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The transformation of images of Nezha and the changing cultural discourses in Chinese national style animated films from 1979 to 2019

Zhuying Li ¹✉

Nezha is a mythological and dynamic character in the Chinese cultural discourse. In traditional China, the mythological character of Nezha represents a cultural integration between Daoism and Buddhism. By applying the Chinese animated films as an approach, this article focuses on exploring the changing cultural discourses of the Chinese national style in post-Maoist cinema through critical analysis of the character of Nezha and the deployment of Daoist philosophy in the construction of Chinese national style from the post-Cultural Revolution context to the post-Socialist context. This article examines two Chinese national-style animated films. The first film is *Nezha Naohai* (1979) which was produced in 1979, and another animated film is *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019) which was produced in contemporary China. Through the film and cultural analysis of *Nezha Naohai* (1979), this article argues that the Daoist philosophy engages in the cultural discourse of Chinese national style and shapes the narrative, rhetoric, aesthetics and characterisation of Nezha in the post-Cultural Revolution context. The contemporary film *Nezha Zhi Montong Jiangshi* (2019) reflects an ideological change in the discourse of Chinese soft power states the power of Chinese culture including Daoist philosophy within a modern and scientific paradigm, which promotes a more international Chinese national identity and national style.

¹School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. ✉email: Zhuying.li@hotmail.com

Introduction

Macdonald (2016, pp. 79–84) argues that the China studies within the context of animated film studies are flourishing and move beyond the limits of Sinology which focuses on premodern literary and cultural topics. Significantly, Chinese animated films engage in the discussion of Chinese national identity and soft power within a larger cultural context. For example, Du (2019, p. 13) suggests that the importance of historical continuity and cultural resonance is reflected in Japanese and American animation studies; thus, the construction of Chinese national identity must be discussed in Chinese animated films.

During the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Fairbank (1969) states that “[C]hina is a uniquely large and compact section of mankind, with the most distinctive and separate of the great historical cultures.” Although animation/animated films are modern cultural productions, Eisenstein (1986, p. 23) elaborates that the “folkloric, mythological and prelogical thought” shapes the visual form and plot in the cultural production of animated films. Indeed, Chinese historical cultures including Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism contributed numerous Chinese cultural forms including Chinese painting, calligraphy, Chinese operas and Chinese literature from ancient China to contemporary China. Importantly, the Daoist and Buddhist mythologies have provided fruitful materials for the development of Chinese national cinema, particularly for the construction of Chinese national-style animated films.

In the era of Modern China, Daoism and Buddhism continually contribute to Chinese screen culture. For example, the mythological character of Monkey King in *Uproar in Heaven* (1964) which was filmed before the Cultural Revolution that linked to Chinese classical literature, *the Journey of West* (1506–1580). After the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the important Chinese animated film *Nezha Naohai* (1979) was released in Chinese cinema which derives from the traditional Chinese literature *Fengshen Yanyi* (1560–1630). In contemporary China, two computer-animated films *Monkey King Hero is Back* (2015) and *Nezha zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019) derived from Daoism and Buddhism have achieved great success in the Chinese film market.

The relationships between mythology and the construction of Chinese national identity varied through different sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts. The period of Socialist China (1949–1979) was the golden age of Chinese animated films, and animation was an important section of “Chinese national cinema”, thus the terms ‘national form’ and ‘national style’ were discussed by filmmakers and academia. Du (2019) argues that the Chinese national identity in the Chinese national style animation refers to a pure Chinese identity¹, which derives from Chinese materials, techniques, aesthetics and traditional culture (i.e., opera, papercutting, ink painting, folklore, mythology and literature). Macdonald (2016) states that the mythological discourse and supernatural topics are not specific to animation, but the incorporation of mythology into the discourse of national style is influenced by ideology. In the case of Chinese animated film, Du (2019, p. 117, 158) argues that the application of mythological discourse including fairy tales was called contemporary or ‘new’ fairy tales, which incorporated the socialist ideology into mythology. However, during the period of the Cultural Revolution, only the depiction of political struggle in children’s daily life survived censorship, and the majority of animated films including ink painting and mythology (i.e., fairy tales, folklore, legends, anthropomorphic animals, gods and spirits) were banned (Du, 2019, p. 161).

Since the Chinese government officially opened up to the world in the late 1970s, the Chinese national cinema has advocated a

form of national and international combination to represent Chinese national identity on the global stage. Since Joseph Nye’s (2004) concept of “soft power” emerged in the 2000s, numerous scholars (Voci and Luo, 2018; Yeung and Fung, 2011; Guo, 2012) argue that the Chinese leadership has officially highlighted the discourse of Chinese soft power which promotes national and historical cultural values including the traditional Chinese philosophies to support the nationalist project of ‘Chinese soft power’. Repnikova (2022, p. 10) demonstrates that ‘Chinese soft power’ merges the means of cultural production which derive from “ideology to values to ancient history, national spirit, governance practices and economic might”. Consequently, the state power, including state investment and market policy fosters the growth of the Chinese animation industry (Voci, 2010). Du (2019) suggests that the national style became an official and institutionalised discourse that dominates the animation industry in mainland China. Du (2019) argues that the discourse of the national style highlights the Chinese government’s political framework of soft power. Thereby, Bao (2010, p. 225) argues that Chinese cinema including animation should root in traditional Chinese culture to convey “Chinese features, Chinese stories, Chinese images, Chinese styles, Chinese manner, and Chinese spirit.”

Similar to other profound civilisations, the development of Chinese civilisation is a process of learning, absorbing and integrating foreign cultures. From ancient China to contemporary China, the construction of the Chinese national identity has continually transformed in different cultural, political and ideological contexts. Scholars (Macdonald, 2016; Du, 2019) argue that post-Socialist cinema including Chinese animation reflects an ideological change that the framework of Chinese national identity absorbs Western and scientific paradigms to make the Chinese national style of animation become more international. Therefore, this article aims to apply the Chinese animated film as an effective approach to explore the sociocultural and ideological changes from the post-cultural revolution to the post-socialist context and how the post-Maoist screen culture engages in the construction of Chinese national style through the mythology of Nezha.

Historians (Chan, 2008; Liu, 2009) argue that the character of Nezha first appeared in Buddhist texts including *Chanlin Sengbaozhuan* (1071–1128) and *Wudeng Huiyuan* (1253) in the Song dynasty (960–1279), and initially played the role of protector deity in Buddhist mythology. Through the long history of integration between Buddhism and Daoism in ancient China, Nezha was also recognised as a Daoist immortal in *Sanjiao Shoushen Daquan* (1368–1644). The classic literature of *Fengshen Yanyi* (1560–1630) introduces the full Story of Nezha. Madame Yin, Li Jing’s wife has been pregnant for three and a half years. Madame Yin dreams of a Daoist immortal throwing a Pearl Spirit to her belly and that gives birth to Nezha. Nezha is a little boy who has two magical weapons, one is a red silk sash which is named the Open-Sky sash and the other one is called the *Qiankun* bracelet. One day, Nezha is cleaning his magical and powerful weapons in the Eastern Sea and he kills the son of the Dragon King by accident. The Dragon King is extremely angry and thus he gathers the other three Dragon Kings to report Nezha’s wrongdoing to the Jade Emperor (the ruler of immortals in Daoist heaven). The Jade Emperor orders the Heaven army to arrest Nezha’s parents. According to the Confucian value of filial piety, Nezha uses a sword to cut off his bones and belly, which signifies that he has returned his body to his parents. After the death of Nezha, the Daoist master Taiyi applies lotus flowers and Nezha’s soul to make Nezha reborn.

The mythological character of Nezha was initially introduced to China by Buddhism, but Nezha functions as a distinguishable

symbol of Chinese culture to represent Chinese soft power and national identity in the field of intercultural communication. Macdonald (2016, p. 191) argues that the national-style animated film of *Nezha Naohai* (1979) represented “a return to mythological and fantastic animated production after the strict politicised cinema of the Cultural Revolution”.

Thus, analysis of the character of Nezha in Chinese national cinema and explorations of the changing sociopolitical and sociocultural context after the Cultural Revolution is important. This article applies two Chinese national-style animated films regarding the mythological motif of Nezha that are produced in different ideological contexts in post-Socialist national cinema. The first Chinese national-style animated film is *Nezha Naohai* (hereafter *Nezha*, 1979), which was produced by director Wang Schunchen and played the role of propaganda for criticising the Gang of Four in the transitional period of post-Maoist China. Another Chinese national-style animated film is *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019) which is a commercial film that was directed by Jiaozi and has achieved great success in the film market since it was released in 2019.

The film of *Nezha Naohai* (1979)

The animated film *Nezha* (1979) is a post-Maoist cinematic production that responds to the Cultural Revolution and is one of the most popular adaptations of the mythology of Nezha in Chinese national cinema. As the first wide-screen animated film produced in contemporary China, *Nezha* (1979) is a landmark in the history of Chinese animated film. This film won many international awards including the Cannes Films Festival in 1980, and the Special Award at Manila International Film Festival in 1983. This film was produced in 1978 and released on May 19, 1979, a transitional period that articulates the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and post-Cultural Revolution. Macdonald (2016, p. 178) reads this film as “the key film of the transitional period following the Cultural Revolution. With links to scar literature and art, the suicide and reincarnation of the boy-god Nezha move towards an open-ended and unresolved historic finale.” However, Chinese traditional culture was criticised and banned during the Cultural Revolution. This article argues that the mythological character of Nezha is one of the initial icons that manifests a significant transformation in Chinese popular culture, soft power and cultural integration after the Cultural Revolution. The Daoist philosophy of *Yin-yang* and *Wuxing* engaged in the cultural discourse of Chinese national style and shaped the narrative, rhetoric, aesthetics and characterisation of Nezha after the Cultural Revolution.

Macdonald (2016) notes that the director and screenwriter of *Nezha* (1979), Wang Shuchen applies the Daoist mythology of Nezha which derives from *Fengshen Yanyi* for political reasons. The director of *Nezha* (1979) uses the narrative of Nezha conquers Four Dragons with specific references to the failure of the Gang of Four, which enables this animated film to not only be suitable for children but also attract the attention of adults (Wang 1979 cited in Macdonald, 2016). The film’s director does not mention the purpose of the *Nezha* (1979) was to promote the traditional Chinese culture after the Cultural Revolution.² However, through the film analysis of *Nezha* (1979), I argue that both Daoism and Buddhism have been incorporated into the film’s semiotic system within a pure framework of Chinese national identity. Significantly, the Daoist philosophy, including the *yin-yang* theory and the *Wuxing* theory have been incorporated into the filmic texts to establish a distinct Chinese national identity in *Nezha*.

Liu (2009) argues that the mythological figure of Nezha was derived from Buddhist culture and reconstructed and popularised



Fig. 1 Nezha and Daoist master Taiyi in *Nezha Naohai*, 1979.

by Daoism in ancient China. Thus, in the film *Nezha* (1979), the image of Nezha was portrayed in a stereotypical Chinese style rather than an Indian style. Both Chinese and Western scholars recognise that the image of Nezha in the film *Nezha* (1979) forms a “Chinese national style animation”. For example, Chinese scholars (Wang et al., 1984) argue that the character design in the *Nezha* (1979) refers to Chinese folk-art styles such as China’s door god pictures and murals. Macdonald (2016) suggests that the clothing, hairstyle and facial features of Nezha reveal a Chinese national style that is easily distinguishable from the post-ethnic identities of contemporary anime. Because the representation of Nezha particularly refers to the infants in Chinese New Year’s prints who have chubby faces, large eyes and ox-horn buns (see Fig. 1).

Furthermore, Macdonald (2016, pp. 186–197) argues that Nezha is an androgynous figure because the “gender-neutral style” flourished during the period of the Cultural Revolution and thus an androgynous image of Nezha may attract both male and female audiences. Echoing Macdonald’s argument, I further argue that the androgynous figure of Nezha in *Nezha* (1979) is strongly influenced by the Daoist philosophy of *yin-yang* theory. I argue that the androgynous image of Nezha in *Nezha* (1979) refers to the Daoist concept of “*Chizhi*”, and the androgynous image of Nezha represents the Daoist *yin-yang* balance. According to the Daoist philosophy, the notion of *Chizi* is believed as an ideal gender representation of the Daoist understanding of “*Dao*” (Universal harmony). The term *Chizi* refers to a child who is physically weak but approaches the Daoist understanding of *Dao* in the Daoist discourse. For example, *Daodejing* chapter 55 elaborates that *Chizi* is the representation of harmony with *Dao* who has a powerful spirit and never grows old. Thus, the Daoist immortal of Nezha in the film *Nezha* (1979) has been portrayed as a child who not only referring to Chinese folk-arts but also articulates the Daoist philosophy within the Chinese cultural context.

Daoist philosophy is a school of Chinese traditional philosophies that moves beyond masculine domination and recognises that both *yin* (feminine/femininity) and *yang* (masculine/masculinity) are equal powers. Ames (1981) argues that Daoist philosophy maintains an androgynous ideal that equally values the *yin* and *yang*, or masculine and feminine characteristics. According to the theory of *yin-yang* balance, the ideal gender representation of a Daoist (immortal) is androgyny, which reflects a self-balance of masculine and feminine power. Thus, the mythological character of Nezha in the *Nezha* (1979) has been portrayed as a joyful child (*Chizi*) who has a pure spirit and enables the balance of masculine (*yang*) and feminine (*yin*) power within a Daoist cultural context.

Based on the Daoist philosophy, the androgynous figure of Nezha in the filmic texts of *Nezha* (1979) indeed derives from the Daoist mythological literature of *Fengshen Yanyi*. In the texts of *Fengshen Yanyi* and filmic texts of *Nezha* (1979), one of Nezha’s



Fig. 2 The sun and the moon in *Nezha Naohai*, 1979.

magical weapons is named *Qian-Kun Quan* (bracelet). Within the Daoist cultural context, “*Qian*” is an alternative name for *yang* which refers to masculine/masculinity and sky, and “*Kun*” is an alternative name for *yin* which refers to feminine/femininity and earth. The Chinese “*Quan*” means the shape of a ring which refers to the Daoist understanding of the interaction and transformation of both *yin* and *yang* approaching a balanced power relation. In the *Daodejing* (chapter 42), Laozi states a cosmological Daoist argument that “everything sustains *yin* and embraces *yang* to approach *yin* and *yang* balance (translated by the author of this article)”. In the filmic texts, the Daoist immortal Taiyi assigns the Daoist weapon *Qian-Kun* bracelet to Nezha, which signifies that Nezha as an immortal has the supernatural power to balance the relationship between the sky (heaven) and the earth (world).

Through the analysis of cultural elements/semiotics in the film of *Nezha* (1979), I argue that the rhetoric, aesthetic and character design of Chinese national style still referring to Chinese traditional culture in this film. For instance, the heaven in the *Nezha* (1979) has been described as a place filled with Daoist and Buddhist elements. The heaven in the film has been described as a beautiful and peaceful place that has Buddhist towers and Chinese palatial architecture. The god of the sun lifts the sun, the goddess of the moon lifts the moon and two Buddhist Gandharva(s) are dancing in heaven (see Figs. 2 and 3). In the Chinese historical-cultural context, the images of the god of the sun and the goddess of the moon reference two significant gods in the Daoist mythological system, *Fuxi* and *Nüwo* (see Fig. 2). Since the Warring States Period (403-221BCE), *Fuxi* and *Nüwo* were portrayed as two snakes within a semi-human body and the symbol of *jinwu* (the bird) signifies the sun while the symbol of *yutu* (the rabbit) signifies the moon (He and Xun, 2006). Since the Han dynasty (202BCE-220), *Fuxi* was worshipped as the god of sun/*yang* and *Nüwo* was worshipped as the goddess of moon/*yin* respectively (Chen, 1992). On the one hand, the traditional Chinese semiotics of heaven or cosmology in the filmic texts of *Nezha* (1979) reflects a cultural continuum that links Daoist mythologies and *yin-yang* theory to the construction of Chinese national style. On the other hand, both Daoist and Buddhist elements are equally displayed in heaven representing the integration of Buddhism and Daoism in the cultural context of *Fengshen Yanyi* in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

Additionally, it is important to argue that the Daoist theory of *Wuxing* engages in the character design of Four-Dragons, which aesthetically represents a distinct Chinese cultural identity in the semiotics of *Nezha* (1979). Previous scholarships (Berry, 2004, p. 80; Macdonald, 2016, pp. 190–191) argue that the characters of Four-dragons are important because they play a role in patriarchal authority and symbols of the Gang of Four in the narrative of *Nezha* (1979). However, the deployment of traditional philosophical elements such as *Wuxing* theory in the character design



Fig. 3 The Buddhist Gandharva in *Nezha Naohai*, 1979.

of Four-dragons in post-Maoist China has not been discussed in the field of screen culture.

The literature on *Fengshen Yanyi* indicates that the Four-dragon kings live in the Eastern Sea, the Southern Sea, the Western Sea and the Northern Sea, respectively. In the filmic texts of *Nezha* (1979), the director applies a scene to introduce the Four-dragon Kings. The sunny sky suddenly changes to dark, and a green dragon, a red dragon, a white dragon and a black dragon jump into the dark sky from the ocean. The film first applies a close-up shot to introduce the green dragon who brings thunder and flash that hits a boat in the ocean. The red dragon sets fire to burn the forest. The white dragon brings snow to freeze the earth. The black dragon brings a hurricane to damage the earth. In the next shot, the Four dragons transformed into human-like kings who dressed in green, white, red and black robes. Here, the director incorporates the *Wuxing* theory to construct the figures of the Four-dragons and simultaneously describes the eastern, western, northern and southern dragon kings, respectively.

The Chinese term ‘*Wuxing*’ (five processes/five phases) also derives from the Daoist philosophy of *yin-yang* theory. According to the *yin-yang* theory, *Wuxing* processes are a Chinese philosophy used to categorise five elements (fire, wood, earth, metal and water) for explaining natural processes (transformation) in the Chinese cultural discourse. Numerous scholars (Needham, 1956; Graham, 1986; Derk, 1991; Ames et al., 2012) argue that *Wuxing* theory functions as a methodology to contribute knowledge or explanations in every aspect of Chinese life (i.e., cosmology, geography, politics, sociology, medicine, science, history, aesthetics), in traditional China. Needham (1956) argues that science and natural magic were indistinguishable before the birth of modern science, however, the Daoist classics such as the *Huainanzi* embody the scientific thoughts of Daoism in pre-modern China. In the Daoist texts of *Huainanzi* (179–122 BCE), Liu (2016) indicates that “*Dao* is crossing four dimensions and contains *yin* and *yang*. The Sage who uses *Dao* to balance heaven and earth, *yin* and *yang*. *Dao* rules the four seasons and corrects five phases (*Wuxing*).”³ The chapter on the *seasonal rules* (*shizexun*) elaborates on the *yin-yang* and *Wuxing* patterns of the four seasons, and scholars argue

[S]easonal Rules in the *Huainanzi* turn here to the role of monthly and seasonal ritual time in the proper governing of the empire. Reflecting the annual waxing and waning of the powers of *yin* and *yang* and the successive seasonal potency of each of the *Five Phases* (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) ...The chapter thus integrates *yin-yang* and *Five Phase* theory in a detailed and holistic fashion for the guidance of government policy throughout the year (Major, Queen, Meyer and Rothe) (Liu, 2010, pp. 565–566).

According to the chapter on *seasonal rules* in the *Huainanzi*, we can understand the logical pattern of Daoist proto-scientific thoughts of nature including colour, geography, seasons and the natural power (magic) that are assigned to the Four-dragon kings

in the narrative of *Nezha* (1979). In the Daoist proto-scientific thoughts, the colour of green, red, white and black indicates east, south, west and north, respectively, and spring, summer, autumn and winter, respectively. Thus, the Eastern dragon king refers to the King of Spring who wears a green robe and controls the thunder power, because spring is the right time to start thunder. The Southern Dragon King refers to the King of summer who lives in the southern sea and controls the natural power of fire, and thus he wears a red robe. The Western Dragon King refers to the King of Autumn who can make frosting and snow, thereby he lives in the Western palace and wears a white robe. The last one is the Northern Dragon King who wears a black robe, also he is the King of Winter who enables him to bring hurricanes to the earth.

However, the deployment of *Wuxing* theory in the design of Four-Dragons in the film of *Nezha* (1979) is regardless of political reasons and cannot be argued as an ideological design. The deployment of *Wuxing* theory in the *Nezha* (1979) indicates a tendency for an increasing number of traditional cultural and philosophical elements to engage in the construction of Chinese national style after the Cultural Revolution. This article argues that the application of *Wuxing* theory in the film of *Nezha* (1979) reflects a significant cultural continuum between Chinese tradition and the construction of Chinese national style in post-Maoist China, which represents historical, cultural and creative values in Chinese national cinema. By analysing how the philosophical concept of *Wuxing* influenced the narrative and aesthetic design of Four-Dragons in *Nezha* (1979), this article inspires ongoing research on how *Wuxing* theory shapes a Chinese national style through narrative, rhetoric, aesthetic and discursive characterisation in post-Socialist cinema.

The *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019)

In contemporary China, Chinese traditional mythology referring to Chinese history, Chinese style and Chinese spirit continually contributes to the national construction of Chinese popular culture (i.e. films, TV, animations and games) within the Chinese political framework of soft power. Scholars (Lent and Xu, 2010; Chen and Lau, 2021) state that contemporary Chinese animated films apply Chinese cultural heritages to produce a popular culture that fulfils the political imperatives on the one hand, and attracts international audiences on the other hand. For example, two computer-animated films including *Monkey King Hero is Back* (2015) and *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (hereafter *Montong Jiangshi*, 2019) derive from Daoism and Buddhism that have achieved great success in the Chinese film market.

The nationalist project of 'Chinese soft power' strengthens the Chinese screen culture in global film markets (Clark, 2018; Fan, 2018). Scholars (Voci and Luo, 2018; Fan, 2018; Frangville, 2018; Zhang, 2018) suggest that the post-socialist cinema and the influence-seeking project of 'Chinese soft power' should reconsider a Chinese-inflected humanism which constitutes modern values across geopolitical borders and nationalistic discourses. Through examining the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019), this article argues that contemporary Chinese blockbuster reflects an ideological change that the discourse of 'Chinese soft power' states the power of Chinese culture and humanism within a modern and scientific paradigm, which promotes the Chinese national identity and national style are more international.

Chen and Lau (2021) point out that the stereoscopic and computer-animated feature film, *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) was released in China and the international film market in 2019 and made more than US\$742 million at the box office in 2021. Buchan (2013, p. 2) elaborates that animation "is as much a cinematic and digital technology as it is an art form and artistic medium." Additionally, animation has many formal, aesthetic

and critical interactions with discourses of art and philosophy (Buchan, 2013; Gunning, 2013). The *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) is a computer-generated and three-dimensional aesthetics film, thus its narrative and technology are different from the traditional two-dimensional image film of *Nezha* (1979). By examining the aesthetics, forms and narrative, numerous scholars (Whyke et al., 2021) argue that *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) represents digitality, technological advancement and Chinese modernity.

The film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) is also a good case for demonstrating that the Chinese national style of animation is not fixed within the idealised framework of pure or original national style in post-Socialist China, but the integration of foreign culture and Chinese tradition to extend the Chinese national style within a larger or global context. For example, Lamarre (2017) and Voci (2010) claim that the contemporary animated film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) is not influenced by the aesthetics of Chinese traditional painting which was applied in the film *Nezha* (1979), but represents an international aesthetics by absorbing Japanese and American styles. Chen and Lau (2021) argue that the contemporary representation of the mythological figure of *Nezha* represents a new Chinese personhood in post-Socialist China that integrates individualistic and Confucian collectivistic ethics, which is shaped by Confucian-influenced politics (Wang and Meng, 2015) and a state-managed form of capitalism (Yan, 2009) in mainland China.

Similar to *Nezha* (1979), the adaption of the Story of *Nezha* in the film *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) sets in the Chinese historical and cultural context. Although *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) is set in the Daoist mythological discourse, the film's narrative is independent of the original texts of *Fengshen Yanyi* and can be read as a new Story of *Nezha*. The film tells us of a mythology about *Huanyuanzhu* (a natural spiritual pearl) which derives from the cosmos. Because the *Huanyuanzhu* contains both evil and good sides, and thus the spirit of *Huanyuanzhu* has been controlled by the Daoist master Taiyi. Then, Taiyi's master is named Tianzun, who divides the natural spiritual pearl into two spiritual pearls. The two spiritual pearls give birth to *Nezha* and the Dragon King's son (Aobing) separately. However, the Dragon King's son (Aobing) and *Nezha* are friends, and both struggle against natural authority (Tianzun) in the filmic discourse. Ultimately, *Nezha* and the son of the Dragon King choose to sacrifice themselves to protect massive people and therefore have been adored as heroes by local people.

The original name of *Nezha* was *Nalakuvara/Nalkubala* in the Buddhist sutras, and *Nezha* is the Chinese translation of his Hindu name (Liu, 2009). The original image of *Nezha* in the Chinese translation of Buddhist texts has been portrayed as a powerful and fiery-temper deity who has three heads and six arms. As I discussed earlier, the androgynous image of *Nezha* in *Nezha* (1979) has been reshaped by the Daoist ideal of the *Yin-yang* balance. However, in the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019), the image of *Nezha* was portrayed as the stereotypical image of a Buddhist deity who has a fiery temper. For example, there is a scene in *Nezha's* fight with Aobing, the character of Aobing transformed into a huge white dragon and *Nezha* transformed into the powerful Buddhist deity who uses his six arms to lift the huge ice storm. In contrast to the androgynous, joyful and childish representation of *Nezha* in *Nezha* (1979), the transformed image of *Nezha* in *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) represents robust masculinity that is macho, competitive and aggressive (see Fig. 4). The gender representation of *Nezha* in *Nezha* (1979) is a powerful immortal referring to the Daoist concept of *Chizi*, but he is not as aggressive and violent as the image of *Nezha* in *Motong Jiangshi* (2019).

Consequently, the image of *Nezha* in the *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) highlights the significance of human subjectivity through a



Fig. 4 The transformed image of Nezha in *Nezha zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019).

modern view. The robust image of Nezha in *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) has been portrayed as a hero to against patriarchal authority in the film's narrative. Thus, this article argues that the character of Nezha in the *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) functions as a meaning, interpretation and articulation of modern values such as the construction of human subjectivity. Smith (2010) argues that if the natural world exists independently of knowing subjects, there is no doubt that "the human being is a self-interpreting animal condemned to meaning (p. 127)" and that humans are deeply engaged in subjective modes of being through the construction of human subject society. In the case of the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019), regardless of the distinction between the signifier of 'Tianzun' (i.e., God, Heaven, Dao, Nature) in Western and Daoist cultural traditions, the motif of the film is the construction of human subjectivity. While Nezha calls for "my life is controlled by myself instead of god", the figure of Nezha articulates Nietzsche's discourse on human subjectivity between metaphysics and modernism. Zima (2015) elaborates the Nietzsche's discourse is that humans could decide their destiny and the meaning or reality should not be discovered by pre-existing universal principles, but also created by humans individually. By following Nietzsche's discourse, the transformed image of Nezha in the film has been portrayed as a self-determined and self-empowerment hero and his struggle with human subjectivity is justified and functions as meaning within a modern view.

Needham's arguments provide us the critical explanations to understand how the premodern Daoist philosophy such as the cosmological Daoism articulates the modern and scientific paradigms in the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019). Needham (1956, p. 33) argues that Daoist naturalism tends to explore the true knowledge of Nature, or Order of Nature, rather than seeking "Confucian scholastic knowledge of the ranks and observances of feudal society". In the *Science and Civilisation in China: History of Scientific Thought*, Needham (1956, pp. 33–34) states that Daoist naturalism is a unique and interesting combination of philosophy and religion that contains the 'proto-science' and magic, and thus the Daoist system of thought was not profoundly anti-scientific and never rejected the true knowledge of Nature. Significantly, Daoist naturalism has several terms, including *bian* and *hua*, used to signify the natural phenomenon of change, metamorphosis or transformations such as all kinds of changes in nature (Needham, 1956, pp. 74–75). Importantly, Needham (1956, p. 34) states that 16th-century science was commonly called 'Natural Magic', Gunning (2013) further elaborates that the creation of moving images derives from the realm of natural magic in the history of animation studies. Macdonald (2016) argues that the Chinese cultural heritage adds a historical aura to Chinese national-style animated films, however, the foreign culture such as the sciences supports the establishment of a new cultural paradigm in China since the May Fourth Movement in the early 20th century. In the 21st century, the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) combines the Daoist thought of nature and the Western scientific paradigm of



Fig. 5 Tianzun and Heaven in *Nezha zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019).

nature, which reflects the ideological change in post-Socialist cinema. The construction of a Chinese national identity in contemporary China welcomes a combination of Western scientific and Chinese cultural paradigms.

The representation of heaven (see Figs. 2 and 3) in the film of *Nezha* (1979) applies authentic Chinese aesthetics and represents a distinctive Chinese national style, however, the representation of heaven in *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) refers to a combination of cosmological Daoism and the scientific paradigm. For instance, the film *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) unfolds a mythological story and introduces Tianzun as a personified figure who sits in heaven and numerous planets are moving around Tianzun that signifies Tianzun is God or Dao/Nature to rule the cosmos (see Fig. 5). The *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) first introduces that Tianzun (Dao/Nature) divides *Hunyuanzhu* as two different spiritual pearls and give birth to two binary things, the *mozhu* and *lingzhu* referring *yin* and *yang* individually. According to cosmological Daoism, Dao gives birth to *yin* and *yang*, and both *yin* and *yang* give birth to the cosmos. The cosmos, planets, human beings and the myriad things are ruled by both *yin* and *yang*, which is the Order of Nature/Dao. Both *yin* and *yang* are constantly changing and combining with each other. (Ames, 1981) For example, the transformations of *yin-yang* rules in four seasons, *yin* and *yang* vary among different seasons, but we cannot conclude that one season is definitely superior to another season. Based on the Daoist philosophy of nature including the *yin-yang* theory, *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) combines cosmological Daoism within a scientific worldview of the universe, which elaborates that Daoist thought of the Order of Nature is a nonbinary and proto-scientific thought.

In addition, the Daoist theory of *yin-yang* balance is embodied through the harmonious relationship between the character of Nezha and the character of Aobing in *Motong Jiangshi* (2019). In the filmic texts of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019), the character of Nezha refers *mozhu* and the character of Aobing refers *lingzhu* is equally powerful. The natural magic of Nezha is fire signifying *yang*, and the natural magic of Aobing is water signifying *yin*. However, the two characters choose to collaborate rather than fight with each other, which represents the Daoist holistic concept of *yin-yang* balance.

Furthermore, according to cosmological Daoism, the primary type of *Hunyuanzhu* in the filmic discourse represents the Daoist tradition of *Hundun* (chaos or combination), which has been understood as the cosmogonic progression that myriad things have not separated into any binary structures. For example, the chapter of *Tianrui* in the *Liezi* elaborates the Daoist concept of *Hundun*.⁴

"There is the Supreme simplicity, the supreme origin, the Supreme Beginning, and the supreme elemental. In the Supreme simplicity, qi had not yet begun to exist; the supreme original marked the first beginning of the existence of qi; the supreme

beginning marked the first beginning of the existence of shapes, and the supreme elemental marked the first beginning of the existence of substance. Qi, shape, and substance were complete, but things were not yet separated from each other; this is Chaos, Chaos refers to when the ten thousand things were mutually intertwined and not yet separated from each other” (Michael, 2011, p. 116).

The nonbinary chaos is named *Hundun* by Liezi which derives from the representation of Dao that Laozi calls “*Xuantong*” (non-hierarchical combination) in the *Daodejing* that functions as the concept of Daoist “Nature”. Ames (2011, p. 4) argues that “Liezi on the other hand offers no such succour in following the indeterminate primordial simplicity, or dao, which is itself a mixture of perceptible order and inescapable chaos.” Similarly, Daoist sage Zhuangzi also treats the primeval chaos as a representation of approaching cosmic Dao. Based on the Daoist terms of *Hundun* and *Xuantong*, this article argues that the Daoist thought of the origin of the cosmos articulates the modern physical theory of the Big Bang, which was created by Georges Lemaitre in 1927.⁵ The premodern Daoist texts such as the *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi* and the modern theory of the Big Bang share a similar understanding that the universe started as a single point (cosmological Daoist concepts of *Hundun*, *Xuantong*, etc.) and expanded as large as it is now and it could continue to stretch. Most importantly, the cosmological Daoism such as *Liezi* points out that the nature of the cosmos is the process of “change, generation, spontaneity and transformation (Berthrong, 2011, p. 77)”, and thus enables the Daoist proto-scientific thought of “Nature” to articulate the natural law of transformation including the origin of the universe.

Zielinski (2013) suggests that the history of animation studies is relevant to sciences, and the concept of origin such as the theory of the Big Bang is strongly connected with the methodological development of animation studies. In the case of Chinese national-style animation, this article finds that *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) creatively incorporates a scientific framework such as the theory of the Big Bang into Daoist mythology through the application of digital technology. The film *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) uses 3D computer technology to demonstrate the mysterious nature of the cosmos through the application of Daoist philosophy and simultaneously demonstrates the scientific worldview from a cosmological one which formulated by the modern physical theory. For example, the film of *Motong Jiangshi* (2019) uses an animated scene to create both the Daoist and scientific worldview of the beginning of the universe. In the filmic texts, the combination of the symbol on Nezha’s forehead and the symbol on Aobing’s forehead signifies that the two sections of *Hunyuanzhu* combined. Then, the *Hunyuanzhu* creates the cosmos, planets, time and space that articulates both the Daoist philosophical concept of *Hundun* and the scientific theory of the Big Bang. Here, the transforming images of Nezha and Aobing not only concern the fantasy of Daoist mythology but also link cosmological Daoism to the important scientific concept of origin. However, the Daoist philosophy appeared in premodern China, and the deployment of digital technology greatly supports Daoist theory including *Dao*, nature, *yin-yang* and *Hundun* within a scientific worldview of the cosmos, and simultaneously highlights the significance of human subjectivity through the character of Nezha, which embodies a modern and international Chinese cultural identity for global audiences.

Conclusion

By comparing the different adaptations of Nezha from the post-Cultural Revolution period to the post-Socialist period, this article finds that the mythological character of Nezha in both films contributed to the construction of Chinese national style, but the

emphasis on the cultural framework of Chinese national identity is not fixed. Yet the film *Nezha Naohai* (1979) was produced after the Cultural Revolution, the Daoist mythological character of Nezha and the Chinese national style referring to traditional Chinese aesthetics, semiotics, and the androgynous image of Nezha is shaped by Daoist *yin-yang* theory. Furthermore, the Daoist theory of *Wuxing* is applied to the characters and semiotic design in the film’s texts. Although Chinese historical culture was banned during the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese national style in the Chinese national cinema during the transitional period still refers to the traditional Chinese culture. In contrast to the *Nezha Naohai* (1979) which maintains a traditional framework of Chinese culture, the *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019) combines the Chinese culture and Western culture to promote this blockbuster more international and modern. In the context of a contemporary Chinese framework of soft power, the character of Nezha in *Nezha Zhi Motong Jiangshi* (2019) functions as a representation of modern values such as human subjectivity. In addition, the deployment of digitality in this film frames the cosmological Daoist thought of *yin-yang*, *Hundun* and Nature within a Western and scientific paradigm of the origin of the universe that represents a more international and modern Chinese cultural identity.

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Notes

- 1 Please see “National style, is prominent in Chinese animated films that use traditional Chinese artistic, literary, and cultural forms, materials, and techniques (such as Peking opera, papercutting and paperfolding, ink painting, folk-lore, classic literature) to construct a putatively pure, authentic, and unique Chinese national identity. This identity distinguishes Chinese animation from its counterparts in other countries—Japan and the United States in particular—and, more importantly, articulates nationalistic sentiments and national pride in defiance of foreign influence and dominance” (Du, 2019, p. 114).
- 2 Please see “In an article coinciding with the domestic release of the film, director and screenwriter Wang Shunchen notes that the idea of working with the Nezha story was discussed at the Shanghai Animation Studio as early as the late 1950s and resulted in several scripts (1979, pp. 33–35). Wang explains the reason for choosing to make an animated film from Fengshen Yanyi, as well as comparing the film to the chapters from the novel and justifying changes made to the film, especially with regard to the plot and main protagonists. The language Wang uses is telling and opens with specific references to the Gang of Four (*Siren bang*), the four officials, including Mao’s widow Jiang Qing, who were arrested in a coup d’état shortly after the death of Mao in 1976” (Macdonald, 2016, p. 181).
- 3 Translated by the author of this article from the *Huainanzi*, Chapter One 《原道训》“夫道者,横四维而含阴阳,其德优天地而和阴阳,节四时而调五行。”
- 4 Please see The *Liezi*, Chapter of Tianrui “有太易,有太初,有太始,有太素。太易者,未见气也;太初者,气之始也;太始者,形之始也;太素者,质之始也。气形质具而未相离,故曰混沌。混沌者,言万物相混沌而未相离也。” Translated by Thomas Michael (2011).
- 5 Please see “In 1927, an astronomer named Georges Lemaitre had a big idea. He said that a very long time ago, the universe started as just a single point. He said the universe stretched and expanded to get as big as it is now, and that it could keep on stretching.” <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/big-bang/en/>. Accessed 19 August 2022.

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Author contributions

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Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Zhuying Li.

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