

Movie Review of Ne Zha II ----From the Perspective of the Dissemination of Cultural Soft Power of China

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Abstract

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations. The past several decades have witnessed its great national rejuvenation. The hard power of China has been strengthened extraordinarily. For instance, China, as one of the world's largest exporters, has the world's fastest growing economy and has been the second-largest national economy since 2011. Compared with its hard power, the soft power, especially the cultural soft power is still facing challenges. Chinese authors, literary scholars, philosophers, artists and other cultural practitioners are all working hard to strengthen Chinese cultural soft power in different fields and making progresses. A case in point is the movie Nezha II which has achieved tremendous box office success and has now become the global box office champion for animated movies. This paper shall review the movie from the perspective of the dissemination of cultural soft power of China.

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I. Introduction to Movie Nezha II

1. Who is Nezha?

Most Chinese audiences only know that Nezha is a famous Chinese mythological figure and the son of Li Jing, the commander of Chentangguan, a place in south China. Not many of them knew that Nezha first appeared in the ancient Indian epic “Ramayana” in which he was called Nalakuvara or Nata Kubara, the third prince of Vaisravana or Kubera. In ancient Indian culture, Vaisravana or Kubera is one of the Four Heavenly Kings. He guards the north and is also known as the Northern Heavenly King. He is the god of wealth in Hindu and Buddhist mythology, in charge of wealth and treasures. After Buddhism was introduced from India to China, the Northern Heavenly King is called Duo Wen Heavenly King. In many Chinese temples he often wears armor, holding a pagoda in their left hand, and holding a small mouse in their right hand. Or, he simply holds an umbrella as a symbol of protection. Nezha is the son of the Northern Heavenly King and at the same time, the protector deity of Buddhism

In Chinese mythology, Nezha is depicted as a lovely little boy who can change to be one with three heads and six arms, standing on wind and fire wheels, and holding a red tassel gun. In fact, The image of the Nezha with three heads and six arms is in line with the image of the protector deity in Indian Buddhism. But the Chinese cultural environment quickly changed the original image of Nezha. Chinese Taoism absorbed the story of Nezha from Buddhism and transformed it, replacing Nezha's father from the Northern Heavenly King to the Tang Dynasty famous general Li Jing, who is also known as the Tota Heavenly King in mythological stories. In Buddhist scriptures, Nezha is a protector against demons and monsters. In Taoist stories, Nezha is a cute little boy who fights against the Dragon King.

2. The main content of Movie Nezha II

Nezha II is the second story of the “Nezha” film series. It is a fantasy animated film written and directed by Jiao Zi (formerly known as Yang Yu), with Lv Yanting and Chen Hao as the main voice actors. The entire movie has been modified based on stories related to Chinese Taoism. At the beginning of the story, Taiyi Immortal was ordered to give a “spiritual” pill to Nezha, the son of Chentangguan commander Li Jing. However, by a twist of fate, a “demon” pill entered Nezha’s body, making him the evil “magic child” in the eyes of everyone. The spiritual pill was taken by Aobing, the son of the dragon King. When Nezha was born, he caused a disaster due to the power of the “demon” pill and was regarded as a monster by the people of Chentangguan. Despite his parents’ efforts to protect him, Nezha still became rebellious due to loneliness and misunderstanding. Nezha and Aobing met on the beach of East Sea and the two magic children became friends. As a reincarnation of a demon pill nurtured by the spiritual energy of heaven and earth, Nezha was destined to suffer a heavenly tribulation and die three years later. Faced with the tribulation, Nezha and Aobing worked together to fight against it, meanwhile, saving the people of Chentangguan and earning respect. After the Heavenly Tribulation, although the souls of Nezha and Aobing are preserved, their physical bodies are about to be destroyed. In order to save them, Taiyi Immortal decided to use the Seven Colored Lotus to reshape their physical bodies. However, the process of reshaping the physical body is full of difficulties and challenges. Taiyi Immortal took Nezha to seek help from his friend, Wuji Immortal who was a hypocritical demon in disguise. He designed to induce the imprisoned Dragon King to flood Chentangguan, Nezha’s hometown. Although the commander Li Jing and his wife, tried their best, they were still unable to ensure the safety of the people in Chentangguan. Nezha, in order to avenge his parents and protect the people of Chentangguan, engaged in a thrilling battle with Chan Jiao (Exposition of Doctrine) led by the Wuji Immortal.

It is necessary to introduce Chanjiao (Esposition of Doctrine) and Jiejiao (Intercept Teaching) here, both of which are sects under the sect of Hongjun Forefather in “Investiture of the Gods”. Chanjiao founded by Yuan Shi Tian Zun, is a sect that represents the righteous path, advocating compliance with the mandate of heaven. His disciples are mostly morally upright and highly cultivated immortals. Jiejiao was founded by the leader of the Tongtian Sect, advocating going against the heavens, being unconstrained, advocating strength and freedom. Its disciples are mostly demons, monsters, and practitioners of different kinds. In “Investiture of the Gods”, there was a fierce struggle between Jiejiao and Chanjiao. The disciples of Jiejiao supported King Zhou of Shang Dynasty, while the disciples of Chanjiao assisted King Wu of Zhou Dynasty. The two sides engaged in a fierce struggle, and ultimately Jiejiao was defeated². The fight between Nezha and Wuji Immortal of Chanjiao precisely demonstrates that the so-called “right” and “wrong” are not fixed.

²https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%B0%81%E7%A5%9E%E6%BC%94%E4%B9%89/69344?fromModule=search-result_lemma

Nezha II has achieved tremendous box office success and has now become the global box office champion for animated movies. Nezha II has been released in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Greece, South Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia and many other countries and areas, and has been well received by the Chinese community and local audiences, achieving widespread international influence. In the following part of the paper, the commercial and cultural value of Nezha II will be analyzed from the perspective of the popular expression and positive output of China's cultural soft power.

II. Movie Nezha II and China's soft power

1. The definition of Soft Power³

Soft power, as opposed to hard power, refers to spiritual power, including soft elements such as political power, cultural power, and diplomatic power. Joseph Nye, Dean of the Kennedy School of Politics at Harvard University, first proposed this concept in the 1980s. When analyzing the constituent elements of a country's comprehensive national strength, it is usually divided into tangible and intangible forces, or hard and soft power. He believes that hard power refers to dominant power, including basic resources such as land area, population, natural resources, military power, economic power, and technological power; Soft power is divided into national cohesion, the degree to which culture is widely recognized, and the degree of participation in international institutions. In contrast, hard power is easier to understand, while soft power is more complex. Joseph Nye summarized soft power as guiding power, attraction, and emulation power, which is an assimilative power, the ability of a country's ideology to attract and politically guide. Famous British scholar Robert Cooper believes that legitimacy is the core element of soft power.⁴ In short, hard power and soft power are closely related yet distinct from each other. They are complementary, mutually restrictive, and coordinated. Hard power is the materialization of soft power, while soft power is the intangible extension of hard power.

2. Report on China's Cultural Soft Power

Cultural soft power is an important component of a country's soft power. The Chinese national culture is vast and profound, with a long history, and is the primary resource and important foundation of China's cultural soft power. The thousands of years of civilization have nurtured countless brilliant literary masterpieces. These literary works undoubtedly reflect the soft power of our culture. With the development of society, lots of Chinese literary works have been adapted into many film and television works and exported to a large number of countries outside China.

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out during the 12th collective study session of the Central Political Bureau in 2013 that enhancing the country's cultural soft power is related to the realization of the "Two Centenary Goals" and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the Chinese Dream. Chinese cultural confidence is built on the foundation of over 5000 years of civilization inheritance. Since then, the cultural soft power of China has been greatly strengthened in all aspects. Taking the "2023 Research Report on the Development of Chinese Online Literature" released by the Institute of Literature of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as an example, in 2023, the market size of China's global online literature will exceed 4 billion yuan, with about 620000 original works overseas and about 230 million overseas visiting users.⁵

3. The Cultural Core of Movie Nezha II

The key to the movie's huge box office success both domestically and internationally, is that its story is deeply rooted in the vast fertile land of Chinese culture. It helps spread Eastern aesthetics and Chinese virtues.

First, nothing is more important than family. This emotion is deeply rooted in Chinese culture and enough to make the audience compassionate. Nezha, as the reincarnation of the demon pill, was taken as a monster when he was a little boy. His mother disregarded all the gossips, accompanying Nezha to kick shuttlecock, and searching for ways to break the curse for him everywhere. Her selfless maternal love helps Nezha overcome difficulties and obstacles.

³ <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%BD%AF%E5%AE%9E%E5%8A%9B/3008802>

⁴ <https://www.fx361.com/page/2021/1021/8980151.shtml>

⁵ <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1792124501335241800&wfr=spider&for=pc>

When Nezha was about to go to Yuxu Palace to study under a master, his mother stuffed her son with lots of food she had personally cooked and repeated her concern: “You have a bad temper. This is your first time traveling alone without your parents, so you must consider everything carefully and stay calm when encountering things.” This seemingly ordinary lines remind countless people of the moments with parents. At the end of the film, Nezha’s mother would rather become a golden pill than be a hostage of Nezha’s enemies. Countless viewers shed tears unconsciously upon seeing this.

Another story is about Shen Xiaobao, the younger brother of Shen Gongbao, a protector of Chentangguan. The little boy was full of admiration for his brother and tirelessly traveled across mountains and valleys to see his brother. When he asked about his brother’s career, Li Jing and his wife informed him that his brother was guarding Chentangguan and engaged in the great cause of protecting the people. The words of Li Jing and his wife are not simply to help Shen Gongbao, but also to set a good example for Shen Xiaobao. After all, an excellent role model in the family is enough to benefit children for life on their path of growth. Shen Gongbao, the big brother kept the best medicine for his little brother and his father to take. This also reflects the deep bond between siblings.

Secondly, all characters in Nezha II are not one-sided individuals who are either black or white. For example, Shen Gongbao, who appears to be the culprit behind the massacre of Chentangguan, was able to maintain rational thinking and use his intelligence to protect the Li Jing couple at the critical moment of losing their loved ones. In addition, Shiji goddess, who does not care about the secular definition of beauty and ugliness, is confident in being herself. Just as she said, “Keep the green mountains here, don't be afraid of running out of firewood.” No matter where she is, she has the courage to make a comeback.

Finally, the film breaks the dualism of immortals and demons, exposing the dark side of ruling power system. Wuji Immortal sacrifice the lives of nine thousand demon tribes just to maintain the position of Chan Jiao. Shen Gongbao is forever blocked from the Twelve Golden Immortals System due to his leopard animal background. These plots point directly to the truth that the final goal of the so-called “immortal system” is to maintain their ruling and privileges using whatever dirty methods.

III. Conclusion

Nezha II is a movie feast, and a vivid display of Chinese cultural confidence as well. Wang Shengyang, the director of the Shanghai Museum of Culture and History and a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, said, “It is because China is now a powerful country that other people pay attention to our culture. That is why we have today’s Nezha II. The whole world is shocked. Suddenly, you have something that a developing country cannot do, so it will cause a sensation worldwide. This is China’s true power. This power is massive in terms of quantity and quality. China has five thousand years of civilization. Among so many countries in the world, China is the only one without cultural interruption. Strong culture is a heritage. Chinese high technology supports such a strong culture, coupled with our country's strong economy. It is not surprising to create the popularity of Nezha II.”⁶

Chinese glorious civilization nurtures countless brilliant literary masterpieces. These literary works undoubtedly reflect the soft power of our culture. China’s long history and splendid culture have been transmitted to all parts of the world through various new media. A typical example is that the rapid development of high technology and economy has helped the rise of Chinese animated films. For instance, Nezha II has reached the peak level of domestic animation in terms of special effects. There are numerous special effects shots in the movie, all of which are of extremely high quality. Among the nearly 2000 special effects shots in the entire film, nearly half of them use self-developed technological systems. These special effects of high technology bring the audience a perfect visual enjoyment. What is more, the movie is based on Chinese traditional mythology, integrating modern narrative and Eastern aesthetics, and endowing Nezha with a completely new image. The movie successfully helps strengthen Chinese cultural identity through the positive image of Nezha. Finally, Nezha II has made more overseas tourists aware of the charm of Chinese fine literature. The overseas wave of Nezha II has followed one after another, receiving many positive reviews from audiences and unprecedented attention to Chinese animation.

Although domestic animated films have made great progress in recent years, there are still many problems. A case in point is proper translation. When telling mythological stories, proper translation is a big headache.

⁶ The interview can be found in Douyin(March the 4th, 2005. broadcasted by 中国三农发布)

For example, '急急如律令' is difficult to translate. This is an incantation. Some people translate it to “Swift and Uplift” or “Swiftly, as decreed by law”, but I prefer not to translate it. Poor translation leads to the loss of the original charm of this incantation.

To sum up, Chinese culture has a long history and contains enormous spiritual wealth. Chinese movie makers should draw nourishment from excellent traditional Chinese culture. We must believe that in the near future, with detailed explanation of traditional mythology, delicate portrayal of characters' inner worlds, and stunning visual effects, Chinese animated films will be brought to new heights and demonstrate full cultural confidence.