an enduring proverb, extolling the virtues of perseverance and the conviction of "human determination conquering nature." This fundamental belief, persistent from the mythological conceptions of ancient China to the modern era, underscores a divergent attitude towards fate between ancient Chinese civilization and that of ancient Greece. In Greek tragedy, the protagonist is inexorably fated to fail, and this very failure paradoxically forges and intensifies their heroic stature. Conversely, protagonists in Chinese mythology, while also confronting seemingly insurmountable challenges, seldom aspire to the sublime grandeur of tragedy. They are instead steadfastly committed to the pursuit of victory—and frequently achieve it.

4. Conclusion

From a socio-historical perspective, this dichotomy is attributable to the distinct historical milieus of the two cultures. The Greek city-state civilization, having undergone the Peloponnesian War, was in a state of gradual decline. In contrast, the unified structure of ancient China provided a relatively stable political framework and societal foundation. Diverging from the pervasive disillusionment born from military defeat in Greek society, China's agrarian civilization emphasized continuous regeneration and cyclical renewal. Chinese mythology consequently often reveals a profound anticipation for a prosperous future. Thus, while both Chinese mythology and ancient Greek tragedy share the universal themes of defying and seeking to master destiny, they articulate these themes through markedly different narrative modes and philosophical attitudes. The literary works derived from these respective traditions consequently radiate the unique cultural allure inherent to their origins.

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