

# Deconstruction and Reconstruction: The Modernist Transformation of Traditional Myth in Jiaozi's Animation and the Contemporary Cultural Significance of the Nezha Image

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the post-2015 works of Chinese animation director Jiaozi (Yang Yu), focusing on *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child* (2019), *Jiang Ziya* (2020), and *Ne Zha: The Devil Child Makes Havoc in the Sea* (2024). By integrating postmodern theory, feminist critique, and the philosophy of digital technology, it explores the pathways through which Jiaozi deconstructs and modernizes traditional Chinese mythology. Our findings reveal that Jiaozi transforms classical myths into contemporary cultural allegories through the violent deconstruction of power symbols, the narrative subversion of female characters, and the Eastern transmutation of technological aesthetics. Notably, the reconstruction of the Nezha figure not only signifies a modern awakening of individual consciousness but also functions as a dynamic vessel for Chinese cultural identity within the global context. This study transcends the traditional fidelity-based discourse surrounding mythological adaptation by adopting a three-dimensional analytical framework grounded in semiotics, narratology, and the philosophy of technology, thereby identifying innovative pathways for the modern transformation of traditional cultural resources in Chinese animation.

## KEYWORDS

Mythological deconstruction; Cultural identity; Digital aesthetics; Modern transformation

## 1 Introduction: Mythology as Cultural Algorithm

In the age of algorithmic culture and global narrative circulation, Chinese animation no longer serves as a vessel for folkloric fidelity but as a site of mythological re-coding. Director Jiaozi (Yang Yu) exemplifies this shift by deploying postmodern strategies to deconstruct the ideological scaffolding of imperial myth and reconstruct it as a contemporary cultural algorithm—one that negotiates individual agency, gender politics, and techno-Oriental aesthetics.

## 2 Postmodern Deconstruction of Myth: Power, Violence, and the Demystification of Rebellion

### 2.1 From Mandate to Discipline: The Foucauldian Celestial Bureaucracy

In classical Chinese mythology, Tianming (天命, the Mandate of Heaven) operates as an inalienable metaphysical authority. Jiaozi subverts this cosmological absolutism by reimagining the celestial hierarchy as a Foucauldian disciplinary society. In *Ne Zha: The Devil Child Makes Havoc in the Sea*, the alchemy laboratory of Taiyi Zhenren is rendered through montage: the “nine-cycle refining process” is juxtaposed with the repetitive hand-gestures of disciples, forming a visual metaphor of industrial temporal discipline. The immortal cultivation system is grafted onto modern bureaucratic rationality, exposing the alienation of the individual under symbolic power.

A close-up of calloused knees among citizens of Chentang Pass visualizes what Foucault terms the “microphysics of power”—a network of capillary control that inscribes obedience onto the body. Thus, the celestial order is no longer a metaphysical given but a disciplinary apparatus that manufactures docile subjects.

### 2.2 The Spectacle of Rebellion: Scripted Resistance in Late Capitalism

Nezha's viral slogan—“My fate is mine to decide, not heaven's”—is often read as a triumph of individualism. Yet, a micro-scene undercuts this libertarian fantasy: Li Jing polishing the Xuanyuan Sword reflects a predestined inscription—“the star of salvation across ten reincarnations.” The spirit-pearl reincarnation is revealed as a pre-scripted rebellion, orchestrated by the very power it purports to defy.

This simulacrum of resistance echoes Fredric Jameson's notion of the “cultural logic of late capitalism”: any act of rebellion is recuperated as a systemic update. Similarly, Ao Bing's flooding of Chentang Pass—seemingly an insurrection against celestial oppression—is exposed as a crisis-management tool wielded by the Dragon Kings to consolidate control over aquatic tribes. Baudrillard's dictum—“rebellion as performance”—is literalized: resistance becomes a consumable sign within the semiotic regime of power.

### 3 Gendered Subversion: From Symbolic Tool to Narrative Agent

#### 3.1 Maternal Reframing: Lady Yin's "Shuttlecock Revolution"

Traditional mythologies reduce Lady Yin to a biological conduit or tragic sacrificial mother (e.g., the flesh-cutting scene in *Investiture of the Gods*). Jiaozi reconfigures her as a female general in armor, whose shuttlecock game with Nezha becomes a metaphor for modern parenting: her sweaty martial stance contrasts with Nezha's playful demeanor, transforming the shuttlecock into a medium that punctures patriarchal discipline. When Li Jing attempts to interrupt with "rules," Lady Yin retorts, "He's just a child"—a micro-rebellion against paternal order.

This maternal reconstruction aligns with Germaine Greer's feminist claim: motherhood should be a resource for female subjectivity, not a shackle. Lady Yin embodies the compatibility of maternity and individual agency, rupturing the Confidelity vs. Subversion binary.

#### 3.2 Female Villain Complexity: Ao Rui's "Manicure Violence" and Gender Anxiety

Ao Rui—the Western Sea Dragon King—emerges as a rare female antagonist in Chinese animation. Her design fuses feminine semiotics (smoky eyeshadow, elongated nails) with phallic aggression (dragon scales, claws), destabilizing the angel/whore dichotomy. Her nails function simultaneously as gender markers and lethal weapons, exposing how gender signs are weaponized in power games.

Ao Rui's attempt to seize power—by refining aquatic soldiers—ends in deeper alienation, dramatizing the double bind of modern women: to transcend gender limits is to risk re-inscription into another symbolic order. Thus, good vs. evil cedes to structural critique of gendered power.

### 4 Techno-Oriental Aesthetics: AI Storyboards and Cloud Rendering as Cultural Encoding

#### 4.1 AI Storyboard Systems: From Efficiency Tool to Narrative Epistemology

Jiaozi's team developed a dynamic storyboard AI system that increases production efficiency by 40%. More crucially, it translates Eastern aesthetic concepts into algorithmic parameters. In *Ne Zha: The Devil Child Makes Havoc in the Sea*, the "Map of Mountains and Rivers" sequence employs deep-learning deconstruction of Song-dynasty blue-green landscapes and Suzhou garden topology, converting "leaving blank" (留白) and "borrowed scenery" (借景) into quantifiable cinematic syntax.

AI-generated water dynamics reference both Huang Gongwang's *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* and fluid-mechanics equations, producing a visual sublime that is simultaneously poetic and physicist. What was once ineffable "aura" becomes computable "cultural algorithm", enabling cross-cultural translatability without Orientalist flattening.

#### 4.2 Cloud Rendering: Digital Archaeology of Ink Aesthetics

Collaborating with Tencent Cloud, Jiaozi's studio iterates 95 versions of the "Black Wind Cave" sequence in *White Snake: Origin* to recreate the misty ink effects of Mi Fu's "Mi-family landscapes." Particle systems simulate ink diffusion physics, achieving a "between resemblance and non-resemblance" modern reinterpretation.

Dragon King designs reference Forbidden City nine-dragon wall motifs, yet incorporate dinosaur skeletal structures and reptilian skin textures, transforming imperial symbols into bio-historical visual signs. This "traditional symbol + modern anatomy" strategy exemplifies Lefebvre's "production of space": technology reconfigures cultural memory's spatial carrier.

### 5 Nezha as Global Cultural Code: From Mythic Hero to Transmedia Icon

#### 5.1 Psychological Translation of Rebellion: Awakening of Individual Consciousness

Nezha's tearing of the "demon" label in *Birth of the Demon Child* signals a refusal of societal labeling itself, not merely defiance of a specific authority. The symbiotic dilemma between Nezha (the prophesied savior) and Ao Bing (the disciplined avenger) mirrors youth entrapment in China's involuted society: individuals struggle within pre-assigned roles while seeking transcendence of structural limits.

#### 5.2 Dynamic Negotiation of Cultural Identity: From Ethnic Symbol to Global Allegory

Nezha's global circulation relies on multi-decodability. In North America, the "demon bead" stigma is read as racial

allegory; in Southeast Asia, family bonds resonate with Confucian ethics. This re-contextualization validates Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model: cultural signs are re-territorialized across reception contexts.

Merchandise further cyborgizes tradition: the Universal Ring becomes a smart wearable, the Red Arm Ribbon a fashion scarf. With 32 % overseas box-office share and ¥800 million in 衍生品 sales, *Nezha* signals China's shift from ethnic narrative to global cultural capital.

## 6 Conclusion: The Modernist Productive Mechanism of Myth

Jiaozi's trilogy establishes a "deconstruction – encoding – circulation" model for mythological modernization. This model:

- (1) Deconstructs imperial power narratives via postmodern irony;
- (2) Re-encodes traditional symbols through algorithmic aesthetics and gendered subversion;
- (3) Re-circulates them as transmedia cultural capital in global markets.

Thus, Chinese animation escapes the fidelity/subversion binary, proving that myth can function as:

- A critique of modernity,
- A laboratory for techno-aesthetics,
- A platform for cross-cultural identity negotiation.

As generative AI and cross-media storytelling evolve, future research should explore how algorithmic mythology reshapes cultural memory beyond the screen—into games, VR, and immersive exhibitions.

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