

# Analyzing the Evolution of the Nezha Character through Nezha Conquers the Dragon King and Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child

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**Abstract:** The textual image and basic storyline of Nezha were perfected in the Ming Dynasty's *Journey to the West* and *The Investiture of the Gods*, and the story of Nezha has been adapted by many film and television workers. The image of Nezha also has different representations in different times. This paper takes the image of Nezha in *The Story of the Gods* as the prototype. By comparing *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* with the original character, this paper analyzes the inheritance and innovation of his task shaping from two aspects of appearance and core, and then explores how cultural creators can attract the public's interest and recognition in the adaptation and creation of the character image.

**Keywords:** Nezha Characterization; Modernization Humanization.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Nezha, a culturally significant character in Chinese folklore, has been adapted and reimagined in various film and television versions, with the most memorable being the 79th iteration of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and the 19th version of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. The success of the latter represents an exciting new chapter for Chinese comics, as it reflects the industry's rapid growth in portraying China's history, culture, and collective consciousness.

Upon viewing these two cinematic interpretations, it is clear that the characterizations have undergone significant changes. By delving into the innovative characterization achieved with these cultural works, cultural creators can broaden their perspectives on how to create and adopt characters. Moreover, these experiences provide invaluable references that can enhance the characterization of future film and television works.

### 1.2. Research Content

The textual portrayal of Nezha appears in a large number of myths and legends, with the Ming Dynasty's *Journey to the West* and *The Investiture of the Gods* perfecting the image and basic storyline of Nezha. In this paper, Nezha from *The Investiture of the Gods* is chosen as the prototype of Nezha's image.

The research focuses on three areas: analyzing how characters in the 79th edition of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* compares to prototypes, examining characterization in the 19th version of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* in relation to archetypal image, and evaluating changes in both versions relative to the prototype to determine if characterization is inherited or innovative. The overall goal is to explore ways cultural creators can adapt traditional stories to create popular characters and attract public interest.

## 2. Literary Review

A number of scholars have also examined how the image

of Nezha in these two films has been inherited and developed in comparison to that of *The Investiture of the Gods*.

Pan Lulu argues that the characterization in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* breaks the stereotypes of the characters concerned in the traditional text [1]. Li Jie found that the success of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* can be attributed to its ability to evoke traditional emotions in the characters, combined with an anti-traditional character design[2]. Xia Yutong summarizes the similarities and differences between Nezha's image and the original, namely that the film interprets Nezha as an "anti-hero", but the character still shines with traditional Chinese virtues[3].

From this, we can conclude that the image of Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is an innovative and subversive rewriting of the traditional character that is more in line with the values of modern people.

In a study comparing *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* with *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Zhina argues that the boundaries between good and evil are blurred in the new version of Ne Zha, and that each character manifests the world's pattern of good and evil and coexistence[4]. Zhang Ouwen argues that the image of Nezha changes from the divinity to the humanity, then to a demonic child[5,6].

## 3. Methodology

This article employs the textual close reading method, sample analysis method, and comparative research method to examine the characteristics of personality of Nezha. The study establishes Nezha's image in *The Investiture of the Gods* as a textual archetype, treating it as a constant. The 79th version of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and the 19th version of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* are selected as samples for analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The Changes of Nezha's Character Traits in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *The Investiture of the Gods*

Nezha's image is made positive. This transformation manifests in the form of a valiant spirit of self-sacrifice, dedicated to the righteous cause of punishing evil and promoting good. Consequently, Nezha's image becomes imbued with noble qualities of righteousness, kindness, and beauty. In the original narrative, Nezha's reason for killing Ao Bing and Yaksha wasn't justified, but impulsive without considering the consequences. However, in *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*, the character of the Dragon King is depicted as a malevolent force, who engages in the abduction of young boys and girls, thus causing harm to the populace at large. So Nezha's behavior can be seen as defending justice.

The image of Nezha is more heroic in character. In the original text, Nezha's act of self-mutilation in the final episode, known as "flesh and bone cutting," serves as a manifestation of the deeply ingrained concept of filial piety within Chinese culture. However, the movie of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* argues Nezha's character with heroic qualities beyond filial piety. The film accentuates Nezha's self-sacrificial nature by depicting his willingness to offer his life to save the inhabitants of Chen Tang Pass from a flood made by the Dragon King. This alteration aligns Nezha with the archetype of a traditional hero, embodying a selfless devotion to the greater good.

### 4.2. Changes of Character Traits of Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* and *The Investiture of the Gods*

Nezha's image is humane. Nezha's character in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is imbued with qualities that appeal to human nature, particularly in his portrayal as a child. For example, after meeting Ao Bing and considering him as his only friend, Nezha only asks for a simple wish: "that you come to my party." Nezha's persistence in obtaining Ao Bing's affirmation of attending the party reflects a relatable desire for companionship and social connection and a fear of rejection. This movie amplifies Nezha's personality characteristics as a child. Nezha in *The Investiture of the Gods* actually has a childish side. However, this depiction of the image shaping of Nezha's children has been weakened, and more focused on the uniqueness and extraordinary display of Nezha as a god.

*Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* also incorporates a character arc for Nezha, showcasing the development and growth of his character through the choices he makes. For example, Nezha's character growth pertains to his attitude towards his parents. As the plot unfolds, Nezha recognizes the love and sacrifices his parents have made for him, leading to a shift in his attitude. This transformation highlights Nezha's maturation and deepening understanding of love. This is very different from the plot of *The Investiture of the Gods*, one is father-killer and the other is reconciliation. Nezha's eventual growth was when he shouted "My life depends on me" self-awakening. From the beginning, the audience can only see the demonic surface of Nezha, then deeply understand Nezha's road to self-awakening.

Nezha's image merges with the spirit of fighting fate. In *The Investiture of the Gods*[6], Taiyi Zhenren's words confirms Nezha's actions, such as killing Night Ao Bing,

injuring the Dragon King, and mistakenly taking the life of Shiji's maid, are predetermined by fate and unalterable while aiding Nezha in confronting Lady Shiji. This implies that Shiji's death serves as a stepping stone for Nezha's future transformation into a lotus, signifying Nezha's destined role in assisting the revival of the Zhou dynasty. It is worth noting that Nezha's acknowledgment of fate allows him to rationalize his actions, providing a sense of justification. In this perspective, each time Nezha is deemed to have acted evilly, there is a higher power responsible for addressing the consequences after his demise. But Nezha in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* is a child who refuses to bow to fate. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Nezha is born to be a disaster and is destined to die by lightning three years after his birth. Despite this, he refuses to succumb to his predetermined fate. With the support and care of his parents, he remains committed to doing what is right, even when faced with misunderstanding from the villagers. With his own efforts, Nezha got rid of the bondage of the devil child. He was a rebel against an unfair fate. In the face of the final death, he fearlessly faced his fate, and finally successfully resolved and changed his life against heaven. He didn't admit his misfortune is predetermined by God, which allowed him to successfully change his fate at last. Compared with *The Investiture of the Gods*, which takes the destiny of heaven as its main idea, Nezha puts its theme on the opposite of the ancient Chinese thought of "the destiny of heaven" and emphasizes the subjective initiative of man.

### 4.3. The Style of Character Shaping Which We Can Learned from Both Movies

Characters in film often possess unique traits that may include positive characteristics such as humor, optimism, and perseverance, or skills and talents in the arts or other areas that inspire admiration or appreciation. While these traits may distinguish a character from others, they do not necessarily create a deep emotional connection with viewers. However, the films *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* endow Nezha with distinctive personality traits that engender a strong emotional connection with the audience. In the first one, Nezha is portrayed as a hero who sacrifices himself for the greater good, fearlessly challenging authority and overcoming evil forces. In the second one, Nezha defies his predetermined fate and chooses to follow his own path despite the obstacles he faces. What sets these traits apart and resonates with audiences is that they represent choices that are different from those commonly made by ordinary people.

Characters in films need to align with the values of the contemporary era. In 1979, China embarked on the path of reform and opening up, marking the first year after the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution. The film reflects on past historical experiences and encourages people to have the courage to confront and combat forces of evil. In today's society, our primary contradictions have changed, and filmmakers should create works that resonate with the youth of today. In *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, Nezha is portrayed as a character who is more relatable to ordinary young people. He resembles the majority of people in society while also being distinct from any single individual. Contemporary individuals seem to have more choices but also carry greater burdens. When we were young, we were full of passion, but as we grow older, we willingly go with the flow. Many times, we believe that everything is predetermined.

However, Nezha states, "Who are you? Only you can decide. Who do you want to become? Only you have the power to determine." He represents the struggle deep in the hearts of contemporary youths and serves as a portrayal of every individual who refuses to accept defeat, give up, or resign to fate. Nezha embodies the contemporary youth who wholeheartedly strive for their dreams.

Characters need to break the audience's expectations. As a frequently adapted character, Nezha seemed to have set a template for subsequent depictions in films after the 1979 version of *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King*. Though the film reconstructed characters from *The Investiture of the Gods*, Nezha appeared as a hero who embodies righteous values and seems to become another conventional figure. However, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* broke away from this stereotype. The depiction of his demonic nature was magnified in *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*. This development created a new image of Nezha that deviated from the impression of a heroic child in our minds. The creators offered different perspectives on the character, and this reversal heightened viewers' anticipation for future plot developments. It also provided viewers with a fresh and comprehensive understanding of familiar screen images.

## 5. Conclusion

*Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* and *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* are classic works that remake the Nezha story in *The Investiture of the Gods* in different eras, especially the success of *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* has also injected new vitality into the Nezha IP. As an art, film can play the same role as books to gain insight into people's hearts and bring people strength. The main characters in the film are also one of the criteria for judging the quality of the movie. Today, when the image of Nezha is constantly being remade, we will explore in depth what differences exist between the character image of Nezha and the prototype character, and extract from these differences what is needed to create a good work that the public likes to see. Analyzing the success of film character shaping can also help film and television creators broaden their perspectives and create better and more recognized

works from a newer perspective.

Compared with the *The Investiture of the Gods*, *Nezha Conquers the Dragon King* labels Nezha as a hero and a positive image; *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* pays more attention to the growth route of Nezha itself than *The Investiture of the Gods*. Both are based on Nezha's rebellious qualities, that is, one is a rebellion against external feudal forces, the other is a rebellion against his own destiny, adding to the characters the characteristics that resonate most with the audience at that time. It is also necessary to change the focus of character shaping in accordance with the times. The dismantling and reconstruction of the "Nezha Story" in different eras reflects the spiritual appeal of that era. When film and television workers adapt texts or create new characters, they can refer to different versions of the "Nezha Story" adaptation, focusing on excavating the deep psychology of the characters to mobilize the audience's emotions, so as to resonate and gain public recognition.

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